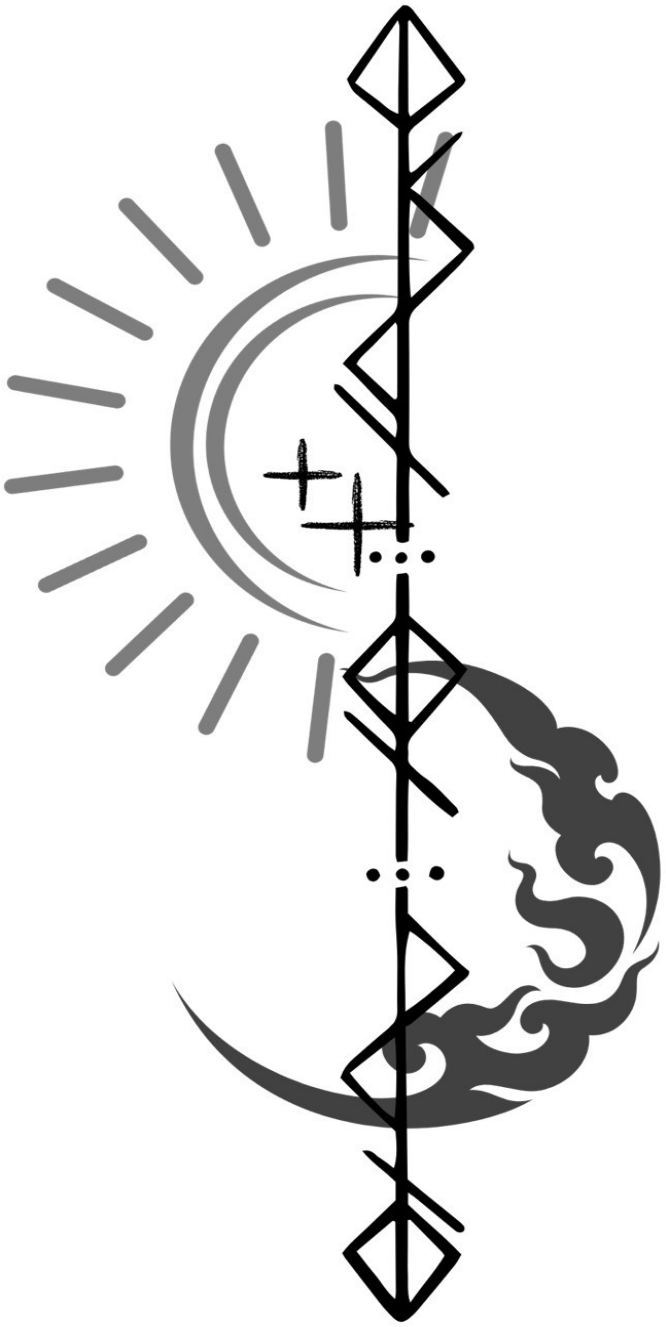
TETHERED KINGDOMS I

RAVENROSE



AJ WILDING



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RAVENROSE

TETHERED KINGDOMS

BOOK ONE

AJ WILDING



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PLAYLIST

The music that inspired the story
Ravenrose Playlist - On Spotify!

Crestfallen - imminence
Demons- Neoni
Six Feet Under - Oshins, Leslie Powell
I am not a woman, I'm a god- Halsey
Fallout - UNSECRET, Neoni
Dead Throne - arankai
Darkness- XVI
Blood Money - Catch your breath
Gravity - Wage War
Soulburn- Dayseeker
Lilith- Ellis
Voices- Hidden Citizens, Vanessa Campagna

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TRIGGER WARNINGS

This book contains content that may be sensitive or triggering to some readers. Topics include:

- Graphic violence
- Blood
- War
- Hostages
- Murder and death
- Depression
- Suicidal thoughts
- Suicide attempts
- Arranged marriage
- Physical abuse
- Drugging
- Emotional manipulation and gaslighting.
- Threat of sexual assault
- Kidnapping and captivity
- Strong language

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For my dad.

"You're far from done.
You are limitless."

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“There’s nothing worse than feeling powerless when everything you love is on the line. Even the tiniest drop of hope can push back the darkness. A little bit of hope can be the difference between fighting and folding.”

— ROWAN VALROSE

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THE KINGDOMS

SITARA
King: Harland Valrose
Heir: Felipe Valrose

SKYE
King: Silas Belmore
Heir: Kane Belmore

LORIEN
King: Rhidian Vaelthorne
Heir: None

MISELYS
King: Percival Mavros
Heir: Cove Mavros

IZEL
Queen: Vivietta Gray
Heir: Ouilixia Gray

DAEKHAR
King: Kallias Corvelle (Deceased)
Heir: Atlas Corvelle (Deceased)

KOVARIA
King: Locke Devereaux
Heir: Thaddeus Devereaux

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PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Rowan - *roh-uhn*
Riven - *RIH-vuhn*
Fel- *FEHL*
Maksa- *MAK-suh*
Alita - *uh-LEE-tuh*
Kane - *KAYN*
Theo - *THEE-oh*
Ayer- *AIR*
Rusic - *ROO-sik*
Sitara - *sih-TAR-uh*
Kovaria - *Koh-VAR-ee-uh*
Miselys- *mih-SEE-liss*
Daekhar - *DAY-kar*
Izel - *EYE-zel*
Lorien - *Lor-ee-en*
Skye- *SKY*
Aurielle - *aw-ree-EL*

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Acknowledgments
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CHAPTER 1

ROWAN

"Are you afraid?"

"No."

"Are you lying?"

I don't answer, knowing my brother already sees through the lie, choosing to look out over the high tops of the forest trees instead, past the mountains to our east, to the iridescent crimson glow just beyond.

The dancing golden-red light of the morning sunrise, so similar to the glowing embers of a fire just before it dies.

Or *awakens*.

"I should ask *you* that," I say finally. My eyes stay trained on the horizon; I'm well aware of the tension growing beside me.

"I'm not the one being sold off to Skye."

Sold.

Not *married*.

I keep my gaze fixed on the sunrise, watching the first light bleed across the sky as resignation settles heavy in my chest. Absent-mindedly, I smooth a hand over my skirt, tracing the wrinkled rose embroidery after a night spent on the castle balcony beneath the stars. *I need to change before my morning lessons with Alita.*

I am not in the mood to be reprimanded by the governess today. My head is pounding with the beat of my heart, and my stomach is questionable at best.

It’s an odd feeling: going from precious princess to prized broodmare within the span of a day.

I finally turn my head to look at my brother, dropping my gaze just as soon as our eyes meet—unable to handle the level of concern I see in his. I scan the cut high on his cheek. It’s swollen, evidence of a bruise forming, the cut red and angry. Like the sky.

“You should put some ice on that.”

“Rowan,” Riven growls, calling out my deflection.

“*Riven*,” I match. “I can’t believe you’re going to risk a scar on that pretty face of yours,” I tease lightly, attempting to shift the mood.

“I took a backhand because I objected to my sister being traded away like a piece of livestock,” he mutters, looking away. “Let it scar.”

Fury simmers beneath his skin, the sunrise breaking something for him too. I eye my brother, taking him in. He looks… *tired*. Dark circles rim his usually bright green eyes, though I’m sure they’re no better than mine.

Last night, after the news broke, we got drunk. Snuck down to the castle wine cellar, stole a few choice bottles before drinking our way through various plots and plans, laughing while we schemed up an array of ways we could escape our fates. The proposed plans only grew more and more outlandish by the hour. It wasn’t until Riven proposed running off to Daekhar, the broken and wild kingdom to the south of Sitara, that I realized we were being delusional.

There is no escaping our fates. They were sealed at birth.

An heir, a spare, and a daughter to sell.

“I’m afraid for you,” I admit. Sure, I’m about to be married off to some prince I don’t know, sent to a kingdom I’ve never been to, in exchange for military aid, but Sitara is on the verge of war with Miselys. As if that weren't enough, Riven is riding west to join Fel to deal with yet another conflict along the Kovaria-Sitara border.

“I’ll be fine,” my brother dismisses. “But to send you off—on your own—to Skye...” He clenches his fists, fury rising once again. “I hate him for this.”

I sigh. Our *father*. I want to hate him, too, but it’s hard to feel hate for someone you rarely ever see. Lucky for me, Riven seems to carry enough fury for the both of us. I wish I were angrier. I should be. Instead, a gray fog of indifference settles over me, thick enough to swallow both light and shadow.

Two weeks.

My gaze drifts over the marble-white stone of Rosecliff Castle. Warm golden light illuminates the palace walls, dark rose vines twist around its spires and curling archways. For a fleeting moment, I'm grateful for the early morning quiet, looking out over the impeccably manicured gardens sprawling across the grounds, listening to the soft chirps of the birds welcoming a new day.

It's all I've ever known.

Home.

A home I'll likely never see again.

Kane Belmore, Crown Prince of Skye—the Iron Kingdom. He's as beautiful as he is dangerous, with black hair, strikingly pale blue eyes, and a jawline as sharp as the iron-gray cliffs of his homeland.

I've met him.

Once.

A few years ago, my father held a ball in Aurielle, Sitara's capital. It was little more than a marketplace disguised as a celebration. With my hand clasped in his, I was paraded through Starlight Castle and presented to what felt like every eligible bachelor the continent had to offer.

Kane was there. Sure, he was handsome, though arrogant. *Typical fae male if you ask me.* Not much else stood out against his ruthless reputation. Cold and hard, like the Iron Army at his command.

And if the rumors are true, he would be king soon. Gossip about his father's condition has had the Rose Court in a tizzy for weeks.

The King of Skye is *dying*. A ridiculous notion I'd initially dismissed as idle court gossip meant to stir fear and speculation. Fae rulers didn't die—not of illness or old age, anyway. They could be killed, of course; no fae is invincible, but accidents were exceedingly rare. And yet, the whispers have persisted.

Reports claim King Silas no longer appears in public. Too weak, the rumors claim. *Impossible*. Or… it should be. The tethering had long since blessed the fae crowns with great power, and with it, incredibly long lifespans.

"I don't know what he's thinking. Skye is barely an ally. Hells, last sun cycle, we were keeping a vigilant watch on *that* border." Riven runs a hand through his dark hair, mussing it up even more than it already was. "Even

with this new treaty, I *still* don't trust them not to invade—and I *especially* don't trust them with my *sister*."

I chew my bottom lip, staying quiet. He's not wrong, but I refuse to go down that road. My newfound apathy is good for something at least. Fearing what's to come won't change any of it. My fate is my fate; there's no escaping it.

It's not like this is unexpected. I *am* a princess. An arranged marriage was inevitable, anticipated even, something my father began planning the day I was born. I just hadn't expected the day would come so soon, and with so little notice or courting.

"You could still run." Riven drops his voice, leaning in closer. "There's always Daekhar…"

My stomach knots at the mention. "The *untethered* kingdom?" I hiss, my gaze pulling south. Rosecliff sits on the very edge of the Sitara-Daekhar border, where the sunlit rolling hills and grassy meadows of the Sun Kingdom give way to the thick, dark forests of Daekhar. "The kingdom of the lightless?" I scoff, wrinkling my nose in disapproval. "I'd sooner walk into the Miselyian Sea than set foot inside that cursed kingdom. They welcomed *demons* with open arms, and the gods punished them for it."

A harsh screech cuts through the early morning quiet, drawing my attention up.

Overhead, a massive black bird sits, perched atop a nearby turret. And the way it's sitting there—so unnaturally still—it could easily be mistaken for a roof ornament meant to scare off the pigeons if I didn't know better.

Riven's talking, but his voice trails off on the wind. I'm unable to look away from the dark bird.

A crow… I think? Maybe? The creature's feathers are as black as coal, absorbing the light of the rising sun, rather than reflecting it.

I tilt my head, studying it. *Gods, that thing is enormous.*

As if objecting to my attention, the creature releases yet another ear-splitting screech, forcing me to wince.

The bird finally stirs, ruffling and stretching its fine array of feathers, showing off an impressive wingspan before taking to the air.

I track it, and a sharp pang of jealousy rips through me as I watch it fly away, until it disappears into the thick forest below.

"Rowan," Riven snaps. "Are you even listening?"

“No,” I reply with a sigh, only feeling a little guilty for ignoring him. “But I’m not running to Daekhar,” I say, turning to face him. “I’m not running at all. The treaty has been signed. I will marry Kane. Our union will solidify the still fragile truce between Sitara and Skye.” My jaw tightens as I recite the line my father fed me. “It will strengthen the alliance, and protect our kingdom and our people.” I release a settling breath. “Going through with it—” I swallow, “—is the right thing to do.”

The right thing, maybe, but the words feel wrong coming out of my mouth, and I let them hang between us. My brother’s answering frown says enough.

Rosecliff may be far removed from Sitara’s politics and chaos, but even here, practically banished to the kingdom’s outskirts, we feel it. The wind has shifted. More news arrives every day with talk about another Kovarian raid, skirmishes on the borders, violence from Daekhar—a lawless kingdom—spilling over. And the Miselyian Kingdom to our east? Don’t even get me started.

With enemies all around us, I don’t have to like it, but my duty as the Sitari princess is to Sitara—and its people. After we wed, Kane will provide warriors, weapons, food, and aid for the ravaged border villages that we so desperately need.

I grip the balcony railing a little tighter, staring out at the sun—the orange light of dawn fading away to bright golden rays before Riven sighs, the tension in his shoulders ebbing away as he makes a decision. “Wanna go shoot?” Gold flashes in my twin’s eyes right before his lips curve up in an all-too-familiar mischievous grin.

And despite myself—and my mood—I feel the hint of a smile pull at the corner of my own. “You know that question only ever has one answer.”

His answering grin is infectious, and I turn to check the height of the sun. “We have to be quick—and take the servants’ passages to avoid Alita.”

He nods, already halfway to the door. “Give me a minute. I’ll grab the bows and the quivers. We can take the passage from my room—maybe steal a muffin from the kitchen on the way out.” He winks and I laugh, already feeling lighter as I watch him disappear.

Stealth is necessary. With the sun fully risen, Alita is sure to be awake, likely taking her morning tea. And my governess would certainly not approve nor allow such *unprincesslike* activities. Gods forbid a princess learn to defend herself.

“That’s what princes are for…”

I can’t help but roll my eyes just thinking about it.

Light-blessed, that *is* what princes are for, and my two princely brothers made sure to train me well.

I sigh. Despite the grim future hanging over my head, it is a beautiful day. I rest my arms lightly on the railing, enjoying the warmth of the sun on my skin, releasing a slow breath, centering myself. The breeze carries the scent of roses from the gardens below—sweet, familiar; something in it settles me, my body finally relaxing.

I let my gaze drift past the gardens and the castle walls, to the tree line and further, to where the light doesn’t touch. Shadows dance and twist within the dark forest; the sight of it has me leaning closer.

Shadows, yes—but something about them seems… unnatural. I watch more intently, my heartbeat slowing to a crawl when they shift—all on their own. Darkness grows between the trees, spreading wide, even though the leaves above haven’t shifted, the wind still.

My arms slip from the railing and I take a step back, panic seizing my chest, instincts already screaming.

The darkness continues to spread between the trees, swallowing light; the shadows bend between the trees in ways they shouldn’t. As if—as if they were *alive*.

“*No*,” I whisper, taking more steps back before turning sharply and running for the door. I reach it in seconds, hauling it open, glancing back over my shoulders to find—

Nothing.

I freeze, breathing hard, my heartbeat pounding in my ears, looking out at the forest, at the light sprinkled through. That impossibly dark void gone.

My eyes dart back and forth, scanning the entire length of the forest, but there’s no trace of the fast-spreading shadow storm I thought I saw.

I grip the doorframe, feeling light-headed while questioning reality.

Light.

For a moment there— I shake my head, releasing a shaky breath. I need sleep, because even with the sun shining high above, my daydreams are no longer safe from the dark.

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CHAPTER 2

ROWAN

Sure, maybe it was reckless and ill-advised, but after only an hour in the woods with a bow in my hands, I'm finally feeling like myself again.

I inhale the familiar pine and cedar scent of the Wyldewood, letting the wind whip the dark hair out of my face before slowly releasing my breath—steadily—alongside my arrow, only to huff out another breath immediately in frustration when the arrow hits to the left of my target.

"You're still dropping your shoulder," Riven calls from where he's lounging in a small patch of sunlight, atop the flat boulder we've longed since claimed as our own. The natural gold highlights in his reddish-brown hair shimmer in the early afternoon sun peeking through the thick trees above.

His bow lies abandoned not far off, while he lazily sharpens his sword, his eyes on the blade and not on me.

"I am not," I snap, rolling back the shoulder I had, in fact, dropped with a scowl. I stalk over to retrieve my arrow, ripping it from the tree before glaring at the tiny red center of the target. Its unmarred paint mocks me.

"Rowan," my brother chastises when I yet again take up position.

I ignore him, taking another arrow out of my quiver and loading it into my bow. Taking aim, I roll my shoulder back. *Now stay there,* I tell it.

Neither of us wants to admit it, but it's probably about time to face the day. Both of us have a full schedule of engagements, and our absence will not go unnoticed. News of the wedding will spread quickly through the

court. Honestly, I'd be surprised if word hadn't already traveled all the way through the stables by now.

There are plans to make and dozens of arrangements to see to. I'm sure Alita's already adjusted my schedule to extend the already arduously long etiquette lessons.

I dip my chin, the only sign I heard him, as I lift my bow higher, determined to pierce the heart of the target before attending to my long list of pointless duties. Busy work for an idle princess.

Calming my heart, my breath evens out and I draw the bowstring taut, the edges of my fingertips just lightly brushing against the corner of my lip while I block everything else out, focusing entirely on the little red target one hundred paces away.

A familiar whoosh cuts through the air when my fingers release the string.

"*Ash and embers*," I curse when I miss the intended target once again.

The colorful language elicits a soft sigh from Maksa. She's curled up in her favorite hollowed-out tree stump just below where Riven sits.

"It's harder than it looks," I grumble in the little wolf's direction.

Maksa lifts her head, cocking it to one side. Her blue eyes are bright and inquisitive, as if she's actually listening. Despite my growing frustration with the arrow and my future, a reluctant smile breaks through at the sight of her little face looking up at me.

Setting my bow next to Riven's, I crouch down, scooping Maksa up into my arms.

The second I have her, the pup twists, rolling onto her back like an infant nestled in its mother's arms. A full smile breaks out across my face as I stare down at her. Her pink, speckled tongue lolls out of the side of her mouth.

"You wouldn't last a second, wild thing," I tease, scratching the soft fluff of her little belly. Out of habit, my eyes do a quick scan of the trees surrounding us. This morning's terrifying experience has made even the woods feel unsettled, undermining the fleeting sense of calm I found in shooting with Riven.

Rosecliff's unique position at the far southeast corner of Sitara, between Daekhar and Skye, puts it right at the edge of the Wyldewood. The dark forest runs along nearly the entire border with Daekhar, and up into the mountains of Skye. It's ancient, the forest's trees towering and thick. But

since the untethering of Daekhar, it was light-cursed. Or, well, at least that's what the stories say. Full of monsters and possibly even demons. I certainly wouldn't know, having never ventured deeper than the little training circle Fel and Riven had built for us, just a stone's throw beyond the trees.

So, like I said, I can be reckless sometimes, sure, but I'm not stupid. There are far too many dark tales about the Wyldewood and the sinister creatures and demons that dwell there for at least some of them not to ring true.

Riven's sharp intake of breath pulls my attention from the trees, and the sight of crimson dripping from his palm has me running toward him.

"What happened?"

"It's fine." He curls his hand into a fist, but the continuous drip of blood down his palm and onto the gray rock below gives away his lie.

"It's not fine." I set Maksa down, pointing to the bright red blood now staining the rock. "There's blood. *Blood* would indicate the opposite of fine."

Riven rolls his eyes at me. "It's just a little cut—"

"Give me your hand," I demand, holding out my own.

He does nothing of the sort. Instead, he attempts to wrap the bleeding cut tighter with the dirty scrap of cloth he'd been using to polish his blade. "It's fine—"

"Shut up and give it to me." I level him a hard look, still holding out my hand expectantly.

"Someone will see," he hisses, his eyes darting to the edges of the forest surrounding us.

"Riven Vaelor Valrose," I snap. "There's no one here besides you, me, and the forest sprites. If there were… Well, they would have already dragged our sorry asses back to the castle by now. I never get a chance to practice, and you owe me." My eyes flash. "Give me that palm, right now." There's a sharp edge to my voice that leaves little room for argument.

My brother sighs, his eyes rolling so far into the back of his head they almost disappear, but he finally gives up the hand.

Hiding my smirk, I pounce, gripping his hand before he can rip it away from me. In all fairness, the cut is tiny, but deep, and more blood spills out from just the motion. Keeping a firm grip on my brother with my left hand to prevent him from pulling away, I cover his palm with my right, closing my eyes. Warmth fills me as I call my magic. Seconds pass, and soon I'm

wrinkling my nose at the pinching pain cutting across my own palm as I pull the wound from him.

“That’s enough,” Riven protests, attempting to yank his hand away from me, but I dig my nails in. “Ow!” he whines, but stops trying to pull away.

“I’ll say when it’s enough,” I argue. Another few painful seconds go by before I open my eyes. “Okay, that’s enough.”

I relinquish his hand, and Riven looks over my handiwork with a sour expression on his face. The slice on his palm is nowhere to be seen, the skin smooth and unblemished, the stain of blood on his skin the only evidence of what happened. His eyes flick to mine, where a now identical cut mars my own, and this time it’s *my* blood dripping onto the forest floor. Riven’s frown deepens, but it does nothing to dull my growing excitement at the accomplishment.

“Did you see that?” I stare at the fresh wound on my hand with a wide grin on my face.

“You shouldn’t have taken it all,” he grumbles. “Here—” Riven tears a sliver of fabric off his tunic, snatching my hand before I can protest, wrapping it around the angry little cut to stop the flow of blood.

“I needed the practice.”

Riven’s eyes scan the tree line of our little training circle suspiciously. Whirling around when a light breeze causes the brush behind him to rustle.

“No one saw!” I hiss at him, annoyed that he’s not celebrating my little triumph with me. Only Riven and our older brother, Fel, know what I can do. They've both been my unwilling patients more than a few times, but they hardly get injured enough for me to practice on them.

“You cannot use it in Skye,” Riven says, his eyes still scanning the trees.

I frown, my mood officially dampened. “Healing magic is hardly a threat.”

“Anything can be a threat.” Riven’s gaze finds mine. “You cannot let them see you as anything more than what Father has already told them.”

My eyes narrow, hating that conversations about my future have clearly been had without me present. “And what has he told them I am?”

“His perfect little daughter,” Riven replies. “Nothing more. Nothing that complicates the tethering or succession—nothing that invites *unnecessary* questions.”

I grit my teeth.

“You cannot use it, Rowan,” Riven warns me again, sensing the discontent.

“I know.”

“And they absolutely cannot find out about your—”

“I KNOW!” I bite, and Riven’s mouth snaps shut.

I look away, folding my arms across the irritation burning in my chest. Magic in the kingdoms has long since been tethered to the royal bloodlines—the six fae crowns: Sitara, Skye, Lorien, Miselys, Izel, and Daekhar. But not Kovaria, the only human-led kingdom on the continent.

Only those born with royal blood can wield it, and the higher in succession, the more powerful the magic.

Except, *somehow*, mine rivals Fel’s.

Father never liked that, and he especially didn’t like that my powers already far exceeded Riven’s, my twin, who was born *first.*

It’s the same kind of magic that has flowed through Sitara’s royal bloodline for generations. The same as my father, Fel and Riven too. But mine was strong. *Too strong*. And unlike my brothers, or my father, mine also gave me the ability to heal.

That pesky little tethering mistake is the reason I’ve spent nearly my entire life exiled away at Rosecliff, tucked far away from Aurielle and the curious eyes of its Starlight Court.

But my father never forgave me for it, blaming me for the power I inherited—that I had no control over. I should be grateful he hadn’t taken the final step and bound my magic. Though, he’s threatened it enough times.

And so I kept my light buried beneath my skin; hid the power from my friends, the servants, the court. I made myself smaller so no one would know just how much power I carried, to never give my father a reason *to take it.*

As far as any one in Sitara is concerned, Rowan Valrose is powerless.

However, the other matter is a secret, even from my father. A secret only Fel, Riven, and I share, and something Kane, my new fiancé, absolutely *cannot* know.

Nobody can ever know.

Because if anyone found out—*anyone*...

I’d be dead.

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CHAPTER 3

ROWAN

The trees sway overhead as the wind picks up. The sky grows darker with what looks to be an incoming afternoon storm. I peer into the deep shadows of the woods, an uneasy feeling settling over me. All at once, the overwhelming feeling of being watched prickles my skin, sending an icy shiver down my spine.

"We should go."

Reaching down, I scoop Maksa back up, and together, Riven and I reluctantly trudge back to the castle. The weight of what's ahead hanging over us.

"Magic is irrelevant anyway," Riven mumbles nearly under his breath, reciting something our father often told us as children. "Only the royal fae lines even have magic these days. And with nearly all the demons gone, the world has grown beyond it."

I scoff at the familiar lecture. "It's easy for Father to say when he controls nearly half the world's magic himself. No one would dare challenge him, and he likes it that way."

Riven's mouth tightens. "I wouldn't bet on that. Tension with Miselys has moved beyond simple animosity and battles over trade routes. And Kovaria is restless; the raids along the border are only getting worse, and then there are the rumors…" My brother's tone turns grim, maybe even bitter, before trailing off entirely.

My head whips toward him and I freeze in place. "What rumors?"

Riven looks to the sky, and immediately I know whatever he was about to say isn't something my ears were meant to hear.

My eyes narrow and I turn around to glare at him. "What are you keeping from me?"

My brother doesn't get a chance to answer, because just at that moment, Maksa twists in my arms, scrambling up higher until her paws rest atop my shoulders, her ears—still too big for her head—alert and listening.

"Maksa! What—" My spine stiffens, and both Riven and I glance nervously around the dirt path at the surrounding woods. I half expect my governess, Alita, to appear from somewhere in the dense brush, her favorite switch in hand.

I've barely regained my grip on the little wolf before she leaps from my shoulder, and the moment her paws touch the ground, the little menace takes off in a full sprint, disappearing between the trees.

"Rowan, don't—"

"Maksa!" I shout, taking off after her, Riven's warning an afterthought at my back as I dart into the woods after her.



She was just a little thing when I found her—or rather, when she found me.

Maksa, a tiny wolf pup, just appeared one day. She sat just beyond the tree line of our little training circle, watching me shoot arrows for hours.

She was so skinny, her mostly white coat broken up by large tan patches, with tan and black freckles dusting her muzzle. A small chunk was missing from her left ear, and she was so nervous, any unexpected sound or movement made her flinch.

After I spotted her watching me, I kept up my routine of shooting, careful to keep one eye on the pup and another on the woods, should her mother be lurking nearby.

Only after a long while was she finally brave enough to step within the circle. She didn't even try to sneak a bite of the snacks I'd brought with me. A few strips of dried meat and cheese lay out on the boulder between us. She just crept closer, watching me all the while.

I’d lost myself in shooting, and the next time I looked up, she was gone. A wave of disappointment slid through me as I scanned the trees, but there was no sign of her.

The next day, she was back. And after nearly another full day of her watching, I carefully set down my bow and quiver, moving closer.

She watched me, but didn’t run as I drew closer and closer until I was close enough to scoop the little thing up and claim her as my own.

The little princess made herself right at home. She slept on my bed, eating the cook’s meals, so long as they were prepared to her own specifications—she’s a spoiled brat.

A brat who would not survive a minute in these gods-forsaken woods alone.



Maksa flies through the training circle quick as lightning. When she reaches the trees again, she changes direction, bearing further south.

I tear after her, hastily snatching an arrow from my quiver while running through the circle and loading it into my bow—just in case.

It’s not long until I lose sight of her completely, my heart racing as panic sets in, and I slow my pace, searching through the thick vegetation for any sign of her pretty white and tan fur. After a few long seconds, I realize I’m much farther into the woods than I’ve ever been before.

“Maksa!” I call out, my voice echoing in the surrounding quiet.

I stop, holding my breath, desperate to hear the familiar sound of her whine when she wants to be picked up, or the sound of her feet thrumming across the thick mess of pine needles below. But I hear nothing, nothing besides the faint chatter of birds and the brush of the leaves in the breeze. Until—

What was that?

Voices?

Hoofbeats?

I twist around, trying to orient myself off the path. *Am I close to the road?*

I inhale sharply, still pressing forward but slower now, growing more cautious the deeper into the woods I go. But hope rises when the surrounding trees thin, the dark forest lightening as the sky becomes visible once again. Tripping over roots on my way out of the woods, relief floods through me when I spot Maksa, sitting atop the small hillside just ahead—staring at me.

I blink at her, confusion ebbing into irritation as I climb the hill to join her.

"Maks. What are you—" My question cuts off the moment I crest the hill.

Below us lies the bend in the road, right before you reach the gates to Rosecliff.

Normally quiet, today it's full of activity: a small caravan of soldiers moving through. I stare down at the men—or rather fae—my eyes catching on the swords slung across their backs, dagger hilts glinting in the sun at their hips, bows and quivers full of arrows on a few.

I don't recognize any of them, but a little of the tension in my shoulders ease at the sight of Sitara's white and gold colors, and the star crest on their armour.

The men are laughing, shouting to one another as they drag something behind them—or should I say, *someone?*

The soldiers are too preoccupied with their prisoner to notice me—high up on this hill at their backs. I dare a step closer, peering down at the filth-covered man, nearly every inch of him caked in dirt—or was that blood on the side of his face? His hands are bound before him, and he trips and sways wearily as the Sitari soldiers, who appear to be growing increasingly irritated with their burden, drag him roughly forward, each time a little harder than the last.

But despite his circumstances, the man laughs.

Laughs!

In fact, he holds his head even higher as he laughs at the soldiers who curse and spit at him until one of them, having had enough of the man's antics, shoves him forward hard enough that he falls.

More shouts ring out, bringing the small military convoy to a halt.

At the disruption, a rider toward the front turns his horse around. His presence alone is enough to put a stop to the prisoner's harassment, and every Sitari soldier takes a wide step back as he approaches. His auburn

hair shines in the sunlight, and I tilt my head to study him. To study the familiar way he sits upon his saddle, his rigid posture, the set of his jaw…

Without warning, Maksa takes off again, racing down the hill and toward the caravan of soldiers.

“No!” I shout, not giving it a second thought when once again, I pick up my skirts and tear after the stars-blasted wolf.

Maksa is just about the friendliest creature on this side of the fae lands, but the soldiers waiting at the bottom of the hill don’t know that… and when they see a gawky wolf pup bounding up to them, I’m fairly certain they’ll shoot first and ask questions later.

I’m so wholly focused on Maksa, slipping and sliding, just barely keeping my footing on the way down the muddy hill, all while shouting at the soldiers not to shoot… that I don’t notice the familiar rider sliding down from his horse, that is, until Maksa leaps right into his arms.

My face twists in horror, but one quick look has that horror dissipating nearly as quickly as it comes, and I don’t slow down either before I, too, tackle the rider, wrapping my arms tight around his waist.

“Stand down! Stand down!” I hear the rider rumble out to his men. I glance up quickly, not realizing how the other soldiers have their weapons at the ready, waiting for his orders.

Strong hands grip my shoulders as the male pushes me off of him, holding me at arms length in order to inspect me fully. After a few seconds of sharp scrutiny, he pulls me roughly back in. My arms wrap around him so tightly, I don’t think he could shrug me off again if he tried.

My heart warms at the familiar deep rumble of his laugh that tumbles out of his chest, my grin spreading ear to ear.

“Are you acquainted with this,” a nearby soldier starts, then pauses, “feral little thing, Your Highness?”.

“This feral little thing is my sister.” I can hear the smile in his voice. “Your princess.” He calls out that last part loudly, and the effect is immediate.

I shove my brother back roughly, my grin quickly sharpening to a glare when everyone around us drops to one knee, bowing their heads, one fist over each chest. Well, everyone except their prisoner—the only one left standing besides Fel and I.

Fel’s amber eyes sparkle at what he’s done, a smirk on his face. He knows just how much I hate all this pomp and circumstance.

“On your knees, swine,” a gruff voice snarls, pulling my attention just in time to see one soldier whack the back of the prisoner’s knees with his fist, forcing the man to the ground with a grunt before raising his arm to hit him again.

I’m already moving to intervene. “No! No, it’s all right. He doesn’t… None of you have to—”

“Stand down, Breck,” Riven shouts at the soldier as he gracefully descends the hill, finally catching up.

Breck drops his chin deeply in respect, halting his assault on the man.

I eye the prisoner, inches deep in the road’s muck, still on his hands and knees. Sensing my gaze, the prisoner lifts his head, raising his eyes to meet mine. They’re blue. A pretty shade of blue, I notice, before he winks.

Winks!

His blue eyes sparkle and mine narrow, my mouth already opening to tell him off when his attention slides behind me. I turn just as Riven reaches us, and he too immediately embraces Fel in a tight hug.

“What are you doing here? I didn’t know you were coming!” Riv gives him a playful shove, and Fel’s hands fly up to steady Maksa, who’s now wrapped around his neck like an oversized floof of a scarf. He pries her off, carefully handing her to me before running a hand through his hair, attempting to smooth it.

“Neither did I, but...” He looks around; all eyes are on us. “We’ll talk later, alright?”

Riven and I exchange glances, but he nods slowly in acceptance.

Fel’s eyes fall back to the little bundle of fluff in my arms. “Maksa’s grown.”

The little wolf’s ears perk up at the sound of her name. The last time Fel was home was right after I first found her, and I swear she likes him better than me.

“She’ll be six months old next week,” I say, scratching behind her ear with a smile.

“Come on.” Fel inclines his head toward the castle; the gates are open, the guards having already spotted us. He turns, grabbing his horse’s reins, and both Riven and I fall in step beside him, with me holding Maksa tight to my chest, lest she decide to run off again.

It’s a short walk to the gate, but I can’t help but look back over my shoulder every few minutes to check on the prisoner Fel brought with him.

He notices, smiling at me each time I do.

“We found him less than a mile south of here,” Fel says, taking note of my curiosity. “He and a couple of others, scouting close to Rosecliff.”

“What for?” I ask, scrutinizing the prisoner again.

“That’s what we need to find out.” Fel’s expression is harsh, and I realize as we pass through the high stone walls of Rosecliff that the pretty blue-eyed boy is unlikely to walk out of them just as pretty—or at all.

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CHAPTER 4

ROWAN

"Absolutely not." Alita's slight frame blocks me from following the small unit of soldiers into the throne room to address the "visitor," as General Winthrop calls him.

Irritation burns through me, and I steel my spine. "I have every right to be in that room, Alita."

"It is *not* the proper place for a princess." My governess's face clearly displays distaste, and her disgust grows as she observes the mud still caked to my body and boots from the road.

I fold my arms across my chest. "The *throne* room is not the proper place for a *princess*?"

"Not this afternoon, it isn't." Alita's face flames a deep shade of red at my insolence. Her cheeks might even turn purple. She starts toward the stairs, abandoning her stance in front of the doorway, certain I'll be a good little princess, as usual, and follow.

But I'm about to be sent away, so I don't really feel like being a *good little princess* right now.

As soon as Alita is far enough away that I know she can't grab me, I waltz straight into the throne room, chin held high.

"Rowena Vivietta Valrose!" my governess shouts in disbelief.

"Just add a few more switches to my punishment, Alita," I call back over my shoulder. "The only way I'm leaving this room is if you drag me out."

“That can be arranged,” General Winthrop murmurs quietly as I pass him, a deep frown on his face.

My eyes narrow. “I’d like to see you try, General.” I continue through the room and up the carpeted steps of the dais, sliding into the seat beside Riven, who’s watching the entire exchange with a smirk on his face.

The general mutters his annoyance, but the prisoner waiting before us interrupts any subsequent retort by speaking up.

“I’d like to see that too.”

“Shut up.” The soldier guarding the man gives him a hard shove, but it doesn’t deter the dazzling grin he shoots my way.

“Everybody settle down.” Fel’s deep, commanding tone echoes through the cavernous space as he sweeps into the room, his sharp eyes taking in the brewing tension until they fall on me. “Rowan—” he starts, and I give him a hard look, just daring him to kick me out, “—can stay.” He gives me a small nod, and I smile.

I missed my brother. But the entire thing still grates on me. As much as I appreciate Fel backing me up, I shouldn’t need his permission.

Still waiting impatiently by the door, Alita throws up her hands, a distinct sound of disapproval emanating from her before she turns and stalks out of the throne room. Her heels click loudly against the marble floor as she goes.

The general looks as though he has more opinions on the matter, but wisely keeps his mouth shut. The sight of his red cheeks and tight jaw makes it hard to contain the smug smile that threatens to escape me.

“Do you have to be difficult in everything?” Riven asks, leaning in, his voice a whisper so only I can hear him.

My eyes stay trained on the general when I give my answer. “Yes.”

My twin leans back, exhaling. Forever my greatest ally, he doesn’t always understand. All three of us had been born at the table, but only Fel and Riven were offered a seat. I’ve had to fight for mine since the day I was born.

Fel takes his seat on the dais beside us, and at his behest, the soldiers half-drag, half-push the prisoner forward. I steal the opportunity to study him, recognizing the Kovarian crest on his armour: a sword pointed down, with white wings flaring out from either side. And through all the dirt and mud, the silver, white, and blue of his uniform peeks through. My eyes trail up to his rounded ears until they land on those bright blue eyes.

Human.

“What can I do for you, Your Highness?” The man’s eyebrows fold forward. “Highnesses?” he questions before giving a little shrug, addressing all of us before bowing deeply—too deeply—*mockingly* deeply.

I arch a brow.

One of the guards leans forward and smacks the back of his head again. “You’re to speak only when spoken to.”

The man reaches up to rub the side of his head with the back of his hand, his hands still bound. I catch the slight smirk on his face before it disappears, his eyes finding mine again.

He knew that. He’s familiar with court etiquette; most are not.

“What is your name?” Fel asks, his voice deep and in command, every bit the Crown Prince of Sitara right now.

The man turns his attention to my brother with a look of exaggerated confusion on his face, making a slight gesture toward his chest, as if confirming Fel was talking to him.

“It is Theo, Sire.” He takes his gaze down to the floor. Still taking it just slightly too far for it to truly be respectful.

“Is that a last name or a first name, Theo?” Fel asks, his mouth a thin line, unamused with the Kovari scout’s *attitude*.

“It is the only name. Sire,” he tacks the honorific on at the end, but his tone remains in jest as if still not recognizing the seriousness of his situation.

“Well, *Theo*, is it?” Fel leans forward in his seat. “Do you care to tell me what in the hells you were doing in my forest?”

Theo looks thoughtful for a moment, as if actually considering the question and whether or not to answer it. “No, I don’t believe I do, Sire.”

Fel doesn’t move, but his jaw ticks slightly. There’s a beat of silence while he studies the scout. “Is this a joke to you, Theo?” There’s a dangerous edge to my brother’s voice that wasn’t there before.

“No, Sire.” Theo’s expression appears serious—yet *not* at the same time.

Riven shifts in his seat, and Theo’s eyes flicker to him, holding his gaze. Unabashed. Unintimidated. His blue eyes *still* sparkling.

But Fel has had enough. He waves to the guards at Theo’s back. “Take him down to the cells for further questioning.” The guards haul the man roughly to his feet, dragging him from the room.

My eyes trail them out. Theo notices my stare and shoots me another wink.

I shake my head, marveling at the man's audacity.

Riven notices. The glower on his face evident as he glances between the two of us, looking like he might call them back, but I wave him off. No harm done.

"If he winks at you again, I'll personally remove those pretty little eyes of his."

"Stop being dramatic," I sigh, though my worry for the prisoner grows.

"He's asking for it," Riven grumbles, looking like he's still half debating chasing after the Kovari *scout*.

Once they're gone, Fel sits back on his throne, his shoulder sagging slightly. He looks up to address the general. "We found him about a mile south of Rosecliff, scouting a position with a couple of other men."

The general's disinterest couldn't be clearer. "Just kill him and be done with it. He's a scout, nothing more. It's unlikely we'll get anything useful out of him."

"That's not true," I hear myself interjecting.

All eyes turn to me.

The look on the general's face says he might just want to flay me alive for adding my two cents, but I continue, all too aware of the room's attention on me. "He's not just a scout."

The male standing next to the general—Breck, I think Riven called him earlier—snickers. "Not a scout? Of course, he's a scout! We found him in the woods—*scouting*." He shakes his head and rolls his eyes, looking at my brother, waiting for him to dismiss me.

"He might have been *scouting*." I emphasize the word just as he had, and his dark eyes slide venomously back to mine. "But he's not a *scout*." Holding up my fingers, I tick them off as I continue. "His mannerisms, his court knowledge, not to mention the man's flagrant disregard of royal protocols, his armour—it's too nice for the lowest ranking position in the ranks—and, of course, the overall air of entitlement and smug-ass attitude." My gaze moves to my older brother. "He's *not* just a scout. He's noble. Or if not noble, then very close to nobility."

The general grunts and waves me off, dismissing my assessment. "He's a cocky foot soldier who thinks he knows everything. I've seen it a thousand times."

My jaw ticks.

Fel, who's stayed quiet until this point, speaks up. "We'll hold him for now. Question him. I want to know why Kovaria is scouting so far east. And I want him alive—for now, anyway." His gaze falls on the general, who looks as if he wants to argue but thinks better of it, giving Fel a curt bow of his head at the orders before turning on his heel, marching out of the room, and taking his soldiers with him. But not without a farewell glare at me.

"Always a pleasure, General!" I call out to his back.

The large man pauses, his shoulders tense, but he doesn't turn, then strides more stiffly to the exit.

"Rowan—" I turn to my right to find Riven wiping his face with his hand and Fel doing his best to hide a small smile.

The corner of my lip twitches upward. "Come on, you can't tell me that wasn't a little fun."

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CHAPTER 5

ROWAN

"I see you and the general have been working on your relationship." Fel sighs while slumping down in his chair, exhaustion written all over his face.

"He's a dick!" I bite out.

Next to me, Riven coughs sharply to hide his own snicker.

But only amusement dances in our eldest brother's tired eyes. Usually, he's the most rigid of the three of us.

"I see the new governess is earning her keep," Fel teases lightly.

"That has yet to be seen," Riven laughs, giving me a playful shove. "Ro's vocabulary has certainly grown *more* diverse, but there are far more *creative* names she could have called him."

I return his playful shove with a more forceful version of my own, and Riven has to grip the arm of his chair to keep from falling out.

"Let me guess what lessons you were avoiding tonight," Fel laughs, and I shoot him a warning glare—giving Riven one more shove for good measure. "Dancing, posture…"

"Manners, perhaps?" Riven tacks on.

"I would never!" I reply, painting a look of shock and indignation upon my face, feigning innocence while pushing aside the nightmarish memories of posture lessons. Hours and hours and hours of maintaining the proper way to sit, stand, and curtsy.

Ridiculous.

The fact that the boys don’t have to attend such lessons irks me to no end.

Fel and Riven’s laughter fill the room, and the sound warms my chest.

Gods, I’ve missed this. It feels like ages since the three of us have been together. Fel had been called away to new duties with the Sitaran army, spending more time at Aurielle with our father. Riven, too, had been gone more and more for training. Our father has been grooming each of us for our future roles since the day we were born. Remembering this could be one of the last times the three of us are together like this has my heart tightening painfully in my chest.

Shaking off the tears that threaten to form, my attention narrows on my oldest brother. “And how is the Crown Prince of Sitara, Felipe Benedict Valrose?” I tease in the mocking tone of the court herald. “Rumor has it he is just perfect in every way.”

Fel rolls his eyes at the reference to the never-ending headlines about him in the village papers. “Oh, you know, same as usual. The ever uptight, pretentious, god-king-heir,” he replies with an embellished flourish of his hand.

I smile. As much as Riven and I like to poke fun at him, he really is the best of the three of us. Born to be king, he embodies the role wholeheartedly and without complaint, though I can see a difference in him.

Smile fading, I sit up a little straighter, turning to face him so I can see his eyes. “No, but seriously, how are you, Fel?”

To the rest of Sitara, Fel might be the heir, but to Riven and me, he’ll always just be our stinky older brother. And as stoic as he might appear, I know his duties weigh more heavily on him than he’d ever admit.

I don’t miss the small, almost sad smile when he looks down at his boots, or the flash of grief in his eyes that's gone nearly as quickly as it appeared. Two contradictions. His eyes, a warm amber gold unlike the dark green belonging to Riven and me, betray his true feelings.

Fel takes a deep breath, lifting his head to meet my gaze. “Starving. Shall we find something to eat?” He stands, his back stiff as he extends an arm out to me. The dutiful prince once more.

I don’t take it. Fel is here for a reason. His sudden appearance, and so soon after our father’s announcement last night—my *engagement*—is not a coincidence.

“You have news.” I stare him down, daring him to try evading me again.

Riven is silent beside me; he too held in rapt attention as we watch our brother uncomfortably rake his hand through his hair. It’s longer than I’ve ever seen it. He’s long overdue for a trim; the reddish-brown locks are close to falling into his eyes just like Riven’s.

Fel gives me a knowing look. “I thought we could discuss over dinner.” He gestures to the door but still avoids my gaze.

I take one small step in his direction before stopping, slowly shaking my head. “No.”

Fel stiffens.

This time, it’s Riven who speaks. “You’re a shit liar, Fel. Always have been. Come on, out with it—while we’re alone.”

It’s true the guards have all resumed their posts outside of the closed double doors across from us. And recently, it's become so rare for the three of us to be together—and to be *alone*. You might think it was our father’s new mission in life to keep us apart.

There had always been assasination attempts, but after our mother was killed in a demon attack, Father sent the three of us away—to Rosecliff, where we could be kept safe.

Rosecliff sits so far on the edge of Sitara’s territory that it is practically in Daekhar. Buried deep within the Wyldewood forest, the castle itself is an impenetrable fortress. After thousands of years, the walls have never been breached by fae armies, demons, or monsters alike.

But for the last year, aside from a few impromptu visits, Fel has been splitting most of his time between the military and the Starlight Court in Sitara’s capital. Father’s been preparing him for his role as heir just as he has Riven and me.

Except Father still prefers to keep the two of us far away from court.

The three of us stand in silence for a long moment. We know each other so well, Fel can’t hide anything from me, any more than I could hide something from him. Patiently, I wait for it to come out as he stares hard at the ground. Not wanting to say… whatever it is… yet.

“He’s moved it up,” he finally breathes out, his jaw tense.

“The wedding,” he confirms when I just stare at him.

I sigh in defeat. *There goes my two weeks.*

Riven lets loose a growl next to me, and there's a sharp bite of anger to his tongue when he speaks up. "We only just received word of the engagement last night. There's supposed to be a period of courting."

"There's growing tension on the border," Fel offers weakly, as if some kind of explanation. "I was already on my way here when Father sent a falcon with the news."

"With Kovaria?" I pry, seeing as Fel dragged a Kovarian prisoner back with him.

"No. But that's an additional concern now, thanks to *Theo*." Fel runs a hand down his face. "No, the King of Miselys appears to be amassing soldiers along the east border as we speak."

That explains why Father left so quickly after his announcement last night.

Riven gives a start at his words, and his eyes find mine immediately. "Do they mean to attack?" A war with Miselys would be—well, devastating. For both sides.

Fel's jaw tenses. "Not yet."

Miselys may not have attacked yet, but by the way Fel is acting, and the wedding getting pushed up… the situation has to be serious. Especially if it's messing up all of Father's carefully laid plans.

"Kane and his men are en route to… *collect* you." Fel's eyes flicker to mine before exchanging a look with Riven.

I don't flinch at the sound of my fiancé's name. Kane. He's practically a stranger. I haven't seen the male in years now… The prince I'll soon call my husband. I chew my cheek, taking in the news. *This is it.* It's really happening. An alliance with Skye through my hand will strengthen our kingdom, extending far greater protection to everyone I care about. I can cry, scream, yell, but it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter because I will marry Kane. No one will have to force me. No, I'll do so willingly because it's what is best for Sitara. If marrying Kane gives us soldiers, weapons, and aid from Skye, then I know what I have to do.

"When?" My voice sounds strangely detached as I feel myself slipping back into that increasingly familiar, joyless apathy in order to cope with the overwhelming outlook of my future.

Fel eyes me warily, as if waiting for the explosion. "We're to leave for Canton fort the day after tomorrow. Kane…" He trails off, still assessing

my reaction closely, or well, in this case, my lack thereof. “Kane will meet us there and take you back to Skye, where the two of you will be wed.”

“The wedding won’t be in Sitara?” Riven demands.

Fel shakes his head, his expression grave. “There isn’t time.”

Riven and I exchange a look, and I know he and I are on the same page, one benefit of being twins, and both of us are thinking the same thing: this is certainly suspicious.

I consider it; Sitara isn’t the only kingdom at odds with Miselys. “Skye hates Miselys as much as we do.”

Fel’s jaw tightens. “More.”

The Sea Kingdom and the Iron Kingdom have long clashed with each other. King Mavros of Miselys has spent decades contesting Skye’s waters, which Skye vehemently defends. Perhaps he’s even sent his assassins to Skye too.

Suddenly, it all makes sense.

The engagement. The wedding. *The timing.*

Sure, a union between Sitara and Skye would bolster Sitara’s forces and provide much-needed protection, but more importantly for Skye, it’s a declaration.

Or rather a warning. An all out threat to the Salt crown.

“Because of Mom?” I ask quietly, watching Riven and Fel’s faces as they too put the pieces together. “They know I have a claim?”

“Father must have told them,” Fel says grimly.

“*Told* them?” Riven scoffs. “Something tells me it was his selling point.”

I wrinkle my nose at the idea of them bartering over me like some prized broodmare. “Do you think he advertised all of the assassination attempts, or did he keep those close to the vest?” My bitter thoughts escape out loud.

An heir, a spare, and a daughter to sell.

My mother was a distant cousin to the Salt king himself, leaving Riven and me with a tiny drop of Miselyian royal blood running through our veins. Not Fel, considering his mother died in childbirth years before our father married my mother. King Mavros has never cared how distant our claim might be, given how often he’s attempted to kill us over the years. A drop of blood is more than enough to satisfy the tethering and claim the Salt throne.

I’m quiet. My thoughts are racing too quickly for me to keep up.

My bloodline is valuable, making me especially desirable to an heir like Kane. Any child of ours would not only have a claim to the Skye line of power, but to Sitara and Miselys as well.

“So Father gets an army, and Skye finally gains an upperhand on Mavros after all these years?” Riven smiles, though it’s the bitter kind that doesn’t touch his eyes. “I’m liking this arrangement less and less.”

“But Miselys has an heir?” I ask, confused. “Mavros has a son… Cove?”

“He does, but a claim is still a claim.” Fel answers. “Father has been pushing further east, stepping on Mavros’ toes… If he, or Skye, were to attack… take out Cove…” He shrugs, like talk of violating the Tethering Covenant and plotting the death of another kingdom’s heir is little more than moving pieces across a chess board. “And of course, with the rumors circling about the Skye king’s health…. Mavros is growing increasingly paranoid.”

“Which explains the increase of soldiers on the border,” Riven muses coldly, and Fel nods.

Weaponizing my mother’s blood. *My blood*. I clench my fists.

“But the timing…” Fel’s frown deepens. “With all this unrest with Kovaria, and more and more raids along the Daekhar border, our army is stretched too far. If Mavros decides to attack,” he swallows hard, “we’ll survive… but not without first sustaining heavy losses. Heavy *civilian* losses.” His eyes find mine.

Not numbers on a battlefield, not pieces moved across a playing board, but mothers… *children*.

An alliance with Skye might be a threat to the Salt crown, but for good reason.

And I’m the key. If my hand can buy Sitara an army, another year of peace, another thousand lives spared, then perhaps it's a price I can bear.

“When is the wedding?” I ask.

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CHAPTER 6

ROWAN

The soft leather soles of my hunting boots barely make a sound as I creep across the deserted hall floor, careful to keep my steps light and my movements quick. If I get caught, I'll have more than a few marks to add to my collection of scars across the backs of my legs, courtesy of my father and Alita—and countless governesses before her. The marks are well hidden by the long gowns I'm forced to wear.

Oh, she just couldn't wait to punish me for "that little stunt" I'd pulled in the throne room last night. She waited until after I left dinner—and the protection of my brothers—before she pounced.

In the end, I got that lesson in *posture* after all.

I can see why my father handpicked her.

Hours upon hours spent standing perfectly still, spine straight as a spear, my skirts lifted above my knees. If I so much as swayed, Alita's thin, reedy switch would crack against the backs of my legs without hesitation, leaving angry welts that split open and bleed. She calls them *posture lessons*. I call it *torture*. The thin silver scars scattered across my skin are proof enough.

My jaw still aches from gritting my teeth. The night had been nothing short of an endless battle of wills. I was determined not to break, while Alita refused to release me until I did. She wanted tears. She wanted me contrite—apologetic. She wouldn't be satisfied until she felt the punishment was severe enough to make up for the embarrassment I had caused her.

But I haven't cried in years, and I'm not about to start now.

There’s no one to go to. My father would have easily doled out the punishment himself, *if he were here*. A princess has to be in control of herself; she cannot be impulsive, emotional, or reckless.

My brothers would stand up for me—just like they have in the past. But like the cut still marring Riven’s cheek, my father would make them pay. And they would get it far worse. A reminder to everyone of what would happen when someone challenged him.

So I stay silent, bite my tongue, and take the punishments, because what’s a few new marks anyway?

It could be worse.

I clear the hall without incident, hesitating when I reach the concealed entrance to the servants’ passage, listening carefully to ensure the dark and narrow passage within the stone walls is indeed empty.

At this time of night, most of the servants should already be in bed. However, with the lords’ dinner being held in Fel’s honor tonight, many of the servants have been pulled from their regular duties to help in the ballroom and kitchens. Both on the other side of the castle, thankfully.

The passage is quiet; I take a deep breath before following the dark space, mostly from memory, my fingers tracing the rough stone walls. I forgot to bring a lantern with me into the tight, windowless space, and the darkness has my heart in my throat. I slow my steps when I reach the west hall and poke my head out, having to take my chances in the main corridor in order to reach the unassuming wooden door at the end.

With no excuse to be in this part of the castle, I skirt across the hall quickly, reaching the door undetected.

I attempt to haul it open, but the door doesn’t budge. I try again—but after a few more minutes of me attempting to tug the heavy thing open, I frown. It must be latched from the inside.

With one nervous glance back down the open hall, I reach for the knife I keep sheathed along my upper thigh, hidden in my skirts, a gift from my brother on my last birthday. It’s beautiful, more of a work of art than a weapon. Intricate, rune-like markings are etched into the steel, running hilt to tip. I don’t know what they mean—if they mean anything at all. But they catch the light whenever I turn it in my hand.

I’m meant to be in my rooms, reflecting on my actions from last night. And I was *reflecting* alright, right into the darkest parts of Rosecliff.

Taking my knife, I shimmy it up and through the narrow crack in the door, deftly applying just enough pressure to pop the latch on the other side. The door swings open with a tortuously loud whine.

Grinning in triumph, I quickly steal inside, latching the door again behind me.

Growing up in Rosecliff may have been boring, for how secluded it is, but the castle itself is home to dozens upon dozens of secret passageways and tunnels. My brothers and I know almost all of them by heart.

But not this one. Although it is just another one of the many hidden corridors and staircases the castle possesses, this particular passage has always been off limits. And I find myself alone, with only my thoughts to keep me company as I descend the dark, winding staircase underground.

Marriage.

I knew it was coming.

So why has it caught me so off guard?

After all, what were all those finishing lessons for? It's my duty.

The king has three children: a*n heir, a spare, and a daughter to sell.* Now that I am of age, my value has never been higher.

But Kane Belmore? I guess I just never expected it would be him. Like Fel, he is the heir to his own throne and has prepared diligently for the crown he will soon inherit, if the rumors circulating the court are true.

From what I remember of the days he came to court, he was handsome and polite. Everything a fae prince should be. Fel and Riven know him better than I do, of course, having spent more time together. *They* were permitted to accompany Father on the rare royal visit outside of Sitara, while I was left at home. And while they said they found him to be rather arrogant at times, neither could come up with anything especially heinous that might outright disqualify him from marrying their sister.

Though, neither of them are happy about it; the alliance with Skye is still too new.

But they did say Kane has a rather well-known reputation as a playboy. Reportedly showing up to events and engagements with a different female on his arm each time. He certainly didn't strike me as the type who wanted to settle down. But then again, neither am I. Perhaps the two of us could find common ground there.

Plus, gossip and rumors are just that. And *gods*, the rumors my father spun about me and my brothers… they are *far* from the truth. I can only

hope that holds true for my soon-to-be *playboy* husband as well.

He will be the next king of Skye. A mountainous kingdom to our southeast, well known for its stone and ironwork, as well as its formidable and rather ruthless army. A kingdom I'll one day be queen of. The thought makes my stomach drop, and for a moment, I feel dizzy, stopping to balance myself on a step before proceeding further.

By the light… Queen of Skye… My jaw aches as I grind my teeth once more, thinking about the crown and all the scrutiny and expectations that come with it.

My boot catches on a loose nail, but I'm able to catch both myself and my scream by grabbing hold of a metal sconce nailed into the wall next to me. My feet only slide down a few steps, just barely avoiding disaster. Breathing hard, I let myself recover for a moment before pressing on.

None of it appeals to me. I can't quite shake the feeling that this is the end. My ladies-in-waiting and other noblewomen can't stop congratulating me. They found me first thing this morning, gushing and carrying on about my "happily ever after."

But to me… it doesn't feel that way. Happily ever after? Happy? Maybe—hopefully, but it most certainly is an ending.

That's all I'll ever be. Once I marry Kane, it's all over—not that it ever started. It's not like I've seen much more of the world from behind the walls of Rosecliff, but… from that day on, that's all I'll ever be. His wife.

I already know how every moment of my life will play out. The story—*my story*— Someone else already has it written.

And if I'm being honest, it's not one I want to read.

My thoughts quicken my pace, as if I can run from destiny. *For Sitara,* I remind myself, forcing the rising rebellious thoughts from my mind.

If not Kane, it would just be someone else. This is my destiny. I was born to be sold. My entire existence hinges upon a pretty smile and a hand worth its weight in gold. That's who I am and—looking forward—who I'll ever be.

I sigh, drawing myself up and dusting off my skirts when I finally reach the end of the spiral staircase. It takes a minute to catch my breath. I swear Alita tied my corset extra tight this morning on purpose. My lungs are screaming.

Looking up, I find myself faced with yet another heavy wooden door, nestled deep below the stone castle above. This one, however, is unlocked

and swings open easily, revealing the subject of the one quiet rebellion I've allowed myself this morning.

A few feet away, behind thick iron bars, Theo lounges against the filthy stone wall as though he occupies a throne rather than a prison cell. One knee is drawn up to his chest, an arm draped lazily across it, while his other leg stretches through the moldy hay littering the dirt floor. As I emerge from the unassuming door at the far end of the dungeons, he lets out a low whistle, his gaze dragging over me in a slow, deliberate appraisal.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't the Princess of the Rose Court herself." His grin widens. "To what do I owe the honor of being graced with your royal presence in this charming corner of the kingdom?"

He sweeps his arms wide, presenting the filthy, cramped cell as though it were a lavish suite rather than a dungeon. The thick iron bars between us do little to diminish the mischief dancing in his eyes.

"Come to play?"

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CHAPTER 7

ROWAN

My eyes trail over Theo's suggestively arched brow as he awaits an answer to his question. That same familiar laughing expression remains on his face, but he can't quite hide the weariness around his eyes. Or the streaks of dried blood running down from his temple, and his pale, cracked lips…

I allow my lips to quirk up in a small smile and watch as his eyes widen in surprise. He likely had expected more of a prudish response. I close the gap between us with slow, deliberate steps, holding his gaze as I move.

"Well, that depends." I drop my eyes, noting he's wearing just a tunic and breeches. The armour he was wearing previously sits in a heap just outside the cell. Although covered in dirt and straw, I can tell the tunic Theo wears is newer. The stitching is fine, especially along the blue and silver crest of the Kingdom of Kovaria—a sword with white wings— that sits just over his heart. "What game did you have in mind, my lord?" I mimic his suggestive tone, while batting my eyes a bit too obviously, letting the address hang between us.

The amusement on Theo's face fades slightly, and he appraises me again, albeit more seriously this time.

"So formal, Your Highness." I hear laughter in his tone, and he flashes me a bright smile, the kind of smile one shouldn't find in the dingy, dark, forsaken cells of the castle's dungeons. The ones all the way in the back—

cells reserved for the condemned. Rising to his feet, Theo dusts off some dirt and loose hay from his breeches. “I am, but only a humble scout.”

At his full height, he’s taller than Riven, though not as tall as Fel, but he has several inches on me.

I narrow my eyes before reaching my hand through the hidden slit I’d cut in my skirts, watching his eyes track the movement. A second later, I pull out a small flask of water I had strapped there, just below my blade.

“I’m afraid,” I say, twisting the cap off the metal flask, “I can’t play any games with someone who cheats and lies.” Taking a small sip of the cool water I’d filled the flask with, I smile. “Don’t you agree, my lord?” I bat my eyelashes expectantly at him again.

The guards will not have allowed him any food or water while they’re questioning him. And Fel’s men probably did not give him any after they captured him either… Which made my little flask of water highly desirable.

The *not-scout* gapes openly at my boldness. “You are unlike any fae princess I’ve ever met.”

“And you are unlike any simple scout I’ve ever met,” I say, holding his eye.

His mischievous smile turns curious, studying me again before he finally drops the pretense. “How did you know?”

I tilt my head to the side. “Did you think you were hiding well?” I arch a brow. “Sure, you might have flown under the radar of the general, or even my brothers, because men…” I roll my eyes. “But the truth is in the details—you just have to pay attention.”

He just stares at me.

I sigh, placing a hand on my hip. “The stitching in your tunic is far too fine for a scout, the thread too expensive—too durable—with a meticulous finishing. And your armour alone…” I give him a look. “Since when has any army prioritized the safety of a simple scout with Varrick steel?”

I suspected earlier, but now that I’m closer, I’m able to confirm the armour dropped unceremoniously on the floor is, in fact, Varrick steel. One of the rarest metals on the continent, it’s found and forged only in Skye, and a luxury very few can afford.

Theo sits back on his heels, crossing his arms with a slight nod. “Well played, Princess, well played…”

“Thank you.” I smile back at him politely, inclining my head. A second later, I take another step forward, tossing the flask at him between the cell bars.

Displaying quick reflexes, Theo catches the flask before looking back at me in shock.

I just give him a shrug back.

A little goodwill goes a long way.

I wait as he untwists the cap, taking a long drink.

“Why pretend to be a scout?” I ask after a few moments.

He takes another drink, shaking his head. “I didn’t *pretend* to be anything. Your men caught me and labeled me as such.” The corner of his mouth ticks up. “Who am I to correct them?”

Fair.

I consider him. He appears to be telling the truth, but who can really know? I decide to press my luck.

“What are you doing in Sitara territory?”

“Sitara territory?” He lets loose a clipped laugh, and I don’t miss the way the corners of his bright eyes darken. “This is Rosecliff, is it not?” He steps closer, closing the gap between us.

I hold my ground, although my instincts scream at me to take a step back and remove myself from his reach.

“This land belongs to the Kingdom of Daekhar.” Something flashes in his eyes, but it’s gone again before I can put a name to the emotion.

“And Sitara claimed it.” I lift my chin as I state the fact, not like I need to explain this to him. When the Blackwing Court fell, the bordering kingdoms snatched up small pieces of it. The rest was left to the wild fae, dangerous rogue raiders found at the center of most border skirmishes. “It’s not like Daekhar was making any use of it.” My tone is sharp. The taunt bold—even for me.

Theo eyes me with a look that’s much colder than before, taking another drink from my flask. Kovaria and Daekhar were close allies before the fall. But Daekhar’s own king is solely responsible for his kingdom’s destruction.

“If you say so.” He takes another drink from the flask.

I frown at him. Surely he knows this, though, because Kovaria is human-led, its interactions with the fae are limited.“The Daekhari king was driven mad by his own demon queen. He destroyed his own court, killed his

own children, and thus ended the royal bloodline. Without a blood heir, no fae can ever claim the crown. The tethering won't allow it. And so the land is left to ruins. What does it matter if Sitara lays claim to a tiny strip of land on the edge of a kingdom that can never rise again?"

After the Great War, in order to fight back the demon hordes that threatened to overrun the realm, the six fae kingdoms forged a blood covenant to restore balance and maintain peace. The ruler of each kingdom must be a blood heir to the original six royals who completed the tethering. Without a blood heir to rule, the land would fall to waste. *Cursed.* As Daekhar now was.

"It matters," Theo mutters before draining the last of the water from the flask.

Bristling with irritation at the direction our conversation has taken, I fold my arms across my chest, intent on bringing it back on track.

"You never answered my question."

Theo's smile is back and once again full of mischief. "Ah, Princess, you see," he moves closer, leaning up against the bars, and I take a discreet step back, "I never intended to."

I release a huff of frustration.

Without warning, Theo tosses the flask back.

I fumble to catch it. The empty metal canister drops against the stone floor, the cavernous space echoing the clanging sound even more.

I snatch it back up with a scowl.

Commotion sounds at the dungeon's entrance. A soldier appears in the doorway, likely having heard the clatter. His eyes scan the space, and when they land on me, standing in the middle of the dungeon, his mouth drops open.

I wince. *So much for not getting caught.*

The soldier shouts, his hand finding the hilt of his sword as he hurries toward the two of us.

Before I can back far enough away from the bars, Theo flies forward, his hand reaching out and grabbing hold of my wrist, tugging me back to him.

His voice is low enough for only me to hear. "Be careful, Princess. This game you're playing—it's far more dangerous than you know."

And then I'm released from his grip. Just as quickly as he grabbed me. His hands are held up in surrender as he backs away from the bars as the

guard closes in.

I scramble away from him, my eyes wide at the threat—*or was it a warning?*

Questions swirl in my mind, but the soldier has already reached us, quickly putting himself between me and Theo before hurriedly ushering me out of the dungeons—this time through the main entrance—and back upstairs.

To face the consequences of my actions.

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CHAPTER 8

ROWAN

"You could at least act like you are to be wed to a crown prince in less than two weeks' time," Fel lectures.

The guard who caught me in the dungeons is one of Fel's men, and he delivered me directly to my brother. Less than ideal, but likely a better outcome than if he'd brought me straight to Alita—or the general.

We face off on the upper west terrace, where no one can overhear us.

"What would you have me do, Fel? Prance about and pretend I want this?" I glare up at my brother, who's listening with a deep frown on his face.

"I don't want this. I never wanted this." The last few words come out quieter than the rest.

"You have a duty to your kingdom, Rowan."

A flash of rage flames inside me, and I feel my magic stir, but I push it back down. It's an effort not to snap at Fel, but if I hear the words duty, honor, or responsibility thrown at me. One. More. Time…

I bite my tongue to keep myself from saying anything I might regret.

When I don't respond, Fel's jaw tightens. Playing the heir has made him insufferable. I miss my brother—the version of Fel that Riven and I grew up with before duty, honor, and responsibility changed everything. Changed *him.*

Shaking his head, he turns to stare off the balcony at the sinking sun. The golden sun has already disappeared past the horizon, and the faded gold

and yellow light of day are slipping away. Much like the time I have left here.

“I don’t think I need to remind you what will happen if Father needs to get involved.”

Oh, I know. All too well, I know. As much as I hated growing up on the edge of Sitara territory, the less we saw of our father, the better. Far away from his judgment, his criticisms, and his *punishments*.

Rage flares again at the way he hit Riven the other night, for daring to question one of his decisions. A sigh escapes me, and Fel turns away from the retreating sun, once again meeting my eye. “I don’t want to get married, Fel. I didn’t choose it. And I don’t want it.”

My brother opens his mouth to argue, a lecture about *duty, honor, and responsibility* likely on the tip of his tongue, but I keep going, cutting him off.

“But I will. When I get to Skye, I will stand up in front of hundreds—maybe even thousands—of guests I don’t know, and marry the Iron bastard.”

Fel lifts his brow, doing his best to hide the smirk that’s forming at my choice of language, but thankfully, he skips the reprimand.

“I will marry Kane because it will safeguard Sitara.” With unrest now brewing on two of our borders, Sitara lies at risk between both Kovaria and Miselys. The alliance with the Iron crown gives us armies and weapons, only strengthening our position. Plus, it will make the other kingdoms, especially Miselys, think twice before attacking either of the two powerful allies.

That said, I turn to leave, walking away from my brother, but not before turning to add, “I will marry the Skyen prince because it’s what’s best for our kingdom. But if you’re asking me to smile and pretend that marrying a male I don’t know is everything I’ve ever wanted—*that* I cannot do. I will *not* do.” My eyes lift to find my brother’s, my face a mix of sadness and resignation to my future.

Fel nods solemnly, his jaw working before looking guiltily at his feet.

The sadness in his eyes needles me, and I open my mouth in an attempt to make peace. I’m already upset, and he’d just scolded me for my reckless trip to the dungeons, and worse—for acting cavalier about being betrothed.

But Fel is just the messenger. None of this is his fault; both of us chained to our position in the royal line. But before I can apologize, the

words stall on my lips… Something behind Fel's head catches my attention.

An iridescent crimson glow has appeared on the edge of the horizon, just like the sunrise yesterday.

But the sun has already set… I watched it—the light had faded away, and the glow was a golden yellow, not red.

The sharpness of the red and orange colors bleeding into the night sky is too bright—too ominous, in the way they haunt the horizon.

I stare at the crimson glow, watching it dance and twist just beyond the dark forest. My instincts scream fire, but there's no smoke, no scent of ash on the wind. It could be miles away, perhaps, but still… my gaze drops to the quiet village that lies just below the east tower.

And when I look up, I nearly fall back in horror, a gasp escaping me.

Where, just seconds ago, there had only been trees, backlit by that eerie glow, now stand what looks to be thousands of dark silhouettes. The shape of their armour and weapons on their backs stands out in stark contrast to the reddish glow at their backs, making them appear even more ominous. The dark army stretching as far as my eyes can see.

I feel all the blood drain from my face, and I half-choke, struggling to speak—to scream—to do anything.

Fel looks up from the ground, and with one glance at the look on my face, he's turning, hand already on the hilt of his sword. My brother takes in the sight, his features hardening as he takes in the vast army encircling us.

Those silhouettes are moving now, headed straight for us.

I eye the steep stone walls of Rosecliff, meant to withstand the strongest of armies. The walls have been tested in countless battles throughout the castle's history, and they've never once fallen.

But the gates stand open below; the guards had not yet seen the danger—couldn't. The western terrace towers, high above the rest, give Fel and me the best vantage point.

The two of us exchange a loaded look before turning to run for the hall, our shouts echoing through empty halls. Most of Rosecliff's nobles and servants have all turned in for the night.

The war we thought might be coming…

It's already here.

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CHAPTER 9

ROWAN

The scent of smoke and ash burns my nose as the approaching army ravages its way through the forest.

The castle has deteriorated into a flurry of panic and fear, the evacuation now well underway.

"It's not fair." I cross my arms, staring out at the dark army through my bedroom window, at risk of sounding like a petulant faeling. But Alita just informed me we would leave Rosecliff within the hour, along with Fel, most of the soldiers, the Rose Court, and villagers, but—without Riven.

The governess sighs in exasperation; for once her attention is not on me, too busy micromanaging the maids in packing up my gowns. Heavens forbid a gown escape a military siege with a crease!

Fel and Riven are locked in an emergency war council meeting, one I'm not allowed to attend. It's not fair how decisions are being made about our beloved home, and I'm not even permitted an opinion.

Or how Riven will oversee the evacuation of both the castle and village; I'm not even allowed to help.

Useless. My body vibrates with untethered energy. I'm unsettled, looking out the window at the impossibly large army headed our way, in the gown Alita forced over my head this morning—doing nothing.

Below us, both fae and humans alike scurry about the small village, rushing to enter one of the castle's evacuation tunnels before they're magically sealed. There are three: one within the village itself, another in

the soldiers' keep hidden behind a false wall in the armoury, and a third at the very top of the west tower.

Once the evacuation is complete, Riven will magically seal the entrances, and not even the King of Sitara himself could open them back up. The walls of Rosecliff should hold, like they have for centuries, but for some reason, Fel has issued the order to evacuate.

My eyes catch upon a small family, carrying what little they can, along with their two small children, hurrying along the path.

I can help.

I *want* to help.

But instead, I'm up here. Dressed like a porcelain doll in a fine silk gown, my hair curled and braided, a delicate gold crown of thorns and roses atop my head, expected to wait patiently until I can be escorted to safety with the rest of the Rose Court ladies.

Alita rubs her temples. "Rowena, I do not have time for this today. You will do as you are told, and that is the end of it." She waves her hand at the maid anxiously waiting by the door. "Liana will escort you to the tunnels."

Since news of the army has spread, the castle is a mess of tension and worry. Even Alita looks paler than usual, the familiar sharpness of her tone cutting less.

That Alita has not seized the opportunity to lecture and punish such blatant disrespect is further evidence that the situation we find ourselves in is quite grave indeed.

Reluctantly, I drag myself from the window, joining Liana at the door before allowing her to lead me from my room, all while my mind runs away from me.

Why here?

I'm well aware Sitara is on the brink of war, but it never once crossed my mind that the war would start *here*—at *Rosecliff*. The castle is of little value; it's beautiful, sure, but aside from its sprawling rose gardens, it has nothing to offer.

Liana leads us through the east wing corridors, the halls bustling with nobles and their servants as they make to flee. But just as we're about to cross into the castle's west wing, Riven comes into my sights.

He's down the hall, dressed in the shining gold armour of Sitara, conversing seriously with two of the lords' sons.

They were probably permitted to attend the war council meeting, I think bitterly to myself. Shrugging out of Liana's grip, I race down the hall, nearly colliding with my brother in my haste.

Ignoring Liana's panicked hissing at my back, as soon as I reach my brother, words spill out of me in a near-incoherent rush.

"Slow down, Rowan. For the gods' sake," Riven curses, drawing me away from his friends and giving them a quick nod of dismissal.

I suck in a breath, attempting to calm down, but I cannot slow my rapid rate of speech. "What are they saying? Is it Miselys coming for all of Sitara? Is it wild fae from Daekhar? More Kovari soldiers?"

And then, quieter—almost a whisper—I ask the question I most want the answer to. The rumor that's swirled through the castle hall for the last several hours. "Is it true they have a Raven?"

As the words leave my mouth, Riven's eyes go wide, quickly glancing around us before practically shoving me out onto the nearest terrace.

My brother's eyes scan the balcony, ensuring we're alone, before he whirls on me. "How do you know about that?"

I roll my eyes, my hands finding my hips. "*Of course* I know. Honestly, give me a little credit, would ya?" I give him a look. "What I need to know is whether or not it's true."

My eyes search his, looking for the answer in them.

Since they are so determined to shut me out of everything, I've made it my life's mission to know just about everything I shouldn't. It's one of the few skills I excel at, too—to the dismay of everyone around me.

The servants' passages are good for more than just sneaking down to the training grounds or the dungeons.

As word of the army broke, I overheard whispers spreading through the castle like wildfire—a rumor that a *Raven* marches among the army closing in on Rosecliff. Ever since the dark army appeared beyond our borders last night, it's all the guards have spoken of. Quietly, of course. In hushed voices and behind closed doors, as though keeping the words secret might somehow make them less real.

I can hardly blame them. The thought of a demon lurking just beyond the castle walls is enough to frighten even the bravest soldier. That same dread coils deep within my stomach as I search Riven's face, finding the truth written plainly in his eyes.

It's true.

“Rowan—” he starts.

I ignore the tired way he says it, too used to my name coming out of everyone’s mouths that way. “We don’t have secrets.” I frown, hurt flashing in my eyes.

My brother glares down at me, well aware he’s being manipulated before he finally breaks, but not before uttering a few choice curse words at my persistence.

“Out with it,” I growl, folding my arms over my chest, irritated that he’s making me berate him for the information.

Defeated, he caves like a sandcastle at high tide.

“It’s the Kovarian army that approaches.”

My eyes widen with surprise. *The humans?* My thoughts immediately go to Theo.

“They’ll reach our walls just before dawn.” His green eyes, so much like my own but lighter with flecks of gold, study my face, still hesitant to continue. “Our scouts have reported seeing a Raven with them, yes.”

My heart drops at the confirmation of what I knew deep down was true, but still had hoped—*prayed* to the gods—it wasn’t.

A Raven.

A shadow walker.

The monster has many names. The demon, as I prefer to call it, has the power to bring Rosecliff, and maybe even all of Sitara itself, to its knees.

It was bold of Kovaria to attack the faeries. They have clashed a few times in the past, sure; tension on the borders is fairly normal, and while the humans have the numbers, they lack power—magic. But a Raven… A Raven would give them the advantage they truly need to take on the fae.

I release a slow breath, lifting my chin to meet my brother’s eyes once again. “So that’s it then, we’re just giving up? Turning tail and running?” My fingers curl into fists at my sides. “We should fight.”

Riven’s usual mischievous grin is nowhere to be seen. Instead, a tense and barely contained anger graces his sharp features. “Even if they didn’t have a Raven… the castle guard can’t face Kovaria alone.”

“But the walls—” I argue, but Riven cuts me off.

“—will only hold so long.”

The appearance of an anxious-looking maid draws both of our attention. It’s not Liana; I don’t recognize her, but already know she must be one of

Alita's. The governess was as dissatisfied with her maids as she usually is with her princess; she almost always had a new one in rotation.

The maid gives a quick curtsy, her eyes wide as she addresses both Riven and me. "Your Majesties."

I ignore her, turning my attention back to my brother, but he nods his head for her to continue.

"Princess, Lady Alita sent me to check that you are ready to depart. She —" the maid stutters nervously, "she is waiting for you at the west tower entrance." She's referring to the evacuation tunnel.

I scowl, not at the maid, the poor, quivering thing. What a day to be in service to the governess. "Please tell her she should go ahead. I will remain here until Prince Riven has completed his duties, and he shall escort me through the tunnels himself."

My twin stiffens beside me.

The maid, fearing the consequences she might face if she returns to the tunnel entrance without me, chews her lip, her hands anxiously smoothing down her already smooth skirts.

"You should go," Riven pushes, turning to face me.

I glare at him.

"I'm serious, Rowan. The Kovarian army is nearly within striking distance. It's not safe. Fel and most of his men have already gone through to secure the tunnels and lead the first group of evacuees. They will seal the tunnels soon."

I already know Riven is to oversee the final stages of the evacuation, but is supposed to leave Rosecliff before Kovaria attacks.

"No, I'm not leaving you." I step forward, gripping the balcony railing tightly, lest someone try to tear me from it.

"Rowan," Riven whispers, "I'll be fine."

"Yes, you will," I assert. "And I will be here waiting for you when you are fine, and the two of us will leave Rosecliff together." I look at him, my tone leaving no room for argument.

With an army led by a demon outside, there is no chance in all the hells that I would leave my twin behind.

Riven inhales deeply before speaking, keeping his voice low as he eyes the waiting maid who is growing increasingly more nervous as time passes. "Alita won't like it."

"Alita doesn't like anything I do," I dismiss with a wave of my hand.

“Father won’t like it,” he counters.

I clench my jaw, gripping the balcony railing a little tighter. “Then Father should be here. Shouldn’t he?”

Someone sent a falcon to the capital as soon as the army appeared, but our father has not yet responded.

“They’re about to get everything they wanted out of me. They can at least let me make this one choice.” There’s venom in my words, but Riven doesn’t get the chance to argue, because the sounding of a horn interrupts our conversation.

Courtiers and servants in the halls freeze at the sound; peasants and villagers in the streets all stop and look up in alarm. And when a second horn trumpets through the air—panic. The second brings forth a flurry of movement and shouts.

My heart races as Riven unsheathes his sword from his belt.

I eye the sword enviously; I’m not permitted a sword, but I do have my knife. Hidden in my skirts and strapped to my thigh, as always. It’s a simple blade, but sharp as anything. A thorny rose, carved into the steel hilt as if it were wrapped around it. The blade is my favorite thing in the entire world, but would be little defense against, say, an army.

Resisting the overwhelming itch to grab its handle, I turn my attention back to the maid, who still stands by the terrace doorway, trembling. Drawing myself up, I lift my chin. While I don’t enjoy playing the role of princess, I am exceptionally good at it.

“Go,” I say, giving her a hard look. “Tell Alita I am with the prince, and he will escort me to safety alongside our guard.” My voice is stern, but still kind. “If she insists on accompanying me herself, she may wait for us to join her.”

I sneak a sly smile at my twin as he pretends not to notice. It’s clear he does not approve of my staying, but short of dragging me through the tunnels himself, there’s little he can do about it. The rest of the castle guard is far too busy with the evacuation and preparing for the attack.

Though reluctant, the maid’s eyes flicker back to the hall inside, where the servants who remain in the castle are now running toward the west tower. With one last look of desperation in my direction, the trembling maid drops to a curtsy and scurries away.

A grin spreads across my cheeks at the minor victory. Even if I’ll pay for it later—especially if my father finds out. The joy at winning the small

battle quickly fades as I join Riven in looking back out over the balcony.

Two horns. My heart thumps hard within my chest.

Kovaria is here.

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CHAPTER 10

ROWAN

Moments after the second horn sounds, the castle shudders with a near-deafening boom, shaking the floor, the walls, the very heart of the stone castle. The sounds of crumbling rock and brick followed quickly after, along with screams and shouts as anyone remaining within the walls started sprinting for the tunnels.

Sword in hand, Riven turns for the door.

I follow, quickening my steps to keep up with his long strides. Though exceedingly similar as twins, Riven left me behind somewhere around year sixteen. He's far taller, with much longer legs. Sensing me at his back, he whirls around, and I nearly crash into his chest from the abrupt change in direction.

"You can't come with me. It's not *safe*."

I shoot him a look, but the look he gives back says this time he's not having it.

"Wait at the entrance to the west tower. I need to find Kazel and ensure they've finished evacuating and seal the tunnels."

"I can help—" I start, my voice shaking with the fear I feel running through me, despite my best efforts at hiding it. "I can heal." My thoughts turn to the other power, one I'm still working to control. That could help too, if only I knew how to use it.

Another loud boom rattles the stone beneath our feet, and Riven reaches out, gripping my arm to pull us under a sturdy archway as pieces of stone

and a spray of dust and debris drop from the high ceiling above.

“Holy shit,” I whisper, realizing just how unprepared I am for war.

The thought appears to hit Riven at the same time. “Your healing won’t be of any use down there; the injuries—” his jaw works, “—will be catastrophic.”

“But what about—”

“No.” Riven’s eyes lock on mine, his position on this firm. “We can’t risk it.”

I chew the inside of my cheek, my fingers tightening at my sides. If I could help, if it would make a difference… maybe it would be worth it.

Riven shakes his head, reading my mind. “Even if you are willing to risk it, you can’t control it. You don’t even know if you could summon it at all.”

I clench my jaw tighter, but only because he’s right.

I’ve only ever summoned it once fully—*accidentally*. And while I can feel its warmth, the light, the sheer power of it encased within my chest, sometimes sparking along my fingertips when I’m furious, I have no way to release it. And even if I could… Once I do, the magic won’t listen to me. It’s always been wild, uncontrolled, and dangerous.

Riven’s right. I could just as easily hurt the Sitari soldiers while trying to hit Kovaria.

My brother glances back over his shoulder, the shouts from the yard growing louder—the army on the move.

“Go to the west tower,” he urges. “I’ll meet you there.”

The fear of losing him is threading cracks through my chest. “Promise me.”

Riven gives me a long look. “I promise.”

The words ease my worry, but only slightly. My heart lurches violently when Riven reaches into his pocket, pulling out a small, folded scrap of old parchment and thrusting it at me, already half a step away.

“No,” I say, shaking my head, even taking a solid step back. “If you’re trying to give that to me, I’m not taking it.”

“You have to.” There’s a grim look on my brother’s face, and he closes the gap between us, taking my hand and shoving the scrap of parchment into it.

“But you promised…” I can feel the tears threatening the corners of my eyes, but refuse to let them flow.

There’s another loud bang and a rise of shouts from the yard; this one less impactful than the last, but my brother’s frown only deepens. “You asked to help. *This* is how you can help.” His eyes stare hard into mine. “And I promised my intentions, but even I cannot control the outcome.”

One tear escapes, leaking slowly down my cheek.

“If Kovaria breaches the gates, if they make it into the castle and I’m not back, you must escape through the tunnel on your own, but not before sealing the entrance at your back.” His hand moves to mine, taking it and slowly folding my fingers around the page. “It’s the sealing spell for the tunnel door. Once spoken aloud, the stone will seal shut, and *no one* will be able to get through.”

His hand keeps my fist closed, even as I try to fling the parchment away from me, shaking my head. “No, I won’t do it. I won’t leave you here.” My eyes flicker to the window; the sound of war is loud outside.

Despite our circumstances, and his obvious frustration with me, Riven’s eyes soften. “You have to.” He releases my hand, pulling me instead into his chest in a deep hug. “If Kovaria—or the Raven—breaches the walls, and you don’t seal the tunnel, everyone—the court, the servants, the villagers… their children… They won’t make it.”

A lump forms in my throat and I fight it back, breaking free of his hug at the same time.

“Fine. I’ll seal the damn tunnel,” I bite out venomously, hating having to even consider such an outcome.

“Promise me, Rowan.” Riven’s body is half turned, anxious to attend to his duties, but I know he won’t leave until he hears it.

“I promise,” I say, almost against my will. “But it won’t matter because you’re coming back. *You’ll be there*,” I practically growl at him.

He gives me a small smile at the familiar sharpness of my tongue. “Yes, I will.” His eyes promise me as he reluctantly pulls himself away, leaving me behind, but not before calling back over his shoulder. “Go to the tower, Rowan. If I’m not back in fifteen minutes, you go without me, and you seal that fucking door!”

I stand, watching him run the length of the hall until he disappears around the corner and into the stairwell. I stay put, eyes peeled on the empty corridor before me for a few moments after, breathing hard.

The castle around me shakes again, and I release a scream of both frustration and rage as I whirl around, heading for the west tower, feeling

little sparks warm the tips of my fingers at the volatile release of emotions and my hate for the soldiers outside the walls. They're threatening my home, my friends—my brothers.

Riven will be back. He'll make it. He has to.

He *promised*.

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CHAPTER II

ROWAN

I fight the urge to stay right here and wait for Riven, but the wild energy, fear, and adrenaline surging through me is taking over, so I break into a run, heading for the west tower's entrance. Not to flee—not yet. But from the west hall, I will have a better vantage point of the castle walls to see what is happening outside.

And I'm not the only one.

A small crowd is forming by the windows at the base of the tower; I recognize two of them as lords, Riven's friends from court, along with a handful of servants. They're all staring down at the scene below, expressions white with fear.

The group parts for me, letting me through.

"What's happening?" I ask, peering out the nearest window. The base of the tower offers an unimpeded view of the castle gates and walls. Fae archers are perched upon them, either impatiently pacing as they wait for the army to get within range, or standing as still as the gargoyles beside them.

And beyond them, I pale, taking in the sight of the Kovarian army. Rows and rows of soldiers and horses, clad in silver armour—some in black—helmets on and weapons drawn.

Archers line Rosecliff's walls; more soldiers stand in rigid formation in the yard. But even I can tell… there aren't enough. *Not nearly enough.* If Kovaria breaches the walls...

My heart sinks.

Fel took most of Rosecliff's forces, along with his own, to lead the evacuation through the tunnels. They will ensure the passage is safe, prioritizing the safety of Rosecliff's people.

All who remained behind did so voluntarily.

Most of the soldiers are older, many of them coming out of retirement to protect Rosecliff and our people.

I scan the soldiers below until I spot my brother, just in front of the reinforced gates, talking with one of the commanders. In my periphery, my eyes snag upon a catapult, far out across the field, just before it's launched.

"Get down!" I scream, pulling the nearest person with me to the ground. An enormous boulder sails toward the castle walls, just narrowly missing the window. The tower shudders at the impact; glass and pottery shatter around us as they're knocked from their shelves.

A woman is crying.

I rise slowly and peek out the window, curiosity outweighing the danger. Outside, the neat lines of the Kovarian army part, making way for someone—or *something*.

A dark figure emerges, outfitted fully in black, giving him the illusion of being cloaked in darkness. It's still dark out, but the night's shadows appear to cling to him, twisting around his body like some kind of shield.

The Raven.

My eyes go wide and I stumble backward, away from the window, drawing further into the shadows myself, my instincts screaming at me to run—*to hid*e—from the dark demon.

Behind me, one man begins a rapid prayer to the goddess of light.

The shadow demon steps forward, moving past the front line of waiting soldiers, his cloak billowing out behind him in the strong wind. Though his hood and cowl remain in place, concealing every inch of his face, hiding the fully blackened eyes, *demon eyes*, I know I'd find underneath.

He stops a few feet ahead of the line, his gaze narrowing on the castle gates.

The blood in my veins turns to ice, and I know the very moment he draws in his power, a gasp of surprise escaping me. To everyone else, he just looks to be standing there. Watching. Waiting.

But really, he's gathering power, and from the ice in my veins and the bitter tang on my tongue, he's calling forth *a lot* of power. More power than

I’ve ever sensed before.

Fae with magic can sense magic in others, can even garner their strength or their power if so attuned. It’s why I have to be so careful when practicing my own, lest anyone with royal blood be lurking about. A Raven isn’t fae, but a creature born from the blood of demons. I shouldn’t be able to feel it. That power—*his* power—is unlike anything I’ve ever felt before.

A choking sound escapes me when he steps forward again, leaving the vast Kovarian army at his back and walking toward the castle walls—alone. Someone close by misunderstands my fear and rubs a comforting hand across my back.

“He’ll never make it past the archers,” one of the young lords I saw Riven talking to earlier says smugly. “Just wait till he’s in range. They’ll shoot him down in seconds.”

I keep my eyes on the Raven. He looks like a man, just like the rest of the soldiers, in the way he moves and carries himself, but darkness bleeds from him with every step, as if he’s leaking shadows. I can practically see the darkness emanating from him as he prowls forward with lethal grace, dark shadows trailing out behind his billowing cloak.

Given the fact that no one around me is screaming, I might be the only one who can see them.

Shouts rise from the wall, and the archers load their bows, taking aim as the Raven draws closer—the demon creature almost in range.

“He’s crazy,” mumbles one of the lords. But I can’t form words, my anxiety rising as the Raven gets closer, reading only confidence in his steps. Fear fills every inch of me, and I grab hold of my skirts with shaking hands.

Another shout rings out when he crosses into range, and all at once, the archers atop the castle walls rain arrows down upon the dark soldier.

He doesn’t stop; he doesn’t even hesitate, continuing to stalk forward. Even with dozens of arrows hurtling his way, his gaze stays fixed on the stone wall before him.

I hold my breath when the first arrow reaches him, only to choke on it when the arrow slides right through as if the man is made up of nothing but smoke. Wisps of darkness leak out from every place the arrows strike him, passing through again and again as the archers find their mark. His pace doesn’t even slow. The Kovarian army makes no move to retaliate, waiting still and ominous at his back.

There are several gasps, a prayer to the gods, and even a scream within our little group as we try to make sense of what we're seeing. A few break away, tripping over themselves in their haste to reach the tower's doors, scrambling up the steps and heading for the tunnel.

I watch in tantalizing fear as the soldiers loose round after round of arrows upon the shadow creature below to no avail. He never once falters.

"Demon," someone mutters to the left.

I don't know what I expected; I was barely a child the last time I encountered a Raven, and only remember bits and pieces, but this is horrifying.

Now just a few feet from the wall, the Raven comes to a halt. Shadows coil around him like living things, licking at his boots before unfurling behind him in slow, restless tendrils. My heart thunders against my chest when his hooded gaze suddenly shifts up.

Not to the gate or the guard towers, but all the way up to the exact window where I'm standing. Slowly, deliberately, as if he is aware I am watching him.

I'm hit with another wave of awareness as the shadows thicken around him.

Though his features remain hidden beneath the cowl, I am certain he's looking directly at me. Everything fades beneath the frantic pounding of my heart, and I feel something stir deep within me

My instincts scream at me to run, and I'm not the only one. Under the heavy weight of his cloaked gaze, the remaining servants and lords abandon me, scrambling up the tower steps, fleeing the shadow demon at our gates. But I'm frozen, locked within his stare as if he'd wrapped his shadows around my throat.

After what feels like an eternity, he breaks our tethered stare with a slight raise of his hand, turning his attention back to the wall.

I drag my eyes away from him as shouts rise from the forest's edge, where the soldiers—the Kovarian army—surge forward in a sudden charge.

I don't understand. The walls remain unbreached. Why are they charging? My eyes dart between the surging army and the Raven waiting patiently below. Arrows continue to fly through him in wisps before the archers take aim at the approaching soldiers, laying down a hailstorm of

arrows, but there are hundreds of soldiers—thousands, maybe—and while a handful of them fall, they just keep coming.

“The wall still stands,” I whisper to myself in reassurance. “It still stands.”

Even with the army drawing near, I find my eyes drawn back to the dark demon who is still lingering outside the wall. His focus is once again on the impenetrable wall of stone before him. With all the time and care in the world, he removes one of his thick leather gloves before reaching out and pressing his bare palm against the rough stone.

Darkness sweeps out in all directions from beneath his palm, cascading across the entire wall as if to swallow it whole. The Raven lifts his head and his shadows darken further, and the stone wall of the castle... It appears to lighten, fading away to nearly nothing at all, or rather turning to shadow itself.

All I can do is watch in horror as the archers and the soldiers who had been standing atop the castle walls now fall through it. Their screams cut off abruptly when they hit the ground hard, nearly fifty feet below.

The Kovarian army doesn’t slow as it reaches the shadowy remnants of the castle walls, but instead, runs straight through it. In just seconds, they have done what none of the great fae armies of history had managed to do: breached the walls of Rosecliff.

The small contingent of Sitari soldiers prepare themselves for the onslaught, blades and shields drawn, bravely staring down the raging army of Kovaria. But there aren’t enough—not nearly enough to do anything but make them pause.

Screams of metal fill the air when the two forces clash, swords meeting swords, beginning a brutal dance as fae and humans alike meet their end right before my eyes. Fae, by nature, are stronger—faster—but Kovaria has the numbers, and it’s not long before the castle guard is completely overwhelmed.

Tears stream down my face as my gaze finds the Raven again, his palm still resting against the wall. He turns it into shadow—turning the city’s greatest defense into nothing more than shadowy mist.

With the enemy now inside the walls, Sitara’s forces are deluged.

The Raven lifts his palm from the stone; the castle wall immediately rematerializes fully as he stalks along the side of it—headed for the entrance.

Kovari soldiers quickly seize the gates, dragging the heavy doors open.

Riven.

I lost sight of my brother, distracted by the appearance of the Raven, and I don’t know if he remains somewhere within the bloodbath below.

Has it been longer than fifteen minutes?

Panic rises and my head spins while my heart races with both fear and adrenaline. Tearing myself away from the window, I fly *down* the tower stairs instead of up. When I reach the hall, I can already hear shouts coming from inside the castle, more clanging metal, and the sounds of shattering glass.

The battle now spilling into the castle.

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CHAPTER 12

ROWAN

Riven.

With so much happening around me, I focus on my brother. I need to find him and get us both out of here. *Before it's too late.*

Racing down the main hall, I'm debating whether or not to descend the stairs when a hand wraps tightly around my bicep, yanking me roughly into one of the sitting rooms.

I panic, fighting the grip on my arm, until my eyes meet a familiar pine green. I stop swinging and tackle my adversary with a hug so tight he grunts.

"What the fuck are you still doing here?" Riven hisses once I release him. He takes a step back out into the hall, his eyes scanning the area cautiously, checking to be sure it's still clear. The sounds of fighting flood in from below.

"Looking for you," I choke out, my relief that he's here, and he's okay, overwhelming me.

"You should be in the tower." His gaze rockets back to mine, a flash of anger in his eyes. "You should have already sealed the tunnel—you should have sealed it the second the wall fell." Lines of worry crease Riven's forehead, and my eyes catch on the trickle of blood behind his ear.

My eyes narrow. "And you were supposed to be here already. Can you blame me?"

Riven only glares back, one eye still on the hall. A flicker of movement in my periphery nearly sends me jumping out of my skin when I realize we're not alone.

A young woman holding two small children stands near the center of the room. Both of them are crying and clinging tightly to the woman I assume must be their mother.

"The escape tunnels in the village and the keep have been sealed," Riven explains. "The west tower is the last gate open. Kovaria has already breached the wall and the first floor."

I nod solemnly, having watched it fall myself.

"We need to go now." Riven motions to both me and the woman at my back to follow him out into the hall. "If we can't seal the gate—" He shakes his head, pushing the thoughts away. We all know the consequences.

Holding out an arm, he once again checks the hall. Despite the clanging of metal and the shouts of men that sound entirely too close, the hall before us lies empty.

The woman shifts uncomfortably behind me, struggling to keep hold of both children who wiggle in her arms. Riven notices, too, and he reaches out, taking one of them from her—the little boy—and settling him on his hip. With his other hand, he grabs hold of mine, tugging me out into the hall with them.

Together, we make a break for the west tower stairs, Riven carrying one child and the mother the other. We're nearly at the tower's entrance when a crashing sound, followed by screams and shouts, comes from up ahead.

Far closer than before.

Riven swears, ducking into a nearby alcove, pulling both me and the young mother behind him protectively.

"They're already here," he whispers, and his eyes meet mine, the green flashing with intensity. "Follow my lead; it's just a few paces up the hall. Don't let them see you."

I nod, motioning for the mother and her child to go ahead of me this time. Riven moves swiftly, his back pressed against the wall as he stealthily makes his way toward the steps. The mother and child follow close behind, with me bringing up the rear.

On high alert, he guides us to a room right across from the tower's entrance, ducking into the room as we hear more shouting up ahead. We

crouch down, the mother and I huddled together while Riven puts his finger to his lips, waiting patiently. His eyes stay fixed on the hall up ahead.

My fingers twitch alongside my anxiety, but I force myself to remain still. When the men's shouts fade, Riven holds up a hand to make us wait before he slips soundlessly across the hall. Even with the child in his arms, his steps are light and quick, and he's across in no time at all. When he's reached the other side, he checks the hall once again before nodding for us to join him.

The mother, with her little girl's arms wrapped around her neck, crosses next. All is quiet in the hall, the sounds of battle nearly falling away. When she makes it safely to the other side, I take a steadying breath before I too sprint for the steps.

When I'm halfway across, Riven grabs the mother's hand, starting up the steps.

I'm nearly there when movement catches the corner of my eye. For the briefest of seconds, I look up, locking eyes with a soldier. He's dressed in silver armour, covered in mud—or perhaps smears of blood. He's right below the arch leading into the hallway, silent, his sword drawn.

Light.

His shouts follow me up the curving steps as I scramble after Riven.

We're nearly at the top when my ears catch the sound of soldiers in pursuit, the armour clattering as they start their climb.

Riven reaches the top first, racing across the little reading library we've spent hours in, rushing toward the hand-painted tapestry on the far wall. The one with a gold-threaded map of the stars. Pulling it aside, he reveals a small hole cut into the stone wall. Inside it's dark, but both of us know from our time as faelings, having spent hours playing and exploring the tunnels, only more stairs await us inside, curving down, a long but direct descent below ground.

It's rather clever, really; no one would think to look for an escape tunnel at the top of the highest tower in the castle. The narrow staircase is hidden within the thick brick of the tower walls themselves. The passage leads down into a network of underground tunnels. Eventually, the three escape tunnels within Rosecliff converge, and from that point, they proceed underground to an exit located miles north of the castle.

Riven doesn't waste any time, stepping over the carved rock and into the wall, chivalrously taking the little girl into his arms as well before

helping their mother climb inside. With both children in his arms now, he looks up, craning his neck—searching for me, motioning with his head to hurry up.

But the hurried steps of the ascending Kovari soldiers are all I can hear, my thoughts racing as I try to come up with a plan—as I try to decide.

I take a step back, away from the tunnel, my hands shaking as I watch Riven's eyes flood with confusion. Again, he silently urges me forward. "What are you doing?" he whisper-shouts. "We have to go." He retreats further into the tunnel as if to encourage me to follow.

"I know," I say, my words soft and my eyes burning with the tears I'm forcing back as I return my brother's stare. Selfishly stealing these last few seconds, trying to memorize every inch of his familiar face.

"They saw me."

I can hear the Kovari soldiers clearly now; their boots on the stone stairs bring them closer to us with every step.

It takes a moment for Riven to process my words, and from there, it's only a second before he launches himself back toward the hole cut into the stone, and away from the passage that will take him safely out of the castle.

The passage we can't let Kovaria find.

Unable to hold them back, tears spill over, wetting my cheeks. "I love you," I whisper, tasting the salt from my tears on my lips.

"Rowan, no— Don't!" my twin chokes out, reluctantly changing directions, having to stop to set down the children before he can leave the tunnel to get to me, but it's a struggle to untangle himself as they cling tight to him, fear bright in their eyes.

Finally free, he races back toward the entrance, but it's too late. I'm already speaking the words.

One second, I'm staring into Riven's fear-filled eyes, and the next… solid stone.

The sudden silence cleaves my heart in two.

He won't be able to undo it now that it's sealed; only the one who spoke the spell can reverse it.

I step forward, laying my palm on the stone. It's cold—like it's always been there.

"I'm sorry," I breathe, letting the tears fall free before reaching for the tapestry and dragging it back into place. I rush to the fireplace across the room, tossing the parchment Riven gave me with the sealing spell into the

dying flames before wiping the tears from my cheeks while I summon what little courage I have left before turning to face my fate.

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CHAPTER 13

ROWAN

The Kovari soldiers enter the tower with their blades drawn. The first man to enter eyes me suspiciously, holding his sword on me while whistling to the two men behind him to search the room.

The library located atop the west tower is small. Just a cozy little study with a view as far as the eye can see. Shelves filled with leather-bound books line the room. I've spent countless hours up here, alone, nestled in the cushions. My own private escape.

Having these men up here feels… wrong.

The way they move around the space, shoving things aside, knocking books to the floor… My fists tighten, and the man watching me lifts his sword a little higher, his cautious gaze shifting into a warning.

I hold my breath, schooling my face as one of them draws back the star map tapestry. To my relief, it reveals only a wall of solid, weathered stone —no trace of the sealed passage hidden within.

Not that they could open it even if they suspected. Humans don't possess magic, but it is possible their Raven might. *That power I felt…*

The demon could do again what he had done to the castle wall, turning it to shadow, thereby allowing access. But to my relief, the man releases the tapestry, allowing it to swing back into place with no further regard.

"Just the fae wench, then," the man to my right says, deferring to the older soldier, the one who still holds his blade on me. He's the oldest of the three, his graying temples distinguishing him from the other two.

He’s fixing his eyes on something above my head.

My brow furrows in confusion before I curse silently to myself, remembering the wretched crown atop my head. The one Alita *insisted* I wear.

According to my governess, all three royal siblings were to wear their crowns today to serve as a symbol of our kingdom, which would provide reassurance to our people during the chaos of battle.

“This one’s highborn,” the man announces to the other two while his eyes drop to scan the rest of me. “Put her with the others.”

The two younger soldiers close in on me from either side, quickly securing my arms and roughly forcing my hands together. Cold iron snaps shut around my wrists, and with it, my connection to my magic falters.

They did their homework.

I hadn’t even considered reaching for my powers, nearly as afraid of them as I am of these men.

With my hands now secured in front of me, the men push me roughly toward the stairs, and we begin the long descent. Halfway there, a slight shove at my shoulder causes me to lose my footing on the stairs. I let out a yelp, sliding down several steps before a curve in the wall abruptly halts my fall.

My head spins from the impact, while I hear the men snickering above me. I shake my head to try to clear it, tasting blood on my lip. The skirt of my dress—another casualty—has torn several inches.

The men haul me back up on my feet without allowing me any time to properly recover, pushing me forward, and my feet once again slide dangerously on the stone steps. Anger flares, and I grit my teeth, fighting to keep my balance despite their best efforts.

The two handling me are brutish and muscled; their heavy armour would certainly slow them down if I could get away. I might be small, but I am quick. If I could slip out of their grasp, then I just might—

Any hope I’ve invested in the improvised plan goes up in flames the second they shove me out into the hall.

Soldiers.

Soldiers—*everywhere*.

The previously empty hallway is now crawling with Kovari soldiers.

I feel eyes on me as I’m pushed through the crowded halls. Besides the volunteer guard, I must be one of the few fae to remain behind at Rosecliff.

The mysterious disappearance of the villagers and the rest of the court is certainly a source of both confusion and frustration I can see on the faces of the men we pass.

I attract more than a few curious looks as I'm pushed all the way into the great hall. Once there, I'm shoved rather unceremoniously to the ground.

My knees scream when they hit the floor hard, but I'm at least able to catch myself with my bound hands before my face smacks into the marble.

"Don't get any ideas now," one of the Kovari soldiers warns, leaving me with the others before stepping away to speak to someone else.

I look around, finding myself beside what must be the surviving members of Rosecliff's castle guard—who also wait chained on their knees, accompanied by a handful of human servants. Either they didn't make it to the gates before Rosecliff sealed them, or they were too stubborn to leave. The lot of them stare back at me, alarm and horror etched into every one of their faces at the sight of their princess amongst them.

Kovari soldiers are everywhere; several are to guard the small group of prisoners while the rest are busy breaking everything. The men toss vases and pottery alike, tearing through cabinets, smashing all that they come across, having already torn just about every tapestry from the walls.

Anger and rage give way to dark hatred as I watch them rip apart the only home I've ever known.

Without warning, silence falls upon the room, and the soldiers' attention all snap to the arched entryway leading into the hall. I push myself up a little higher, craning my neck to try to see what they're all looking at.

The men stiffen, standing at attention as a tall, battle-worn soldier stalks into the room, flanked by several men. Deep black armour sets them apart from the rest, and they lack the Kovari crest: a sword with white wings.

I lean forward, narrowing my eyes, as I quickly study their armour, noting it lacks any crest at all.

It's clear the tall one in the middle is in charge—if the utter silence in the hall is any indication. As he strides toward us, my eyes drop to the streaks of blood marring that sleek leather armour of his. A blood-red cowl conceals the lower half of his face, leaving only a pair of piercing eyes visible. Black war paint adorns the rest of his face and scalp; the hair on either side of his head is shaved off. This paint, or perhaps ink, continues

down both arms. The dark ink, stained with blood, only adds to his menacing appearance.

His eyes scan the room, running over each one of the captured Sitari soldiers, and the servants, until his gaze comes to a rest.

Right on me.

I don't even realize I'm staring until the Kovari soldier closest to me kicks me hard in the ribs. I wheeze, my lungs constricting, thankfully suffocating my cry as I curl in on myself, sharp pain radiating through me while I struggle to inhale.

Two shouts rise from the line of detained Rosecliff guards, protesting my mistreatment while I fight to regulate my breathing. My need for oxygen growing severe.

"Captain Rusic," the graying Kovari soldier says, turning toward the newcomer.

I'm still bent over, struggling to breathe as my lungs refuse to expand completely. My gaze remains fixed on the floor until two boots enter my vision, stopping on the marble just ahead of me. I swallow hard.

"Line them up," the captain commands, his voice deep and rough. I know it's his with no need to look, a voice used to being obeyed.

The Kovari soldiers react with speed, roughly forcing the Sitari prisoners into some semblance of a line around me.

The captain's boots remain in front of me, and despite every instinct screaming at me to keep my head down, my eyes lift.

This is it.

I'm going to die. Right here. Right now. But I *won't* go out a coward.

Setting my jaw, I fight the urge to drop my eyes as I stare up into cold and empty eyes. Captain Rusic holds my gaze for a long moment before turning to survey the full line of prisoners. His gaze circles back around, lingering on me for half a breath longer than the others before he turns, looking away while addressing his soldiers.

"Take the humans," his deep voice commands before his eyes fall back to mine again. "And execute the fae."

The response is instantaneous. Soldiers raise their swords, but a frantic, shrill voice breaks through; it's coming from the end of the line. "Princess! Princess! *Please!*" the woman pleads. "She's the princess!"

No. In horror, my eyes fly to locate the speaker, recognizing Ellory—human, and one of my lady's maids. She's frantically motioning in my

direction, desperately trying to capture Rusic's attention, but really *anyone* who might listen.

But no one does. Rusic's back is already to us as she pleads louder with the retreating captain, standing and resisting the soldiers as they try to drag her off with the rest of the captured human servants.

I shake my head subtly, my gaze flying between her and the captain. No, no. I desperately try to tell Ellory to *let it go* in silence.

Just let me die here.

Now.

Clean.

My eyes are still on Ellory when silence falls again, the Kovari soldiers stilling around us. Swallowing hard, I whip my head back to face the captain. He's turned around, a quiet look of rage on his face, one hand held up as he moves in to assess the woman, the movement predatory.

Ellory, now fully aware he's heard her, falls silent at his menacing approach, swallowing hard under his furious gaze before he turns it on me. Rusic doesn't speak as he takes me in again, looking me up and down, my heart thumps wildly in my chest, nearly stopping entirely when his gaze settles on the crown.

When he still says nothing, the man beside him, one also dressed in black like him, speaks up. "Can anyone else confirm this fae to be a Sitari royal?"

I close my eyes.

There's a long stretch of silence, so quiet you could hear a pin drop in this crowded hall right before the entire line of Sitari soldiers and servants pipe up their reluctant confirmations.

My eyes open, resigned—and unable to keep from glaring back at the well-meaning betrayal. They're trying to save my life, but—*no, no, no, no. This—this isn't good.*

My eyes slowly trail back to Captain Rusic, and then to Ellory behind him; her eyes are full of both desperation and apology. I'm sure she had hoped to save my life, but hadn't quite thought through what might happen after.

Another beat of uncomfortable silence, and then, "Bring her," Rusic states simply, already turning and heading back toward the hall while he adds, "You know what to do with the rest."

There’s a flurry of movement; the two soldiers who were flanking him step forward, grabbing hold of me and dragging me up while I scream, trying to fight them off.

The Kovari soldiers move in as one, swords drawn. Some of them shove the human servants away roughly as they scream in protest, while the others bring their swords down, driving them through each of Rosecliff’s guards, brutally executing them.

I twist and fight, but the men holding me are strong, and though they struggle to keep hold of me, I’m out of the room before the last of the royal guard is dead. The screams follow me out into the hall, growing rougher until I realize… the screams are coming from me.

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CHAPTER 14

ROWAN

I fight the men every step of the way until the two are practically carrying me through the castle foyer and out what remains of the front gate.

The sight of the dead or dying soldiers littering the ground silences my screams as shock takes over. Blood stains the cobblestones; bodies, most of them wearing Sitaran armour, lie twisted in the rubble. Unable to take in any more of the horror, I squeeze my eyes shut tight, but the smell of death is heavy in the air.

Several minutes pass.

With my eyes closed, I have no warning before a dark hood is suddenly shoved over my head.

No.

I thrash violently as darkness crashes over me. Panic fills me, and I lose it. I'm a child again, seeing those black shadows leaking into my room between cracks in the door. Darkness everywhere. I tremble as it swallows everything.

My mother's scream.

The darkness took her. And now the Raven has come for me, too.

Terror takes hold, seizing my lungs, striking some hollow place inside me until all the fight bleeds from my body, and I go limp.

The men no longer have to force me. I allow myself to be half-dragged, half-carried out of Rosecliff. The sounds of war and the smell of bloodshed around me fade away.

After what feels like an eternity, we finally come to a stop. In my current state of whatever this is—shock, maybe—it's difficult to say just how far we've traveled from Rosecliff. But there are new voices now—male. I'm too lost in my head to make out what they're saying, but they are speaking the common tongue.

I'm nudged forward, and I'm aware that we've moved somewhere inside. The wind no longer whips at my exposed skin and skirts.

A few more steps and then an abrupt stop before I'm thrown to the ground. Limbs shaking, I use my bound hands to push myself up to my knees just as someone rips the dark hood from my head.

The sudden light is blinding and warm; it chases back the shadows that had wrapped around my throat, and I suck in a sharp breath. Daylight. It takes several long breaths before my body stops shaking, for the light to chase back the remaining shadows, the ones that linger in my mind.

I blink a few times, looking around. We're inside a large canvas tent. My eyes dart wildly around, and for a moment, pure terror surges. *The Raven.* No longer just the creature from my nightmares. *It's here—was* here. What if they let it take me?

Seeing more large, armour-clad Kovari soldiers surrounding me, I let out a sigh of relief. Silver and black armour. Not a shadow demon in sight.

It takes a few more seconds for me to realize that someone is speaking—speaking to me.

Looking around for the source of the voice, I find it in the center of the room. And there, sitting atop a high-back chair with a modest silver circlet on his head, is just about the last person I expect to see.

"Princess." Theo smiles at me, waving away several clerks still pressing for his attention and leaning forward to get a better look at me. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Laughter tumbles out of me; I'm powerless to stop it. And from the looks the others are giving me around the tent, I know I must look insane.

Theo has stopped talking, his eyes on me and me alone, and aside from my own maniacal fit of laughter, the tent is dead silent.

Did he ask me a question?

Recovering enough to form thoughts and put them into words, I release a steadying breath, straightening as best I can from my position on the ground. I lift my chin to address the former prisoner.

Theo is wearing new armour. His pretty face is mottled with perhaps even more dirt and blood than when I last saw him.

“Nice crown, Theo,” is all I say to the astonishment of our surrounding audience.

The corner of his mouth twitches up, and I recognize the look of quiet amusement I’ve come to expect from Theo.

The guard to Theo’s left, however, doesn’t find it quite so amusing. He steps forward, no doubt to smack me for such impropriety. “You’ll not speak to the prince in that way—” His arm lifts, just as I expect, and I brace myself for the hit.

But it never comes. Theo raises a single hand in objection, his eyes on mine. I swear, I can see wheels turning in those sapphire eyes.

The prince. The man’s words echo in the fog that is my current state of mind, and I raise my brows at the title before shooting his guard a taunting look anyway, daring him to hit me.

What do I have to lose?

The guard’s eyes narrow, and while his fingers twitch at his side, he begrudgingly steps back into position on Theo’s left. My gaze travels back to the prince, noting the mischief now dancing in those blue eyes, the dangerous smile curving across his face as he rises from his seat, looking down at me.

“Who knew something so wicked could be so pretty?” he muses, letting his eyes trail over me.

My eyes narrow. *Something*? My lip curls up, flashing Theo a single fang in response.

Another man steps forward now, much smaller than the guard to his left, his expression anxious as he addresses the prince. “Your Highness, I suggest we gag the fae and possibly replace the hood?” He eyes me nervously, looking ready to jump out of his skin if I so much as blink at him. “Tricksters and witches, they are,” the man mutters, looking around for support.

I scoff. *What a hypocrite.* Especially considering the company they keep: the shadow demon they have in their ranks.

A few others murmur their agreement, and I look around incredulously. *They can’t seriously believe that.*

While taking in the reactions of those in the tent, I shift anxiously on my knees, scanning the small crowd again for any sign of the wretched

creature, relief coursing through me when I don't find it—*or feel it.* Though my gaze catches upon one familiar face, finding Captain Rusic amongst the group. His glacial expression never wavers, not even when I glare back at him. And while the others whisper around him, he remains silent. I can't help but notice how he's strategically placed himself between the prince and me.

But Theo just waves off his advisor as he presses his argument further, and my gaze falls back on him, surveying him in this new light.

Theo is actually Prince Thaddeus Devereaux, Kovaria's crown prince.

We'd met. At a diplomatic dinner in Aurielle years ago, long before Fel took him prisoner. We were just children then. Our fathers met to discuss updating land treaty terms. He bowed, and I curtsied, and that was just about all I could remember of him, other than I had thought he was handsome. Even back then, with his unruly blonde hair and cerulean eyes. Features that had only grown with him. I can see why the Kovari prince is rumored to be so highly desired by the ladies of his court.

The slightest nod from Rusic draws my attention back to him, just before one of his men grasps my shoulder, holding me still, while the other rips the crown from atop my head. A golden circle of twisted thorns with rose blossoms intertwined within. Rusic steps forward, taking the crown from his man.

My cheeks burn at the sight of it in his dirty hands.

Rusic turns to approach the prince, bowing deeply before presenting my crown to him. "The Princess of Sitara, by all accounts." His tone, combined with his arched brow, conveys that he thinks otherwise.

Theo reaches out, taking the circlet from him, examining the detail. "And the two princes?"

I try not to flinch at the mention of my brothers.

The captain just shakes his head, and I have to fight the smile pulling at the corner of my lips. *The tunnels remain undiscovered. Fel and Riven are safe.*

The prince releases a sigh, his gaze fixed on the crown in his hands.

"Thank you, Captain. I know you have a lot to attend to. You and your men are dismissed."

Captain Rusic doesn't spare me another glance before turning to stride out of the tent, and a couple more soldiers, all in black armour, follow him out.

Once they're gone, Theo sets my crown down on the arm of his chair and takes a step closer, looking at me as if I'm a problem to solve. "But what to do with you?"

I open my mouth as if to answer, but his advisor cuts me off.

"She should die." He nods furiously, looking around again for support. "Here and now," he states boldly, lifting his chin smugly. "Send Sitara, and its *king*, a message."

The prince doesn't bother acknowledging him, almost as if he hasn't even heard him, his eyes still on me.

"Tell me, Princess, where is your army? The soldiers I arrived with?" He asks his question patiently, his eyes still light, his face a cool mask, but I can see past the masked indifference to the hidden desperation deep within those cerulean eyes of his.

I just stare back, refusing to look away, even though I have no intention of answering him, careful to keep my face blank.

He takes another step closer, his tone more serious. "Where are your brothers?"

I'm as still as death, aware of how the guards nearest to me grip the hilts of their weapons a little tighter as the prince travels even closer.

"The heir?" Another step, and the prince is now close enough to touch. "The near entirety of the village?" His head tilts to the side, studying my face. His blue eyes burning with more questions.

Still on my knees, I keep hold of his gaze, staring him right in the eyes. My face impassive, my eyes unblinking. It's an expression I have honed and perfected over the years. Well tested. Its entire purpose was to incur my governess' ire, and I can tell by the prince's frown that he indeed recognizes it for what it was.

Unyielding.

Breaking eye contact, he turns to face the advisor who's dancing nervously behind him. "No trace of them? *Any* of them?"

His advisor clears his throat before he speaks. "No, Sir. The villagers and the nobles, along with the better part of their army, appear to—" He swallows, clearing his throat once again, tapping the top of his own leg as if to give himself the confidence to say what he must next. "They seem to have all disappeared through unknown means. Only the first line, a small contingent of the castle guard, and a handful of servants, remained at Rosecliff once we breached the walls."

Once you cheated, I thought to myself.

“She’s truly their sister? The princess? We are sure?” another advisor asks, eyeing me with suspicion.

But I keep my gaze on Theo. He knows who I am, and there is no question in his eyes as he studies me, no doubt deciding what is to be done with me.

“Might I suggest, Sir,” the nervous advisor starts, continuing only once Theo gives him a nod. “While I do support a prompt execution,” he levels me a distasteful look, “if you insist on keeping her alive, you *could* use her as leverage—against her brothers.”

My heart drops to my stomach. I hadn’t considered that. Not once. *Why hadn’t I considered that?* On the rare occasion that humans capture fae, they never let them live.

Never.

No, let them kill me. Death might be bad, but being kept alive—far, far worse.

“She could be a useful source of information,” the second advisor states. “We could torture her for the location of the rest of her people.”

My heart is beating so fast, and it’s difficult to keep my face neutral; I worry my fear betrays me. Riven’s voice echoes in my ear, a reminder of all our training sessions. “*Never let them know what scares you.”*

“Mmm,” Theo hums, his thumb grazing the line of his jaw as he considers me—studies me. And whatever he gleans from his perusal makes him smile. “Unfortunately, torturing a princess is not on my agenda for the day.” He shoots me a wink, which I’m quick to return with a flash of my fangs.

He laughs, the sound too light given our current circumstances. Amusement flashes to seriousness, only to cycle back to amusement again as he stares at me. “Fel’s sister…” he muses, his words coming out almost absentmindedly, barely audible, just enough for my fae hearing to pick up.

Fel? *Why only Fel?* Although he is the heir, it just seems… odd. I’m Riven’s sister too. Perhaps more so, considering the fact that we’re twins.

A small smile spreads across the prince’s face, and I already know without question he’s decided my fate. Turning, he sweeps back to sit gracefully in his seat. “Captain Rusic led us to a significant victory today.” His voice booms, loud enough for everyone within the tent to hear. Cheers rise at his words, and several of his personal guards bang the hilts of their

swords against their armour or shields in agreement. “The walls of Rosecliff, walls that have stood for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years, fell to Kovaria in minutes,” Theo boasts, and suddenly I’m struck with the overwhelming urge to hit him. My fingers curl in my shackles. “Such a victory deserves a reward, does it not?”

More shouts, more bangs.

I glance around nervously, my heartbeat quickening, unsure of where he’s going with this.

“As a reward for his bravery, strategy, and for leading Kovaria to a brilliant victory, I gift Captain Rusic the Sitari princess.” He smiles down at the growing look of horror on my face. “To do with as he pleases.” Theo’s lips curl into a dark smile. One I would not have thought him capable of.

“Sir,” the shrill advisor stutters out. “We don’t—” he starts, but the prince cuts him off.

“We don’t keep fae prisoners. No, we don’t. I know. However, we’ve never captured a *royal* fae before. And we all know the captain is owed Valrose blood. So I believe *this* little Valrose here is a fine gift.” Theo smiles, letting his eyes roam my body as if it’s something to be desired. The look he’s giving me turns my blood to ice. “I’m sure he can make some use of her.”

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CHAPTER 15

ROWAN

It's dark and cold in the tent belonging to Captain Rusic.

With my back pressed hard against the wooden pole and my hands bound behind it, I shift in a futile effort to ease the ache in my shoulders. I test the restraints again, twisting my wrists until the iron bites into my skin. There has to be a weakness, some way out. But the cuffs remain stubbornly secure, my wrists bleeding and raw from my efforts.

Everything hurts.

At least the physical pain keeps my mind off the deep chasm of emptiness in my chest, one that threatens to swallow me whole the second I acknowledge its existence.

I fought like hell when they dragged me here. And though I lost the fight, it took four of Kovaria's finest to remove me from the prince's tent and deposit me into this one. I can only hope I left more bruises and cuts than I took.

Oh, how I wanted to smack that godsdamned smirk off Theo's face as he watched them drag me away. Amusement danced in his eyes while his advisors exchanged nervous glances, clearly rattled by the prince's decision to keep me alive.

"Ayer will do himself a favor by putting this one down—quickly," one of the Kovari soldiers said after they'd managed to wrestle me to the pole. After I bit his friend hard enough to draw blood, he shoved a dirty scrap of cloth into my mouth and tied it behind my head.

The one I bit eyed me warily. “Feral, that one.”

And then they left.

That was hours ago. Hours and hours I spent struggling against the unforgiving iron binding my wrists, and trying to spit out the gag, to no avail. All the adrenaline and fight I’d summoned has long since ebbed away. Exhaustion and pain took its place.

The tent has darkened with the setting sun, making it nearly impossible to see. Two small candles flickering all the way across the tent are the only source of light within the space—the only light breaking up the shadow. They emit just enough light to illuminate a dark desk covered in documents and maps of various sizes. It stands opposite a small washbasin, with a small table and chairs nearby.

The *captain* must be a big deal to not only have his own personal quarters, but so many amenities as well. Admittedly, I haven’t really gotten a good look at him, but he hardly looks old enough to have earned the title.

I stare forlornly at the cold, dark, fire pit near the center of the tent. The teeth-chattering chill in my bones can attest to the fact that the Kovari soldiers purposely didn’t bother lighting it before they left.

They tied me to the wooden post—one of the ones holding up the tent—which had been hammered deep into the earth, making it more than secure. The post stands conveniently to the left of a large pallet of soft furs and blankets.

His bed.

Not for the first time tonight, my mind goes to just how bad things could get for me when the captain finally returns. *What Theo alluded to…* I choke back the rising vomit.

But so far, the captain hasn’t shown himself. And after spending hours unsuccessfully trying to wriggle free of my restraints, I’d crumpled to the ground, tired and defeated… with nothing to do but wait.

Shouts from outside the tent send my knees to my chest—the only protection I have—watching the opening of the tent like a hawk for any sign of movement.

Fatigue pricks at my eyes and my head is swimming, still pounding from where I hit it earlier. We didn’t sleep last night after spotting the Kovarian troops, and I’d gotten very little the night before. But for how tired I am, I can’t sleep.

A breeze simmers through the cool night air, brushing open the tent flaps with a small gust, and every muscle in my body goes rigid. After several long seconds, when no one enters, I release my breath, my body slumping back against the post.

I suppose I should be thankful the prince's men had left so quickly that they hadn't even bothered to check me for weapons. My knife remains strapped against my upper thigh, still hidden under my skirts, despite the large tear up one leg. After giving up on wriggling free, I spent the better part of the last hour trying to work out how to get ahold of the blade.

I shift again, my wrists screaming with the slight movement. Hours of trying to slip free of the iron cuffs has not been kind to my skin.

No matter how many times I twist, reach, and strain for the dagger sheathed at my thigh, I lean back against the wooden pole at my back, staring up at the tent's ceiling, finally acknowledging that getting away may just be impossible.

All I can do now is wait for Rusic to release me, and when he does… *my knife will be ready.*

I try to be content with the plan, but fear has its hold on me, and I cannot hide from the monster inside my head.

I should be dead.

They should have killed me.

Instead, I was given away on a whim—an object to possess. *A gift.*

A low growl escapes me, my cheeks burning with anger. I am Princess Rowena Vivietta Valrose of Sitara, and under no circumstances will I bow to some *human* captain, general, or whoever the fuck he thinks he is.

I cling to that rage, letting it carry me to the next minute—the next hour—the next *day?*

Will I even see tomorrow?

Perhaps the captain will do me a favor and kill me immediately. He hardly seemed interested in anything other than my swift death. Only my title had given him pause back in the ballroom. I later found out from Theo's men that any royals found were to be delivered to the prince.

That's it. My way out. If escape isn't an option, I will *make* him kill me. I have to.

I won't let him use me against my brothers.

I won't let him use me, period.

I place escape high on my to-do list, but I'm not dense enough to think it will be an easy task.

The captain's tent is only a short walk from the prince's. While they didn't blind me again with that light-cursed hood, I was too busy resisting them on the walk over to properly assess my surroundings.

Stupid mistake.

But I saw enough to know I'm deep inside the Kovarian war camp. And with the prince's tent in such close proximity, I am either at or close to the center. Thousands of soldiers likely stand between me and the woods. And even if I were to make it, the woods themselves would not only be my salvation—they would be my next threat. I've never been permitted to enter the Wyldewood on my own for good reason.

No. I run my tongue over the rough edges of my split lip; the bitter metallic taste tells me it's still oozing blood. Escape is a long shot. I made this decision when I sealed the tunnel: he *will* kill me, or *I will make him.*

More time passes, the hour growing late, and with it comes the sounds of revelry—soldiers celebrating their victory outside. Their merriment carries on long into the night. It's a welcome distraction as I try my best to avoid playing out scenario after scenario in my head.

I shift uncomfortably. I have to be so careful in my movements now as the restraints have rubbed my wrists raw, my fingers sticky with my own blood.

I shift my weight again, curling in on myself at the base of the pole, trying my best to relieve the ache from the cold in my legs and warm up my half-frozen body, when movement by the door has me instantly still.

The tent flap rips back, a dark figure stepping through, and an involuntary shiver tears through me at the sight.

It's so dark—the candles have burned nearly all the way down. I can't make out his face, but I don't have to; I'm certain—it's him. The tall, commanding presence with just a touch of arrogance can't belong to anyone else.

I sit as still as stone, my back ramrod straight, pressed hard into the wood.

He hasn't seen me yet. The pole to which I'm tied sits far back from the entrance, the shadows working in my favor for once.

Like prey trying not to attract the attention of a predator, I remain motionless—refusing to blink while barely breathing.

The captain enters his tent, removing a bow and quiver from his back before setting it down by the door. Next, he unbelts his sword from his waist, setting the weapon further inside, up against the small table.

He pulls down his blood-red cowl, revealing his braids and face as he leans down to make use of the washbasin, not bothering to heat the water first.

While attempting to become one with the pole, I seize the opportunity to study him more closely. He's tall, broad, with muscled shoulders, and arms nearly as wide as my waist. His presence alone makes the tent feel infinitely smaller. Dried blood and dirt do little to diminish how handsome he actually is, with high cheekbones and a chiseled jawline. In the dim light of the tent, his hair looks to be a muddy brown, and while the sides of it are shaved, the rest is left long, pulled and braided intricately back away from his face and tied securely behind his head with a leather cord. The black marks across his face and skull are even more smudged than they were before, confirming they were painted on like I'd guessed earlier. The darker and unrelenting ink of his tattoos curl up his neck in swirling patterns, or perhaps even *runes*, which piques my interest.

Runes haven't been used for centuries—not since the fae abandoned the old teachings after the tethering. I've only ever seen their likeness in the oldest books in Rosecliff's library, but the runes crawling up the captain's arm and neck don't look like anything I've ever seen before. Seeing the delicate and intricate markings etched atop the tanned and hardened skin of a Kovari warrior is… unexpected.

Rusic shifts closer to the candlelight, and the orange glow reveals subtle flashes of gold within his hair, nearly hidden completely under a thick layer of dirt and grime. I watch as he washes off the dark red splatters on his face and arms with little to no emotion. The way he moves reminds me of the fae warriors Fel and Riven train with—purposeful, intent, exuding strength in power in every motion. He is *dangerous*. And I'd do best to remember that.

With the dirt and blood washed away, his youth is even more apparent. Nowhere near the age I would expect for someone of his rank. He looks far closer in age to Fel, or his own buddy—the prince—just a few years older than me.

"Fel's sister." Theo's words haunt my thoughts. So oddly specific. *Do they know each other?*

I'm the Princess of Sitara, but Theo seemed far more interested in the fact I am my brother's sister. *What does Fel have to do with any of this?* He might be the heir, but he wasn't even here for the battle…

Although Fel and his men captured Theo just outside of Rosecliff, Theo hardly seemed vengeful over it. Though he did mention the captain was owed Valrose blood.

Why?

Rusic reaches across his shoulder, unfastening the buckle of the black armoured chest plate, sliding it off. The leather slips away, revealing more powerful muscles, the candlelight causing shadows to dance along the deep crevices. Nearly every inch of skin is covered in those same swirling black markings.

Leaning further over the basin, he rinses his face one last time, staring into the water for a long while before releasing a sigh.

I don't move; my breath catches as my lungs constrict in my chest.

The captain's hand trails slowly down his face, before his dark eyes lift, stopping the racing heart in my chest the moment they lock with mine.

I swallow hard, staring into obsidian eyes, nearly as dark as the shadow stones themselves. My own strangled breath betrays me, a small whimper squeaking through. Alarm bells ring in my head, every one of them urging me to *run*.

But I can't.

Still, I make one more feeble attempt to pull a hand free of the iron cuffs while stifling yet another whimper that forms in my throat.

The captain's eyes take me in, but he does not move—doesn't stalk over to inspect his *present*. Instead, the man rises slowly, his dark eyes glittering with a white-hot rage, his gaze never leaving me. He moves so slowly, giving no warning before suddenly shoving the basin from the table. The metal bowl crashes down with an alarming clatter.

I flinch—hard.

My heart pounds within my chest, so loud I can hear it in my ears. I freeze again, the captain's furious gaze pinning me in his sights.

"What—the fuck—" a deep growl emanates low in his throat beneath his words, "—are you doing here?"

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CHAPTER 16

AYER

The Sitari princess does nothing but stare back at me. Her eyes wide with fear. She doesn't move—doesn't *blink*—and she doesn't answer my fucking question.

Not that she can. My eyes drop to the dirty cloth wedged between her teeth.

With her hair down, the thick dark locks covering most of those moon-cursed ears, and those big green eyes, she could be mistaken for just another terrified girl.

My eyes narrow at the sight of her. *I know better.*

Like every other fae I have encountered, even covered in dirt and blood as she is, the princess is beautiful. The fae are beautiful by design. A deadly trait refined through generations, bred into their blood to enchant, enrapture, and manipulate their victims to their darkest delights.

She's a little thing. Perhaps the smallest fae I've ever seen, with soft, delicate features and long limbs. My eyes slide back to her ears. They're hard to see in the dim lighting, her hair partially obscuring them. But through the strands, I can just make out the delicate tapered tips poking through the tangles.

I scowl at her.

She doesn't look away. Watching me as a deer would a wolf.

It takes real effort to contain the rage brewing in my chest at finding this little *surprise*. A fucking faerie. In *my* tent. If this turns out to be someone's

idea of a joke, I swear I will tear those responsible limb from limb.

"Wyatt!" I shout loud enough for my lieutenant outside to hear.

The unexpected noise shoots through the tense silence within the tent, eliciting another little jump from the faerie.

The sharpness in my tone brings Wyatt scrambling inside within seconds, already shaking his head as he ducks through the tent flaps, both hands held up defensively. "I told him it was a bad idea."

Ripping my attention off the princess, I turn my blazing glare on him. "You knew about this?"

Wyatt looks between me and the princess at my back and grimaces.

A dark swirl of rage flares inside my chest, and it takes monumental effort to keep it contained. I need to keep control, so I choose my next words carefully, sliding my gaze back to the little faerie.

"What's it doing in my tent?"

"Uhhh," Wyatt fidgets in my periphery. "You might want to discuss that with Theo…"

"*Wyatt*," I warn, my voice hard.

My lieutenant swallows hard, shifting his weight on his hips again before speaking. "She's—er—she's yours. Theo made a gift of her." Wyatt pauses, his eyes flicking briefly to the fae bound across from us. "To, uh... *enjoy*," he finishes with a wince, looking up at me nervously.

I clench my jaw, flexing my fist at my side, and the muscles in my arms ripple with tension.

"No."

Not quite knowing what to do with that response, Wyatt takes a cautious step backward, his gaze still flitting between me and the princess.

I'm going to fucking kill Theo.

"*Gifted* her to me? Like what?" I growl menacingly, the anger I'm struggling to hold back laced within my every word. "Like a bloody *present*?"

Wyatt just shrugs. "Well, yeah. He meant her to be a reward. To—" he cuts off, his eyes trailing over to the princess again, who I'm not quite sure is breathing on the other side of the room, "—to *amuse* you."

I curse, loudly. The tentative grip I have on my emotions slips, and I pound my fist into the nearest table in frustration, splintering the wood with a loud crack.

Wyatt—to his credit—stays silent in response. Likely weighing whether or not words are safe yet.

Running a hand over my face, I push back the crushing exhaustion I feel weighing on me. I haven't slept in days. "I don't have time for this," I snarl, irritation and exhaustion moving to replace the initial outright rage at the sight of my *gift.*

"I think he thought—" Wyatt's words are quiet, cautious, and when I turn to meet his eyes, I spy something unspoken as he trails off.

"Spit it out," I snap, regretting it only slightly, since none of this is actually Wyatt's fault.

"Because her brother is Fel…" Wyatt looks at me.

I feel my body go deathly still at the name, and slowly, I regard the princess again.

Princess.

Fel's sister.

Vaguely, somewhere deep within some political history lesson, I knew there were three Valrose siblings, but since I knew the third was female, I hadn't bothered to learn more, assuming she would be of little consequence.

Sitari females do not fight.

My eyes darken as I study her, looking for similarities between her and the elder crown prince. Her green eyes differ from her brother's gold, but they are only half-siblings after all. I know that much. The reddish-brown hair color is familiar, though hers is darker.

Her body stiffens under my scrutiny, her eyes never leaving mine. I stare at her for another long moment, attempting to read the thoughts behind the dark evergreen of her eyes, noticing the thin ring of gold that encircles her iris before I wrench my gaze away, shaking my head to clear it.

Wheeling around, I move toward the tent entrance.

"Where's Theo?" I growl at Wyatt as I pass him.

Wyatt doesn't hesitate, giving up Theo immediately. "The armoury."

And just like that, I have my new destination, stalking out of the tent without another look back.

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CHAPTER 17

AYER

I’m gonna kill him.

I’m gonna flay him alive and roast his body on a spit like a rotisserie goose.

The prince isn’t hard to find. He’s exactly where Wyatt said he’d be: lingering just outside the armoury tent, discussing something with Gem, our blacksmith.

Theo’s eyes lift, and the son of stones smiles knowingly at the sight of me storming his way. My fist tightens at my side. It’s work to resist pummeling that shit-eating grin off of his face.

But as I get closer, it’s easier to see past Theo’s thin mask of amusement. Behind that all-too-familiar devilish smile and mischievous glint in his eyes, there’s an underlying weariness. A tension running through him that’s nearly undetectable, except that I know Theo better than anyone. And it’s for that reason, and that reason alone, I don’t throttle him where he stands.

“Did you get your present?” The prince smirks, blue eyes sparkling before they dart to Wyatt trailing me.

His words test my resolve not to throttle him, and my answering scowl elicits a chuckle.

“Explain!” I demand.

Still laughing, Theo dismisses Gem with a nod, starting back the way we came. “Yeah, okay,” he muses, regaining his composure as we walk

through the cluttered war camp to his tent. “You know, most guys would have just said, ‘Thank you very much, Your Majesty,’ before disappearing into their tent for the next several hours.”

“We don’t take fae prisoners. *I* don’t take fae prisoners.” It’s a standing rule, as simple as that. I can’t imagine what Theo was thinking with this little stunt of his.

We reach Theo’s tent, but the prince doesn’t respond; he just surveys the surrounding area quickly before waving both Wyatt and me inside.

“She should have died when the wall fell,” I grumble, pacing the open space of Theo’s tent. It’s empty, save for the three of us.

“Yes, but you were the one who decided not to kill her. Not me. Remember?” Theo’s kind enough to remind me.

My fingers twitch at my sides. *Given that she is a royal, it was not my call to make. I was sure he’d take care of it.*

“And now, given the state of things, your little faerie is of much more use to both of us alive. Especially considering we’ve torn Rosecliff apart, and the better part of the Kovarian army—not to mention the two princes—are nowhere to be found.” He runs a hand through his blonde hair, chewing his lip in frustration.

It doesn’t make sense. Theo confirmed the two princes’ presence in Rosecliff before his capture. And we had been watching the castle from the moment they took him.

Where in the stones did they go?

Sighing, Theo strides deeper into his tent, throwing himself upon the sofa and sinking into the plush cushions with a tired sigh. The prince likely hasn’t slept since the day prior, and dark circles rim his eyes, betraying his exhaustion. With everything going on, we haven’t talked about what Sitara did to him in that dungeon of theirs.

“You look like hell.”

Theo grunts, closing his eyes while resting the back of his head on the cushion, taking full advantage of this brief moment of quiet.

“What in the twelve hells, Theo?” I curse, losing patience with my friend. I take a seat across from him, before leaning forward to rest my elbows on my knees.

The prince runs a tired hand down his face, pushing himself up slowly to look at me, amusement fading away. “Has she said anything?”

“No.” Not that I’ve spent much time with her. “But she’s also gagged,” I admit.

Theo looks surprised. “What? I didn’t do that.” He first looks at me before his gaze goes to Wyatt, who’s found a seat at the table conveniently next to a full platter of fruit.

“Nash did that,” Wyatt supplies between bites, nibbling on a strawberry before snickering. “Right after she bit him.”

“She did *what*?” Theo nearly falls off the sofa in his shock of laughter.

My irritation with the situation is still too great to laugh at the scenario, but I can’t help the way the corner of my lip ticks up at the thought of the delicate little fae princess getting the jump on Nash of all people. He hates the fae. She’s lucky he didn’t end her right there.

“She’s fiery, that one, I’ll give her that,” Theo muses, winking at me.

Anger swirls at Theo’s cavalier attitude, and I make an attempt to set the conversation back on track. “Listen, Theo, I don’t know what kind of game you’re playing, enslaving a fae royal, but I don’t have time for it. You know I leave tomorrow for Firelle.” Our men spent most of the day combing through Rosecliff, but haven’t been able to locate the book we came for. It should have been there. And perhaps it had been, but it disappeared alongside the rest of the godsdamned population, army, and princes.

I rise, anger getting the better of me as I pace the small space. I’m still trying to work out how, exactly, the entire population of Rosecliff just up and disappeared while we had the place surrounded.

“Yeah, so?”

“So…” I repeat, my temper heating further, “I can’t babysit a fae princess for you at the same time I’m busy trying to win you a war.”

Theo holds up a finger. “Win my *father* a war,” he corrects. “I’m not king yet.”

“Theo…” The bite in my tone holds a warning that would send most men crawling, but Theo ignores me, reaching for a cup half-full of some liquid he finds within reach, giving it a sniff.

“Relax, Ayer. Gods, we still have plan B, and you know you could use a little fun.”

“It’s not safe,” I argue, shaking my head. “There’s a reason we don’t keep fae alive.” The creatures are crafty devils, skilled in the art of deception and tricks. “Keeping the princess alive is an unnecessary risk.”

Theo levels me a look. “She’s like a hundred pounds soaking wet…”

I frown, rubbing my jawline. My opinion on this is unwavering: all fae are dangerous, even tiny, delicate, and spoiled ones. All fae are the same; they have no regard for human life, lack empathy, and would kill without a second thought.

“I don’t care how small she is. She’s still fae.”

The sigh that escapes Theo is one of complete exasperation. His eyes flicker to Wyatt, who is far more interested with his plate of fruit than he is with us. He leans forward, lowering his voice. “We might need her if we encounter Sitara’s forces again; it would be stupid to waste such an asset.” He pauses, tension washing over his face. “And after what Fel did, not to mention *her father*, her life belongs to you.”

I bristle at the faerie scum’s name but don’t respond.

“Do we have a location on the nobles or villagers?”

My mouth tightens. “No, it’s as if they disappeared into thin air. I wasn’t aware of the fae royals possessing powerful portal magic, but we may need to reassess the intel we have on them.” I’ve been over and over this in my mind. “That—or there's a secret way out of the city.”

Theo considers my words. “Take the girl with you to Firelle.”

“Fae,” I correct with a glare. “She’s no *girl*.” And Theo would do well to remember that.

The prince just huffs and rolls his eyes in annoyance. “Take the *princess* with you,” he amends, avoiding my second glare. “Maybe you can get some information out of her along the way. Or she can be of some… other use.” Theo winks, and I walk away before I hit him.

“There’s a reason we execute them as soon as we catch them,” I try again, hoping to make him see reason.

“We’ve never captured one of the royal fae before.” Theo’s normally bright blue eyes turn icy. “And I’m not my father. Perhaps it’s time we do things a little differently. Our plan for taking Rosecliff didn’t exactly go as we had hoped, but I’m not dead, so I personally consider it a win.” He winks.

I just shake my head.

Theo continues, “The fae are in the wind; we no longer have the element of surprise, and we didn’t find what we fucking needed to. It can’t hurt to have a little leverage on the King of Light.”

My jaw ticks at the mention: The King of Sitara.

“I want her alive,” Theo commands, his gaze hardening as it settles on me. “At least, for now.” His stare deepens. “You’re the only one I trust with that. The hatred for the fae runs deep in this camp. But if she belongs to *you*…” his gaze turns contemplative, “no one will dare touch her.”

I crack my knuckles.

“Take her with you, get your revenge on Fel, do whatever you want with her, but keep her *alive*.” His tone borders on joking, but the look he’s giving me is anything but. There’s an intensity in it, words left unsaid.

I let out a growl of both frustration and resignation.

“Fine,” I concede against my better judgment, shoving a finger at Theo. “But you owe me.”

A wide smile crosses Theo’s face, and he cocks his head in agreement.

“Fair enough.”

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CHAPTER 18

ROWAN

I keep my silent vigil as my eyes stay trained on the tent entrance. Every little rustle or noise sets my teeth on edge. Exhaustion clouds my mind, threatening to take me under against my will. It's only the bitter taste of fear that keeps it at bay.

For now.

The captain has been gone a long time.

The tent flaps rustle, and a lump forms in my throat at the appearance of two Kovari soldiers. But neither of them are the captain. The relief is fleeting.

But these two look familiar…

I recognize the bulkier one as the oaf they call Nash, the soldier who was far rougher than necessary when escorting me to this tent earlier.

I gave him a little love bite to remember me by. The rage in his eyes says he's still thinking of me.

But it's Nash's friend who catches my attention. He's standing a few feet away, taking a cursory glance over the empty tent. The smile on his face only grows when he confirms the three of us are alone. Fear trickles down my spine.

Awkwardly, and on shaking knees, I drag myself to my feet. Wishing—not for the first time—I had some way to get to my knife.

"I see Ayer hasn't played with his new toy yet," Nash says, looking me over in a way that sends acid rising up my throat.

“I would’ve wasted no time unwrapping my present if I were him,” the shorter one says, then winks at me.

My skin crawls at the implication, and I desperately try again to free my hands.

The man, whose name I don’t know, saunters closer, letting loose a low whistle as he unabashedly looks me over. “Oh, what I would do with you.” His eyes linger too long upon my heaving chest, and I glower at him, unable to cuss him out properly with the cloth still tied tight in my mouth. The man looks back at Nash. “Keep an eye out.”

Nash snickers in response and takes up watch by the tent’s entrance.

I look away, refusing to engage with the sociopath as he steps closer.

Fingers dig into my chin, forcing my face forward—forcing my gaze back to him. He smiles, dragging his thumb along the curve of my mouth.

I grind my teeth hard on the gag; the scrap of cloth is all that saves him from losing a digit.

He notices and lets loose a chuckle. “I love it when they’ve got a fight in them.” Desire flashes in his muddy brown eyes while he continues to stare at my mouth.

I twist, wrenching my chin out of his grip with a toss of my head, but he steps closer until he’s pressing into me, catching my hips between his and forcing me back under him. His acrid scent fills my nose, along with the sharp, stringent scent of alcohol. I stop wiggling when he leans in further, his stubby fingers wandering down my trembling side until they find the tear in my skirt.

I freeze.

Heart racing, everything in me recoils at the feel of his hand on my skin. The man’s mouth curves up into a dark grin before his fingers slip beneath the fabric.

Unable to run or scream, I jerk my head away again. The cuffs dig deeper as I strain, and pain explodes in my wrists as I put all my remaining strength into pulling free, desperately searching for any means of escape.

The cold iron holds firm.

The soldier grabs my face again with his free hand, much rougher this time with a bruising grip on my jaw. “Ah, ah, ah, no escaping,” he taunts, his hand dangerously high on my thigh and slowly inching north as he savors my discomfort.

It’s a fight to clear my mind that’s paralyzed in terror at what’s happening—at what’s *about* to happen—until a fresh fear enters my mind.

The dagger.

If he runs his hand up a few more inches, he’ll find my dagger.

No. No! It’s all I have left.

The thought of him taking it—and more—sends a violent tremor throughout my entire body. I stop fighting him. Reluctantly, I lift my eyes until they meet his, holding his gaze while locking my jaw.

Thinking he’s won, a smug smile appears on the man’s face. His head turns slightly as he calls back over his shoulder to Nash. “There. You see. You just have to show ‘em who’s boss and—”

He doesn’t get a chance to finish his sentence because I give no warning before I ram my knee up hard, throwing every ounce of strength I have into it.

Right between his legs.

“Fuck!” The Kovari soldier stumbles backward, sputtering out a wide variety of curses and other obscenities. “You little fae rat!” His face reddening by the second.

Lifting my chin, I give him a little wink.

He’s still bent over, sucking in air. His face now a violent shade of purple as he fights to recover. Breathing hard, he finally draws himself up, stepping toward me and raising an arm. “You’re gonna pay for that.”

I close my eyes, my jaw tightening, bracing for the hit—or worse—but… it doesn’t come.

“Riggs.”

My eyes snap open at the harsh tone, *a new voice*, coming from the direction of the tent’s entrance.

A single word. It must be the man’s name.

Riggs’ fist is frozen midair, just inches from my face. He glares at me, giving me one last look, promising death, before letting his fist drop to his side with a disgruntled huff. He looks to the sky, jaw working, before he straightens his shoulders, turning to face the captain standing in the doorway.

“Ayer,” Riggs grits out.

The room suddenly feels colder, shadows deepening as Captain Rusic—Ayer—turns his icy glare on the man, and a tense silence fills the room.

Nash stands sheepishly off to the side, avoiding Rusic’s gaze.

“Captain,” Riggs corrects with venom in his tone, just barely inclining his head. I can practically smell the animosity between the two. “Nash and I were awaiting your return when your little fae whore got mouthy.” He shrugs his shoulders, a bit too casually, while throwing a flippant wave in my direction.

Ayer’s gaze flicks to mine for a fraction of a second before settling back on Riggs.

I watch the exchange with wide eyes, breathing hard as I find myself caught between two predators and still with no way to defend myself. It’s a struggle to catch my breath with the dirty cloth obstructing my mouth.

I realize Ayer already knows Riggs is lying, but the gag, still tied tight, prevents me from saying anything.

The captain tilts his head, more wolf than man in this moment, before prowling deeper into the tent. The large space abruptly feels too small in the wake of his presence.

Behind him, I notice Wyatt slip into the tent. Another soldier accompanies the younger one, both of them dressed in the same black armour that Ayer wears, different from the gleaming silver of Riggs and Nash. The two of them rest their hands casually on their scabbards as they trail Ayer in.

Riggs notices them too and clicks his jaw, eyeing Wyatt and the other newcomer before shooting an uneasy glance at Nash.

“If you’re busy, we can come back later.”

Ayer halts a few paces away, contempt written plainly across his face as his gaze settles on Riggs.

“Get out.”

Ayer’s words are quiet but lethal; violence simmers in every well-articulated consonant.

Riggs is smart enough to sense it too, and neither he nor Nash need to be told twice. He’s already moving, skirting carefully around the captain and his men, taking care to stay out of reach before making for the exit, his eyes on the captain the whole time.

But the captain isn’t watching him—*he’s watching me*.

It’s an effort not to squirm under the intensity of the man’s gaze.

Riggs is only inches from the exit when Ayer speaks again, his eyes never leaving mine. “And Riggs?”

The soldier stops on a dime, reluctantly turning back to face the captain while still side-eyeing escape. “Yes, sir?” he replies with venom in his tone.

“Don’t touch what’s mine.” Ayer’s warning hangs in the air, and a violent tension radiates throughout the room.

Riggs scowls at me—*like all of this is somehow my fault*—before giving Ayer a curt nod, then quickly disappearing between the tent flaps. Nash, along with Wyatt and his friend, follow closely behind.

As soon as Riggs disappears from sight, a breath rushes from my lungs. Only then do I realize I’d been holding it through the entire exchange.

I draw in a deep inhale, desperate to ease the ache in my chest, but it never reaches my lungs.

Ayer is watching me.

His gaze catches mine, sharp and unrelenting, and the breath stalls halfway down my throat.

My relief dies as quickly as it came. Riggs may be gone, but I’ve only traded one predator for another.

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CHAPTER 19

AYER

We're alone.

She knows it.

I know it.

I step forward. The princess goes rigid with the movement. Her eyes harden as I move closer, and she lifts her chin to keep my gaze, doing her best to hide the terror she must certainly feel, but her body betrays her, trembling more and more visibly at my rapid approach.

Her jaw tightens, and I catch the sound of a muffled curse.

To her credit, her eyes stay locked on mine. She's so focused on holding my stare that she doesn't notice my hand drifting to the knife at my waist.

Not until the blade is at her throat.

Her composure fractures the instant the blade presses against her skin, her eyes widening as she draws a sharp intake of breath.

Keeping the knife at her throat, I rip the gag out of her mouth with my other hand. Not removing it entirely, but holding the cloth out just enough to allow her to speak. The back of my fist burns where it grazes the skin of her cheek. The glare she gives me is full of undiluted hatred.

I lean in, my voice low and threatening in her ear. "Give me one reason I shouldn't end you right now, *Princess*." Slowly, I increase the pressure of the knife against her throat until I'm certain she feels the sharp bite of the blade as it breaks her skin. Warm crimson trickles down her neck in a single bead of blood.

Holding the blade there, I wait patiently for her response. Not letting up the pressure, but not pushing any further. I can't help but think, *Just a little more… and this would all be over*.

I'm expecting fear, panic, begging even, but something in her eyes shifts. It's as if the sharp prick of pain has cracked something inside her. For a split second, her mask falters, emotion breaking through, the look in her green eyes raw and unguarded.

It catches me off guard, and I tighten my grip on the blade on instinct.

And then, just like that, it's gone. Her gaze is distant, as if she's seeing something else—as if she's gone *elsewhere*.

My brow furrows, and tension radiates through my body. The blade lifts from her skin ever-so-slightly. When the focus returns to her eyes, I'm hit with the aftermath of whatever it is she just saw in her head.

Grief.

I recognize it—all too familiar with it myself.

She swallows hard beneath my blade, and I wait for the inevitable collapse.

The tears. The begging. *The breaking.*

I brace myself, near certain I'm about to watch her fall apart.

Sure enough, tears gather, glassing her eyes, but she refuses to let them fall, forcing them back until her eyes are rimmed red. But the grief in her doesn't fade; instead, it hardens, its edges sharpening into something far more dangerous—something unyielding.

Her evergreen eyes stare up into mine before she finally speaks.

"No." She lifts her chin higher, exposing more of her neck, and my jaw ticks. "Stop hesitating and do it already."

Shadows creep into my gaze, and my jaw tightens. I release the gag; the taut cloth snaps back harshly against her mouth—cutting off her ability to speak—and my eyes drop to where my knife still ghosts the skin of her throat.

She looks away, her gaze lifting skyward—to the small opening meant to act as a vent. I follow it through the small hole in the cloth, finding the light of a handful of stars.

I drop my gaze, staring at her now. She takes in the stars with an unreadable expression on her face. Those dim little lights are the last thing she sees before her eyes flutter closed.

And she waits.

My grip on the blade doesn’t waver as I study her face. There’s no trace of the raw emotions from just before, the ones I was never meant to see. Her face is blank, an eerie calm settling over her as she makes peace with her plight. She steadies her breath, her throat working up against my blade when she swallows; another bead of crimson falls free. She breathes in deep and releases it slowly, savoring each breath she takes, very well aware that any of them could be her last.

Do it already.

I tighten my grip on the blade’s handle again. Every instinct is practically screaming at me to kill her. It would be so easy; just one more ounce of pressure, one subtle flick of my wrist, and I could be rid of what is undoubtedly a nightmare waiting to happen.

But after several breaths, my hand doesn’t move and I find myself studying her face again. When the cold bite of steel neither cuts nor retreats, the princess’ eyes open, and our eyes lock. Frustration, hatred, defiance, and curiosity—all of it crashing together until we’re left at a standstill that neither of us is willing to break.

“See, I told you—*amusing*.” A voice wafting in from the front of the tent sets us both free.

A low growl erupts from my throat when I’m forced to drop my blade, taking several steps back while turning to face Theo.

He’s just standing there, watching the two of us with a wide grin.

With the knife gone from her throat, I hear the princess release a breath of relief—*or is it disappointment?* I can’t say for sure.

Very aware that he’s interrupted something, Theo’s eyes dart between us, taking in the knife in my hand—and the look on my face—before clearing his throat. “Well, I’m gonna go. I’ve got princing to do and all that.”

The princess glares at him in my periphery, her eyes narrowing to thin slits.

“You two play nice now, you hear?” Theo gives both of us a playful wink before throwing back the tent flaps and strutting through them, gone just as quickly as he appeared.

Frustrated, I release a sigh, turning my attention back to the princess. Resolve hardens my jaw, and I turn quickly, determined to get this over with.

She flinches, and I freeze.

The abrupt movement sends her reeling back against the pole.

My dark eyes lock once again with evergreen, but the princess' attention quickly falls to the knife in my hand.

"Hey," I call out, wanting her attention back on me, but her gaze doesn't waver, firmly fixed on the glinting silver of my blade, the tip already stained red with her blood. That steely resolve and absence of fear appear to have faltered slightly with the interruption.

"Princess," I say, softer this time, trying again to pull her attention to me. I lift the knife up, toward my face, watching as her eyes trail up with it.

"Eyes on me."

Her eyes lift to mine as my words register, bitter hatred simmering to a boil.

And she's back.

"I'm going to remove that." I point to the cloth digging into the corners of her mouth, the one keeping her silent.

She jerks her head back as far as she can, but the pole at her back limits her movement.

The corner of my mouth twitches. *She's smart.* While I'm sure she wants nothing more than to have her mouth free, she doesn't trust a word I say. And for good reason. I can't exactly blame her for not wanting my blade anywhere near her face.

"You need to stay still for a second," I tell her, still not taking any steps closer, keeping my feet firmly planted where they are.

Her defiance wanes, just for a second, but long enough for me to see past it.

Exhaustion.

It clings to her; I can see it in her eyes, in the weak tug she gives her restraints, as though she already knows the effort is futile. And in the way her shoulders slump when the iron wins again. Fatigue has worn her down. It clouds her mind, fogging up her bravery with paranoia and fear.

Her gaze drifts, just for a moment, to the pallet of furs at her side.

The movement is fleeting.

The meaning is not.

I know exactly where her thoughts just went. Exactly what she fears will happen once I unchain her.

"Hey," I say again, impatience sneaking into my voice while I force myself to hang back a little longer. I *so* do not have time for this. I flip the

knife in my grip—a habit.

She flinches, shying back from it almost immediately.

Godsdamnit.

She's angry with herself—at her reaction. It's written all over her face; she's simply too tired to hide it anymore.

"Eyes on me," I remind her, my tone commanding as I start toward her, watching her track me until I'm once again at her throat.

She's shaking.

Her eyes slam shut when the cold steel of my blade brushes her cheek as it slips beneath the dirty cloth. With one quick flick of my wrist, I sever it clean through. The princess' eyes open slowly, watching me as I pull the cloth from her mouth. I give her a hard look before circling around to her back. She stiffens again, uncomfortable with me out of sight.

"I'm going to release your hands. Don't move," I tell her, bending slightly, waiting for her to acknowledge before I reach for her.

Despite having her voice back, her chin dips in a subtle nod.

I lift her hands, feeling her tense at my touch. I pull the key from my pocket, but hesitate, holding it inches from its lock while I think.

Muttering under my breath, I drop her hands, wrapping my palm around one of her wrists instead. Despite the warmth from my hand, she shivers at the touch. I hold firm, speaking low and quick, the words in a language that is very much *not* the common tongue. I've nearly finished when a searing heat scorches the skin beneath my palm. The princess goes rigid, biting down hard on her lip to contain her scream.

That done, I release her wrist in favor of her hands, this time sliding the key into the cuffs, unlocking them without further hesitation.

I slip the cuffs off, freezing when I catch sight of the bloody mess underneath. The stubborn little thing has nearly rubbed her skin raw in a misguided attempt at freedom. Stiffly she tugs her arms free of my grip, wrapping them tightly around herself while I step back into her line of sight.

"What's your name?" I ask her, unable to remember the name of Sitara's princess—that is, if I ever bothered to learn it.

She doesn't answer me, despite having the ability to with the gag gone, and her eyes avoid mine. I study her carefully, watching as she tracks my blade back to the sheath at my waist.

Satisfied it's put away, she turns her attention to her wrists. They're bruised and bleeding, but that's not the only thing different about them. A dark rune now stains the skin just inside her left wrist. She rubs it, concern etching into her brows when the ink doesn't budge. She glances up at me, a look of horror on her face, unsure of what I've done and silently demanding an explanation.

She doesn't get one.

"I don't have time for this," I grumble, turning to inspect the state of the tent and moving to collect any weapons I might have left lying around.

It's dark, so I take the time to light a couple of candles.

The whole time, the princess remains pressed up against the pole as if still tied there by some invisible force.

"There's food. Here." I point to the small table she may not have been able to see before. "You should eat… sleep." I nod my chin toward the pallet of furs in the far corner of the tent.

The princess says nothing, watching me with that same unreadable expression as before, her hand wrapped around the dark rune I burned into her wrist.

"I have some things I need to take care of. Someone will be outside," I tell her, pausing once more before slipping out into the night, considering her again. "You're in the middle of a war camp," I warn her, as if that wasn't obvious. "Do not leave this tent."

And there it is. My first order.

The existing coolness in her gaze sharpens to a point.

"I'm not afraid to die," she bites back at me, her voice rough and low.

I stop, turning slowly to face her, all the while letting my gaze trail pointedly down her body, watching as her discomfort grows, especially when I let it linger upon the golden skin of her upper thigh, visible through her torn skirts.

"Ah, Princess, as you just nearly experienced, there isn't a whole lot of love for the fae around here. And there are quite a number of things that could happen to you should you walk out this door. Things I can assure you would be far worse than death."

The princess pales at the notion, but before she has a chance to muster a comeback, I take my leave, striding out of the tent and leaving her behind.

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CHAPTER 20

ROWAN

I can't take my eyes off the mark Ayer left on my wrist. It's so similar to the ink on his body; dark, twisting lines of black ink—symbols I don't recognize.

Runes.

I've only read about them in books and, admittedly, not that much, since I didn't exactly find them to be particularly interesting.

Staring down at the little rune burned into the skin of my wrist, I think I might have a newfound interest in the topic.

I scurry over to the washbasin Ayer had knocked onto the floor earlier. Righting the bowl, I snatch a pitcher of water off the nearby table, dumping it into the bowl before plunging my wrist inside.

Snatching a clean cloth from next to the basin, I scrub furiously at the mark, anxiety rising with every second the dark ink stays put.

Gritting my teeth, I dig in harder with the cloth, though I'm careful to avoid touching the wounded skin below. But after several minutes of furious scrubbing, all I have to show for my efforts is more red and raw skin on my wrist.

A shriek of irritation escapes me, and I chuck the cloth as far as I can before pacing the open area of the tent.

What does it mean? What does it *do*?

A terrifying thought crosses my mind, and I hold out my wrist, glaring down at the small, stubborn mark as an ominous feeling settles over me. It's

a half-sun on one side, a crescent moon on the other, divided by a single dark line, with intricate runic markings etched across it in swirling black ink.

There's no way.

I take a deep breath, closing my eyes while trying to settle my racing heart. I'm already ill-practiced. Summoning magic when I'm calm and prepared is difficult enough, let alone when I'm freaking the fuck out.

It makes sense. Maintaining control over magic during intense emotions like anger or grief requires real skill and practice, as magic is tied to them. But I try anyway. Even angry or tired, I can always at least sense it. It's always right there, just under the surface—waiting.

I sigh with relief when I feel the magic deep inside me; its warmth is comforting to my chilled body. I wish I could wrap myself inside it like a warm blanket of protection.

My relief is short-lived, however, because when I try to summon it, it rises to meet my call but… it cannot leave. Power simmers anxiously just underneath my skin as if trapped there.

I gasp, and my hand goes to the rune at my wrist; *it's burning.* The dark mark only grows hotter and hotter the harder I try to push my power out.

Stunned, I loosen my grip on my magic, letting it go, and the black ink instantly cools against my skin.

To say I'm shocked is an understatement.

Humans don't have magic. Though I guess runes don't exactly count as magic. Not really… It's a lost art, like all the other magics forgotten over the years since they largely serve no purpose. Runes aren't supposed to be powerful.

But this one…

I push my power again, harder this time, hissing as the rune burns once again. Harder and harder I try, tears streaming from my eyes from the searing pain, but it's no use. I release the power, giving up.

I might not know how to use it, but I know my power is right on par with Fel's.

And if this little dark mark can contain it…

I feel sick.

All the runes I've ever heard of are for protection—weak protection at that. Most of them were used for protection against demons—who haven't

been a threat for generations. I certainly would have remembered learning about a rune that could do this.

Panic surges inside me, unraveling quickly as the walls close in.

Shaking my head, I back up until I hit the pole I've spent the last several hours tied to. Scrambling away from it, I trip, then crawl behind the chair, thankful for its protection. I bring up my knees, curling into a ball as I hug them tight to my chest. Tears leak down my cheeks.

Stars, I wish Riven were here to tell me what to do.

More tears fall following the stabbing pain in my chest when my twin's face enters my mind.

Light, Ro. Get yourself together. This is pathetic, is probably what Riven would say.

Solemnly, I nod, wiping the tears from my eyes and face. I have two choices: I can stay here and wait around to find out what Ayer wants from his new faerie pet, or… I can try to make a run for it.

The captain's warning echoes through my mind, but I shove it away.

It's the middle of the night; half the camp is asleep. If there ever was a chance—it's now. I refuse to be a pawn in this game of kings. In Kovaria's hands, I'm nothing but a weapon they can use against my brothers, my father, or my entire kingdom if they play their cards right.

Even so, I hesitate, lingering by the tent's entrance.

Ayer was right about one thing: there are worse things than death. And after that little visit from Riggs and Nash, I have some idea what those *things* might be.

I know hatred for the fae runs deep in humans, particularly within the Kingdom of Kovaria, despite never setting foot there myself.

I still need to work out what my brother has to do with any of this. What does Fel have to do with keeping me alive—or giving me to Ayer?

The victory won't be in killing me. No, it will be in breaking me.

Anxiety gives way to a fresh rush of adrenaline. Pushing myself back up to my feet, I pace the tent again.

Am I really going to sit here like a good little pet waiting for my master to return? Ayer left me unbound. And through the tent's vent, I can see the sky is dark; the sun hasn't risen yet. I still have my dagger, and I can reach it now. The second the blade crosses my mind, my fingers find it. The smooth handle in the palm of my hand offers me the briefest moment of comfort.

The soldiers are still busy tying up loose ends after taking Rosecliff. Who knows if, once we leave here, they'll leave me alone and unsupervised again? This might be my only chance, this *one* opportunity; I'd be a fool to pass it up.

Mind made up, I dart quickly over to the tent entrance, stealing a peek outside.

The camp has long since calmed down following the celebratory ruckus that took up most of the night. Dawn is still a few hours off.

My eyes survey the surrounding tents, still shrouded in darkness; most of their fires have been put out, and some emit low light from dying embers. A few feet to my right, I can make out one of the soldiers from earlier.

Wyatt.

Most likely the guard Ayer appointed to stand watch. He's standing several tents up, talking to someone, his back angled to me.

It's now or never.

While Wyatt's distracted, I slip out of the tent, pressing close to its outside wall. Silently thanking Alita for picking out the darkly colored dress this morning. I keep my eyes on Wyatt and his companion, backing away from them, doing my best to stay steady on trembling feet as I move as quickly as I dare in the opposite direction.

Nearing the corner of the tent, I notice a small gap of space between Ayer's tent and the neighboring one. It's just large enough to conceal me while I plot out my next move.

Luck appears to be on my side, seeing as how Wyatt hasn't once glanced in my direction—too absorbed in his conversation.

But just as I'm about to reach the corner of the tent, my back slams hard against something that feels an awful lot like solid stone.

Confused, I freeze. I'm certain there was nothing standing between me and the tent's edge.

"Never trust a fae," a deep voice mutters, just above my ear.

My heart is in my throat. I spin around, peering up into dangerously familiar dark eyes. Ayer stares down at me with a look of bored irritation, but has not yet grabbed ahold of me.

The dart of my eyes gives me away. I make it only one step before a large hand wraps around my upper arm, hauling me roughly back.

My struggle draws attention to us. Wyatt and his companion look up at the sight of Ayer approaching, dragging my flailing ass alongside him. Both straighten to attention, awaiting an order from their captain.

He growls something unintelligible at them before shoving me back through the tent flaps.

“It was a trap?!” I hiss, glaring as he manhandles me back inside. Ayer lets go of me so quickly, I almost fall.

He leaves me standing by the tent’s opening, circling around to face me. Too close—still much too close. I fight the urge to step back.

“Perhaps,” he taunts with a glimmer of malice in his eyes. “I knew you would try to run. Fae always cause trouble.” He leans in until he’s mere inches from my face. “You could have at least made it a little more interesting, don’t you think? Did you honestly believe you could just walk right out the tent’s entrance?”

He scoffs and, oh, the urge to slap him across his stupid face is strong. My hand twitches murderously at my side.

Ayer levels me with a knowing smirk. “In the future, you would do well to heed my warnings.” The amusement fades, and darkness creeps back into his eyes as they bore into me. “And I do expect you to follow orders.”

I give him a scoff of my own, lifting my chin and folding my arms across my chest. “I don’t take orders,” I sniff, looking him up and down as if he doesn’t terrify the shit out of me. *Gods*, he’s tall. Far north of six feet. Much taller than me. “Especially not from you.” My expression changes to that of utter disdain as I glare back at him, refusing to look away or show any sign of deference or defeat.

Ayer’s expression hardens as he straightens to his full height, towering over me. My chin lifts uncomfortably in order to hold his gaze. I’m proud to say I don’t jump when his deep voice booms over me, calling to his men outside. “Put her out!”

My brow furrows, and my gaze darts from him to the tent’s opening, where Wyatt and his friend suddenly appear.

But with Ayer just inches from me, and two Kovari soldiers closing in, there’s nowhere for me to go. Still, I attempt to bolt, but I’m caught before I even manage a step.

Wyatt steps forward, an apologetic look on his boyish face, but it’s the cloth he holds in his outstretched hand that has my attention.

Rallying the last of my strength, I fight against Ayer’s grip. I dig in my heels, desperate to pull away, but it’s no use. Within seconds, the cloth covers my nose and mouth.

I seal my lips, holding my breath, fighting and thrashing, frantically trying to separate the soaked fabric from my face until my lungs burn and my head spins.

I inhale.

The cloying scent of herbs fills my nose, and the effect is instantaneous. My knees buckle and my vision spins. My eyes dart about the room, frantically searching for help, locking onto Ayer’s dark eyes right before the shadows claim me.

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CHAPTER 21

ROWAN

The distant sound of male voices pulls me from a heavy slumber.

I move too quickly, my head spinning as I attempt to push myself up from where I've awoken, curled up on the ground.

Shaking away the lingering dizziness, I glance around nervously, once again finding myself alone inside this now familiar tent.

Irritation sharpens my senses. It's almost insulting to have been left here again, unbound *and* unguarded. Annoyed, I rub gently at my temples, attempting to ease the incessant pounding coming from inside my skull.

He drugged me.

The bastard.

Anger flares at the thought before quickly devolving into dread when I realize they knocked me out. I've been asleep—vulnerable—unable to protect myself for what's sure to have been hours, judging by how bright the sun lights up the tent. My hands drop down, frantically searching my body, relief billowing through me when I find every scrap of clothing exactly where it should be.

And my knife.

By the light.

I offer a silent prayer to the gods at the familiar feel of the blade, still hidden beneath my skirt. It's an even better sign that I was left untouched; they would have taken the weapon had they found it.

And after all, I woke up on the floor, near the tent's entrance and not in—

The bed.

My heart skips a beat as my gaze trails over the soft pallet of furs in the far corner. The bed—is not empty.

Atop it lies the passed out, godsforsaken Kovari captain himself.

Stunned, I sit as still as I can, watching his chest move up and down with his breaths. *Twelve moons*, he is a sight. Just bare skin, absent all the dark armour and leathers, rippled with muscles and dark ink—and scars. There must be hundreds of them. Jagged, smooth, short, and long scars crisscross the captain's broad chest and arms. Silvery lines haphazardly overlap intricately placed dark lines of swirling onyx. I find myself mesmerized by the delicate patterns before smartly coming to my senses.

I remind myself to focus, shaking my head to clear it.

He's clean—or, well, cleaner than he'd been last night. The dirt and blood of battle washed away. His hair is actually dark blond, like wild gold threaded with shadow. It's braided neatly back from his face, tied at the nape of his neck with a leather cord. Gone is the war paint that adorned the shaved side of his skull yesterday.

Wrenching my eyes away from the captain, I scan the tent, finding his armour hanging on the chair by the table, not quite polished but free of dirt and blood.

I chew my lip, trying to decide what to do.

The formidable captain of the Kovarian army is asleep and defenseless in his pallet before me.

I haven't moved a muscle since catching sight of him in that bed. Too afraid a single step, or gods, even a breath, will wake the sleeping monster.

I'm shocked that he would sleep here, inside this tent, without even tying me up. He likely thought I'd remain unconscious longer. Perhaps arrogance will be his downfall.

My pulse quickens as my gaze falls on his pile of weapons, left out, right there in the open, by his bed. They're practically begging me to take them.

I can end this right now.

I push myself up to my feet, keeping my footsteps light as I approach the sleeping captain. I don't let my eyes stray off him until I find myself

within reaching distance of a knife—left out on the bedside table.

My eyes dart between Rusic and his unprotected blade. Better to use his rather than mine, just in case he catches me. Then I'll still have my blade as backup.

Casting a quick glance back at the tent's entrance, I make my move, slowly reaching out and silently wrapping my fingers around the weapon's handle before lifting it off the side table.

Ayer's blade is cold in my hands, heavy too—much heavier than mine. I hold it up, willing my fingers not to shake as I inch closer.

The scars across his chest are far worse up close than they are from a distance. Beneath me lies a man who has stared down death not only once, but dozens of times.

Releasing a slow breath, I bring the blade right up to his neck. The tip pointing right along a thin white scar that marks my intended path across his throat.

I'm clearly not the first to want this asshole dead.

Despite myself, I hesitate. My resolve slips as my eyes run back over the sleeping man, guilt staying my hand.

It costs me.

My blade is still hovering over Ayer's throat when his eyes fly open. His hand shoots up, closing tightly around my wrist. I've only enough time to let out a yelp of surprise before he flips us.

With my back pressed hard against the pile of furs and my hands pinned above me, my composure splinters. My struggles are in vain, however, because Ayer is an immovable wall of steel sitting on top of me, his hips straddling mine, easily keeping me pinned down under him.

His expression is stone cold.

"*Never* hesitate, Princess."

My eyes widen, and I freeze.

"Now be a good little princess and drop the knife, eh?" The trace of a familiar accent I thought I noticed yesterday is more pronounced today.

But I don't drop the knife. Instead, I tighten my grip until my knuckles bloom white; anger, frustration, and hatred burning through my eyes.

Ayer notices, and his jaw ticks as he frowns. "I see the little Rose Princess still has some fight left in her." Dark mayhem dances in his eyes. "Okay, Princess, show me what you've got."

The sudden absence of his weight above sends me reeling. He moves off me, releasing my hands to stand at the edge of the pallet—waiting. He spreads his arms wide, leaving his chest *unprotected*.

I swallow hard, nearly falling off the bed; my legs are a shaking mess and just barely support my weight. My gaze darts between Ayer and the closest exit—my fight-or-flight instincts kicking in.

This has to be another trap…

"Come on, sunshine. I won't even try to stop you." Ayer stands there, arms outstretched, watching me with a challenge gleaming in his eye. "I promise." And then he smirks.

My blood boils at the look he's giving me. *Sunshine? Really?* Does he think I won't do it?

Gritting my teeth to contain my snarl, I push my shoulders back, tightening the grip I have on the dagger he left in my hand. I eye Ayer warily—not trusting him for a second to keep his promise. The dread and fear in my chest war with the overwhelming bloodthirsty urge to attack. He's the captain of the Kovarian army. An army that destroyed my home, killed good men, and would have slaughtered the entire village had Fel not led them to safety. The memory of the Raven comes unbidden, and I can't help but shiver, thinking about the dark creature. The demon Ayer and his prince had to have had a hand in summoning. My hand shakes again, this time not with fear, but with anger. It's sharp, and it's strong, and it strengthens my resolve.

I *can* kill him. I *should* kill him.

I take one step, and then another, slowly closing the distance between us. I'm careful to keep an eye on Ayer's reaction, ready for him to come at me at any second, but he remains still. Though his eyes glint with a dark excitement the closer I get.

When I'm within striking distance, I stop, tilting my head to keep his eye, testing whether or not he's actually going to let me do it. Still sure he's bluffing. He's so sure I won't... He doesn't make a single move to protect himself, doesn't take the knife from my hand, doesn't even so much as flinch when I lift it up, until once again, I have the sharp steel pressed against the vulnerable skin of his throat, lined up perfectly with that long silvery scar.

"*Never hesitate.*" His own words echo in my mind, and this time, I don't; I wrench my hand back, driving it down forcefully, aiming for his

throat. The captain still doesn't move, that aggravating smirk still on his face.

I'm so busy watching him that I'm wholly unprotected to defend against my own body…

The blade is seconds from piercing his skin when a strangled scream rips free from my throat. I fall to my knees, fighting for breath as if all the air has left my lungs. My vision blurs, the world tilts, and my gaze flickers with darkness. It's a fight to stay conscious as pain tears through me in never-ending waves. It's everywhere; burning, endless, ripping me apart from the inside.

I drop the knife as my hands fly up to grip my head while screams erupt out of me. My lungs seize and I can't—I can't breathe. I tear at my throat, trying to free myself from the invisible crushing force. Another long moment of agony passes before the pain finally releases its malevolent grip on my psyche, leaving me a panting mess on my hands and knees before the still waiting captain.

Did he—*did he just use magic?*

Humans don't have magic.

Ayer's laughter only adds insult to injury, sending a rage that quickly counteracts the aftermath of the crippling pain from moments ago. In one quick instant, I move to strike again, snatching up the fallen knife while jumping to my feet, lifting my arm to drive the blade down once more—harder, faster. My intended target is the soft swath of skin at the side of his neck.

My arm catches in the air as if stopped by an invisible hand with such force that I stumble backward.

The same blinding pain clouds my vision once again, and I flinch violently away from it, scrambling to outrun or escape whatever this is, sending me falling forward—straight into him.

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CHAPTER 22

ROWAN

Ayer reacts immediately, spinning me away from him. My breath catches when I once again hit the soft pallet of furs, this time face first. Even though the screaming pain is already holding me in a vise, he quickly renders me completely immobile, pinning both of my hands behind my back.

Since I'm no longer attempting to kill him, the violent wave of pain ebbs, releasing its deadly grip on me once again.

How is he doing that?

I fight his hold, but it's no use. He leans in, and my body freezes at the touch of his warm breath against my ear.

"You almost had me convinced with that innocent little princess act of yours," he breathes, tickling my skin, and I shiver. "But you are just as cold and ruthless as the rest of them."

I thrash uselessly in his hold, and he presses a knee into my back to still me.

"Tricky things, possession runes…" he muses, and I freeze, an icy shiver trickling down the length of my spine. "That mark on your wrist," he croons in that rough accent of his, dark and gritty, "it means you're mine."

I thrash again, and Ayer's grip tightens on my arm to the point of pain. I bite down on my lip hard, drawing blood, in order to prevent a whimper of pain from escaping.

“I can do anything I want to you, but you... you can’t lay so much as a finger on me.”

I’m flipped onto my back so fast my head can barely keep up, still spinning from what must be the rebound effects of the rune’s magic. He releases my hands in favor of my throat. His grip tightens, cutting off my air. My hands fly to his. I pull at his grip, the rune allowing my attempts to pry it from my throat. But when that fails and I dig in my nails, blinding pain explodes again, and my eyes roll back, my body shaking.

Weak from lack of oxygen and unable to stand the pain, my hands drop to either side of my head in surrender. The pain immediately cuts off and Ayer loosens his grip, allowing me to suck in a desperate breath.

Tears leak down both of my cheeks, the echo of pain remaining. I just lay there, head spinning, watching the darkness slowly ebb out of my vision. It takes several seconds to recover—to focus on Ayer’s steel-gray eyes above, watching me. All I see is hatred. It’s intense—bitter and cold.

His massive body looms over mine, keeping me pinned. His hand still grips my throat. I can’t fight him, and the weight of the realization is crushing.

“I can do anything I want to you.”

But I can’t do anything to stop him.

He leans in closer, and instead of fear, a strange feeling of calm takes over.

I can’t fight him.

I can’t hurt him.

I can’t stop whatever comes next.

The helpless feeling is crushing, all-encompassing and too much—the ramifications are too much to comprehend, so my mind just… lets go.

I turn my head, looking away—not at anything in particular—my vision unfocused before I squeeze my eyes shut, escaping to the only place I have left: my mind.

Numbness takes over, and soon I’m floating through a dark void, aware but not of my body or who sits atop it.

He doesn’t move.

Several long seconds pass, and I brace for his touch, fear and anticipation at war with dissociation.

His hand disappears from my throat right before his weight shifts, and then it’s gone entirely.

I steal a peek, and my eyes widen at the look of utter disdain in Ayer's eyes as he glares down at me. I scramble backward, taking the opportunity to put more distance between us while keeping my eyes on him.

"I don't touch fae," Ayer sneers down at me, the look of hatred on his face morphing further into disgust the longer he looks at me.

Too stunned to move, I remain there, propped up on my elbows, silently watching him saunter around the bed to pick up his sword.

"Know this, Princess," he says while belting the leather strap around his waist. "I might be the only soldier in this camp you don't have to fear forcing you into his bed."

I swallow hard, a lump catching in my throat when his gaze finds mine again. "But when it comes time for you to die…" His eyes bore into my own, his head tilting slightly to the side while the edge of his jaw sharpens like the steel of his blade.

He doesn't say it—doesn't have to. The promise is already there. I push myself up on shaky hands, my injured shoulder screaming from all his manhandling. I should be afraid. *Moons*, I should be terrified. And maybe I am—on some level—deep down. And maybe also a little relieved. He said he wouldn't touch me, but then he promised to kill me in the same breath.

Why the fuck doesn't he get it over with then?

He thinks he owns my life? That he can just… decide?

White-hot rage burns hotter than fear under my skin. My magic, too, is pissed, and it feels as though it's pacing the rune's barrier like a caged animal.

Ayer's dark rune burns hot at my wrist when it flares again.

I should keep my mouth shut, lie here and let him have his little win, but anger propels me forward, lifting my eyes and keeping them locked on his as I stalk forward.

I don't know if the rune will let me, but I decide it's worth risking debilitating pain once more. I raise my hand to slap him across his face, but Ayer catches my wrist before I can try it.

My eyes narrow and I glare up at him, trying to wrench my wrist free.

The surprise on his face quickly turns to fury. *He thought he already had me on my knees.*

He shoves me, my back slamming into one of the tent's wooden support posts, and before I know it, he once again has both my hands pinned over

my head with one of his own, while wrapping the other around my throat, his grip bruising.

I glare up at him, hatred burning in my veins.

Ayer leans in, his voice in my ear low and lethal. “Try that again, and I *promise* I will end you.”

My pulse drums against his tight hold. As if to emphasize his point, he increases pressure on my throat, further constricting my airway. My breaths shallow out, growing strained. I lift my gaze to meet his eyes, unblinking when I reply, “So. End. Me.”

I catch the flash of surprise on the captain’s face, so fleeting I might have missed it had I blinked.

“You *want* to die,” he says, looking down at me. It’s not a question.

With his hand still constricting my airway, I can only blink back at him. Would he really kill me right now? Judging by the look of malice in his eyes, I think he might.

In their hands, I’m a weapon—against my brothers, against my country. If I’m dead, they can’t use me, torture me, or whatever the hells they want to do to me.

Steadying my resolve, I dip my chin.

Once.

“Fine.” He releases me, and I take a much-needed gulp of air, tracking the movement of his hand as he reaches for the knife he’s got sheathed on his belt. It’s the same knife he took off me a few minutes earlier. The silver of the blade glints against the sunlight streaming in from above.

My gaze flickers between Ayer and his knife. His fingertips dance along its sharp edge playfully—far too nonchalantly.

“Fine?” I repeat, my tone hesitant, eyeing him with caution. Death is what I want, but once again, it’s too easy.

Ayer stops playing with the knife, his expression darkening.

“Get on your knees.” He points the tip of his blade down at the dirt beneath his feet.

I look at the ground and then back up at him. “Wh—what? Why?”

His lips curl up into a cruel smile. “I’ll give you death, Princess. But you’re going to have to beg for it.”

I instantly recoil, feeling sick, my stomach roiling violently at his words.

Beg for it.

Beg *him.*

Why can’t he just kill me and get it over with? He wants me dead. He told me so.

It’s better if I’m dead.

But… but I can’t get on my knees. I won’t. I won’t beg for death.

I won’t beg him.

No.

Hot tears of frustration fill my eyes, but I force them back, the rune at my wrist scalding hot when I glare up at the captain in disgust. “You’re a monster.”

Ayer just smiles and resumes running his fingers along the sharp edge of the blade in his hand. He called my bluff, and he fucking knew it.

And I’m weaker for it.

Without another word, he turns, striding purposefully for the exit, stopping briefly to pick up a piece of fruit on his way out of the tent, but not before calling back over his shoulder.

“Offer is good anytime, *Princess*.”

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CHAPTER 23

ROWAN

Ayer won't be back—at least not right away.

I sink down slowly onto the soft furs of his pallet, my body too sore to sit on the floor.

He said he wouldn't touch me. I don't believe anything he says, but my head feels like it weighs a thousand pounds, my body aches, and tears of frustration threaten the corners of my eyes. I don't have the strength left to shove them away.

Curling up on the pallet, I hug my knees to my chest while willing my mind to clear. If I let the pain in—*if I let it win*—I'll never get myself out of this. I'll never survive it.

No one's coming to save me. Sitara, my brothers, my father… all probably think Kovaria delivered a swift death upon my capture.

I should sleep. The herbs they'd used to put me out last night may have forced me to sleep, but I'm still exhausted—maybe even more than before, the last of my adrenaline gone.

The sound of approaching male voices has me up and scrambling to my feet before I can fully open my eyes.

Disoriented, I take in the sunshine streaming through the hole in the tent. *Did I fall asleep?*

Panicking, I scramble backward away from the sound, retreating to the back of the tent, as far as I can get from the entrance.

The formidable captain of the Kovarian army strolls back into the tent, not even bothering to give me a look. Why would he? With his cursed rune on my wrist, I'm no threat to him. He heads straight for his desk, rustling papers until he comes across what he was looking for... *A map?* He unrolls it, spreading it wide; it takes over the whole top of his desk.

I haven't dared move since he entered several minutes ago, and he still hasn't spared me a glance. Half of me wonders if he even remembers I exist.

Curiosity gets the better of me, and I lift slightly onto my tiptoes, craning my neck to get a glimpse of the map he's oh-so-interested in, when his eyes slowly rise. I freeze the second they meet mine, my breath catching in my throat at the cold hate I glimpse simmering in his.

Ayer sets down the map he's been studying, leaning back in his chair while folding both of his arms across his chest. "So, Rose Princess…" The tone of his voice drips with a newfound arrogance that wasn't there last night. I curl my fingernails into my palms. "Do you want to tell me your name?" he asks me.

Again.

Does he really not know it? Or is it a game of submission? Either way, my mouth stays firmly shut—the rune on my wrist doesn't force my mouth open—and I watch him warily.

He says nothing else, watching me intently with cold irritation.

I refuse to look away.

A couple of soldiers stroll into the tent, one of them laughing fitfully at something the other had just said. I flinch violently, conceding a step to my fear, my eyes darting between the two new soldiers and their captain, who's still watching me.

A ghost of a smile appears on his face.

Shit, I chastise myself. *Never let them see your fear.*

Wyatt joins us, casually strolling in behind the two soldiers I recognize as the two who dragged me from the great hall just yesterday. *Was that only*

yesterday? Gods.

Both soldiers stop, falling silent when they find me in their gaze. “Sir?” one of them asks, eyeing Ayer with interest, seeing as Ayer’s eyes never leave mine.

The corner of Ayer’s lip tugs up when he finally looks away, and immediately I can breathe a little easier.

“We’re moving out, boys. Princess here is coming with us.” He tosses a rope at them.

The two exchange glances before starting toward me. Alarmed, I retreat instinctively, already searching for a means of escape. Until I remind myself that this is what I want.

Ayer means to take me out of this war camp, which makes the odds of escape a little higher. I just need the opportunity.

My eyes find Ayer one more time as I breathe out slowly, steadying myself and keeping fear on lockdown as his men creep closer. Their faces give nothing away, but my eyes drop to the rope Wyatt holds in his hands as they move to approach.

I don’t fight, letting them bind me, trying not to wince when the coarse threads of the rope rub against the already raw skin on my wrists. There are four of them and only one of me. Better to conserve my energy for what will hopefully be a better opportunity in the future.

The soldier to my right eyes me cautiously, his body rigid and tense.

My thoughts go to the stars-cursed rune on my wrist. Does it prevent me from harming all of them or just *him*?

While I’m itching to test the theory, I resist the urge to attack, but it doesn’t stop me from curling my upper lip and giving him a marvelous view of my fangs.

The man pales, turning a sickly shade of green while taking a measured step back.

My hands are bound, connected to a long stretch of rope Wyatt holds in his hands, to lead me—as if I were cattle. Any amusement I might have felt a second ago fades away.

When my wrists are secured, Ayer rises, pocketing his map before circling the desk and coming toward me. Hands bound in front of me, I straighten my shoulders, lifting my chin to keep his eye, forcing myself to remain still and not concede a single step to this man. He’s so close I can see the silver flecks hidden deep within his onyx eyes.

“Now, are you going to be a good little pet, kitten? Or do I need to drug you again?”

My jaw locks, and I weigh the amount of pain attacking him again might cost me. *Kitten? Oh, if he only knew how sharp my claws were. Arrogant jackass.*

I don’t answer, lifting my chin a little higher, refusing to look away until he does.

He sighs.

“We’re about to go through the Wyldewood. You and I both know the woods are as much a danger to you as they are to us, so I just need to know… You’re not going to be any trouble, are you?”

I keep my mouth shut tight, offering him only my darkest, most scathing glare as my answer.

Ayer rolls his eyes, clearly unimpressed. He releases a long-suffering sigh, shaking his head before turning away and, in doing so, dismissing me as a threat.

Wyatt gives the rope a light tug, and I can’t quite stop the small smile that finds my lips as I step into the sunlight.

Oh, Captain Rusic, *you have no idea.*

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CHAPTER 24

ROWAN

I need a plan. Despite going over and over it in my head, I still only have the same two options: escape or die. Both of which I've already failed at.

Despite his words, Ayer wants me dead. I read it, clear as day, in his eyes. He basically promised me death if I only begged him for it.

Begged. Him.

That I won't do, but what if—what if I were to push that seemingly thin patience of his just a little too far? It shouldn't be too hard. His profound irritation at my being alive is palpable. He's just biding his time, his fingers practically twitching at the promise of gutting me.

The soldiers regard me carefully as they spur me forward, leading me from Ayer's tent by my bound hands. The two not holding the rope have their hands on the hilts of their swords, ready and waiting. I know they think us worse than demons.

Hypocrites.

The monster they summoned to do their dirty work is far worse than anything the fae could ever possibly be.

My thoughts turn to the Raven, a shudder running through me at the mere thought. I hope the reason they kept me alive has nothing to do with that stars-cursed shadow demon.

But the wariness of the guards' gaze sparks a new idea. Let me play into the worst of their fears about my kind. I'm sure the carefully constructed

reputation my father has worked tirelessly to perfect already precedes me. The pretty, poised, and perfect Princess of Sitara. Let them think me spoiled and weak—anything but a threat. And then, when they inevitably drop their guard…

I'll be ready.

It's a weak plan, and not without its flaws, but it's still a plan. It's enough to give me the strength required to follow the tug of the rope down the long line of tents, ignoring the burn of the rough material against my already raw skin.

Ayer's soldiers pull me through the packed war camp. The smell of smoke, leather, and sweat fills my nose.

As if drawn to him, my eyes find Ayer immediately; he's waiting just up ahead with a few more of his men, all dressed all in black. So different from the silver armour the rest, like Theo, wear.

The captain's cold eyes fall on me with one last look of warning before turning and striding down the narrow path that cuts between an endless stream of tents and soldiers.

We fall in line behind him.

There are armoured soldiers milling about everywhere; some sharpen their weapons, while others take a minute to grab some food, eating out of tin bowls, and others busy themselves cleaning leather tack.

I feel their eyes, even more than I can see them, as we progress through the camp. My guards, as if wanting to be as far away from me as possible, leave me quite a bit of slack in the rope.

The two soldiers with Wyatt fall in beside him, murmuring quietly to each other as we continue on, ignoring me, too interested in their own conversation. Their voices are too low for me to make out anything of use.

Looking around, I realize it's a good thing I didn't get much further than I did last night. Surprisingly, Ayer was telling the truth when he warned me I'd never make it. I'm so far behind enemy lines, in the center of a vast camp full of an army who—judging by the stares and glares I'm receiving—*hate* fae.

The men's stares weigh more heavily on me the further we go, making me increasingly uncomfortable. Whistles ring out as I'm paraded past, on full display for the camp to ogle; a growing group of soldiers trail menacingly at my back.

Inching closer to Wyatt, I discreetly gather the excess rope in my hands. I blink in shock at the glares of bitter hatred and contempt shot my way. I know they hate the fae, but it's one thing to know, and it's another to experience it. The way they look at me… An awful feeling of unease settles over me.

Stares turn to scowls, and those scowls become jeers. The men grow more rowdy by the minute, and the commotion only serves to draw more attention, emboldening them further. It's not long until I find myself the spectacle of the camp.

Shouts ring out, and curses too. With so many yelling at once, it's hard to make out their words, but "Fae filth, trash, faerie scum…" make their way through. The growing crowd presses in, and it's not long until I lose sight of the captain up ahead, though I keep close to Wyatt and the other two guards, winding the slack in the rope carefully around my palm so I don't trip on it, and so no one else can grab hold of it.

Refusing to kowtow to their jeers, I continue forward with my chin held high, keeping my eyes fixed ahead, ignoring the insults and obscenities thrown at me and not rewarding them with my attention. My fists tighten on the rope. I remain stoic—impassive—until I feel a sharp flick against the delicate skin at the tip of my ear.

Curling my lip, I let out a snarl, my temper immediately getting the better of me.

Don't do it, Rowan.

I can practically hear Riven's voice in my head.

They need to think you are weak for that plan of yours to work. Harmless.

But pain comes again, in the form of a pinch this time. The fine, pointed tip of my ear is caught between two stubby fingers. The man they belong to tugs so hard, my head jerks violently to the side along with it.

I don't even hear what insult he sneers at me, too busy moving. I drop the excess rope I had gathered at my feet. My guards have gone on ahead, too focused on clearing a path through the thick throng of curious soldiers to notice.

The amount of slack I gathered allows me only seconds.

But seconds are all I need.

Reaching back, I grip the man's hand—the one still holding my throbbing ear between his fingers. The pain is now only a distant ache.

Especially when I catch the look of shock on the man's face when I flash him my fangs inside a vicious smile.

For all his boldness in grabbing my ear, the man flinches, cringing away from me with a shout, trying and failing to tear his arm free. I hear nothing the lard spouts before I'm airborne, using the grip I have on his arm and the momentum of his tug to propel myself up into the air. Effortlessly, I hook one leg around his neck before swinging my body back down, taking him with me as I fall to the ground.

The two of us crash into the dirt. Working quickly, I grab hold of what slack remains in the rope, winding as much as I can around the man's neck while climbing on top of him.

I easily dodge his flailing hands as he clumsily tries to fend me off. I've just wound a second loop around his neck when the rope's slack finally finds its end, going taut when it meets resistance.

Wyatt, having not noticed the situation unfolding at his back, jerks back hard from the sudden anchor. And before he can realize what's happened and loosen the rope, I take it in my hands myself and pull.

The man chokes, spluttering under me, his eyes bulging from the tight pressure around his neck. His legs flail uselessly underneath me as he once again tries and fails to shove me off of him, caught between whether to push me off or tear at the cord cutting off oxygen at his throat.

All of it happens so fast, no one ever had a chance to stop it, and even now, no one moves to intervene, an unsettled silence falling over the onlookers as they gape at us.

I'm nothing but a mask of calm. My eyes are as cold as the northern pines as I glare down at the writhing Kovari soldier, blowing an errant lock of hair out of my face. Unbothered by the shouts and growing commotion around me, I take my time, leaning down to growl softly into the ear of the struggling man at my mercy.

"Don't. Touch. Me."

The man freezes when the sharp edge of a dagger—his dagger—presses into his throat. I had swiped it from the sheath at his waist, holding the rope taut with his blade between my fingers.

Bright red blood dribbles at the faintest increase in pressure, turning the corners of my mouth up in dark pleasure as I realize I've answered my own question.

The rune can't stop me from hurting everyone.

Just *him*.

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CHAPTER 25

AYER

I stalk through camp with a scowl on my face, glaring at the younger soldiers, all of whom are craning their necks for a glimpse at the Sitari princess.

I knew there was an interest in our faerie prisoner, but this is ridiculous.

"Don't you have duties to attend to?" I bark at the nearest group. Stones, you'd think they'd never seen a faerie before.

Then again… most of them probably haven't.

The kingdoms are largely kept separate. It's rare for humans from Kovaria, even soldiers, to cross paths with fae unless they're stationed along one of the border villages—or unlucky enough to be caught up in one of their raids. And even then, the fae never seem to push past Calter Pass.

A shout breaks through the camp behind me. And unlike the ones I've heard hurled at the princess over the last few minutes, this one is a shout of alarm. A second shout gets my full attention, just in time to watch the princess bring down Lieutenant Serik like he's just a baby recruit, fresh off the turkey farm.

"*Twelve moons,*" I mutter under my breath, already moving. What did I say about keeping fae prisoners alive?

A crowd is already forming a thick circle around the pair, soldiers circling around my new pet and the lieutenant like vultures, waiting to see what she'll do next.

I shove through them, drawing out my own knife when I see the flash of steel in her hands. Where in the hells did she get that from? I track the blade's movement as she holds it at Serik's throat, just like she'd done to me last night.

I have to kill her. Right here. Right now.

It's an important lesson for the men. Fae will always act like fae. No matter how dainty they might look.

And all fae are monsters. Not an ounce of compassion in the lot of them.

I'm almost within reaching distance when I hear it: her voice, low and deliberate, just loud enough to where she thinks only Serik will hear.

"Don't. Touch. Me."

It's a warning; quiet, controlled, and utterly *deadly*.

I hesitate for a second, my eyes narrowing as I look between the two of them again.

The princess is already lowering the knife when I reach in, hooking an arm around her middle and hauling her off of Serik with ease.

She doesn't bother fighting me, though I feel the way her body goes rigid at my touch.

I release her as soon as she's clear of Serik, glaring at her before turning my attention to the sputtering lieutenant still on the ground, tearing the rope from his neck. His face is a bright shade of red, either anger or embarrassment flaming his cheeks.

The princess scowls up at me when I snatch the knife clean out of her hands. Noting that they remain bound, I realize she didn't even bother trying to cut herself free. Her green eyes are ablaze, defiance dancing in them.

"*Swords scorn, Theo,*" I mutter, resenting the prince and his godsdamn idiotic plan to keep her breathing.

"I thought you weren't going to be any trouble?" I growl through my teeth at the defiant little menace, holding her wrists up and taking care to check the ropes binding them thoroughly, tightening them despite her hissed protests.

This is on me.

Already, I underestimated her. What did I say to my men? Just this morning. Princess or not, even I seemed to forget fae are fae. And she'd just

gone and proven just how dangerous even a vapid, delicate, little princess can be.

I release her hands.

“I don’t recall making any promises,” she sneers, looking far too pleased with herself. I can’t mistake the challenge gleaming in her eyes. We’re going to have to be careful—*so bloody careful*—in the Wyldewood with this one in tow. It’s not too late to drug her and throw her body on the back of my horse like luggage.

My fingers tighten around the hilt of the knife I just took from her, resisting the overwhelming urge to bring it to her throat. Instead, I turn my back on the princess, fixing my attention on my lieutenant.

The seasoned soldier remains on the ground, carrying on with his dark promises—everything he wishes to do to the little faerie—at my back.

I take a step forward, clamping down hard on my temper, but that doesn’t stop me from releasing the knife. It twists through the air like a loosed arrow, burying itself in the dirt right between Serik’s legs—inches from his goods. The lieutenant’s face drains of color.

“Oi! Ayer! What gives?” Serik shouts while tugging at the hilt of his blade, attempting to wrench his knife free from the dirt.

“I thought,” I drawl, closing the distance between us, my eyes flickering briefly to the enraptured crowd of onlookers who all have the good sense to stay quiet—smart, “you might want your knife back.” There’s a dark edge to my voice, and the man pales even further.

I stalk closer until I’m crouching down beside him. Taking my time, I wrap my fingers around the hilt of the blade, easily yanking it free from the earth. His eyes track the blade in my hand, wariness in his gaze. He swallows hard when my eyes find his, but wisely, his mouth snaps shut.

Good. He’s learning.

I stare down at the blade in my hand before flipping it. Trying not to enjoy the way Serik flinches at the movement.

I’m well aware of the darkness he sees gleaming in my eyes when I hold it out to him, gripping it by its blade.

Serik hesitates, eyeing me nervously—as if suspecting a trap. Slowly, he reaches out and retrieves his knife without another word.

I rise back up to my feet, while he lets out a ragged breath of relief.

“Oh, and Serik?”

He chokes out, “Yes, sir?”

“She’s not *yours* to touch.” I cock my head to the side, my eyes narrowing.

Serik’s eyes go wide, flicking once between myself and the princess, then he gives a desperate nod of agreement before dropping his gaze from mine.

“Excellent.”

Turning on my heel, I glare sharply at a sheepish-looking Wyatt as I pass him, taking the princess’ rope with me as I go. I won’t make the mistake of handing her off again. Keeping a tight grip on the rope, it grows taut when I find its end. I give it a strong jerk, nearly taking the princess off her feet as I drag her after me.

“You better watch your back, Ayer, bedding that serpent,” a voice snickers from the crowd.

More than a few shouts of agreement ripple through our little audience.

Despite myself, I let the corners of my mouth tick up in a conspiratorial smile. “She’ll learn her place.” I stop short, turning back to face the princess, who nearly stumbles in an effort not to collide into me. I let my gaze drag over her slowly—deliberately. Allowing it to linger on the tears in her skirts, on the exposed skin underneath.

She notices, of course she does. Her bound hands rush to cover her thigh, gathering the fabric together; her eyes wide, sensing the danger in my gaze.

I look back toward the others. “Won’t be long before I have the Princess of Sitara where she belongs.” My lips curve slightly. “On her knees.”

Her reaction is immediate. Wariness turns to flame-fueled rage as she glowers up at me.

I give her a little wink. And to add insult to injury, I give the rope another sharp tug, turning forward again as laughter breaks out all around us. A few men clap me on the back as I pass.

The taste in my mouth is bitter. But she’ll think twice before she crosses me again.

“To the fall of the fae!” someone shouts.

The camp erupts again with the chant. I don’t look back as I drag the princess with me toward the edge of camp. I can feel her burning gaze of fury at my back—hot and *unrelenting*.

When we reach the horses, I run a quick check of the gear and tighten the cinch on my saddle. Dash tosses his head, eager to set off. His dark

mane falls into his eyes and he snorts, his eyes curious when he notices the little fae behind me for the first time.

Wanting to be away from this camp as soon as possible, I take the rope and secure it to the saddle before mounting.

“Don’t fall behind.” That’s the only warning I give before nudging Dash forward.

My men fall into formation around us, and together, we move out, one by one disappearing into the darkness of the forest. The raucous sound of the camp at our backs fades away behind us.

Nevertheless, I can’t shake the thought: bringing the Sitari princess with us is a mistake.

Because the little rose… has thorns.

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CHAPTER 26

ROWAN

We don't get very far, just far enough to be out of earshot of camp when Ayer suddenly brings up the reins—halting his horse. Sensing danger, I step back as he swings his leg off the large stallion, but the rope tethering me to him prevents any further retreat.

The rest of his company—about fifteen to twenty men—all have their eyes on me, patiently waiting for their captain.

Ayer stalks toward me, and I draw myself up, ready for anything.

"Give me your boots." He points at my feet as if he's ordering a servant about.

"*My* boots?" I raise a brow in surprise. "Why?" *Are we or are we not about to travel?*

"You attacked one of my men," he answers flatly, as if that's answer enough.

I glance around, taking in the stony expressions of the small command around us.

"This is a *punishment*?" I say slowly, looking back up at him. He's got to be joking.

"Aye." He nods once, folding his arms across his chest. "Your boots, Princess. Hand 'em over." He beckons me with two of his fingers, that infuriating smirk of his tugging at the corner of his mouth.

I search his face. There's *no way* I'm walking barefoot through this forest. It's already hard enough trying to keep up with his stallion with my

boots *on*.

His face is stone cold.

Light-cursed son of night… He's serious.

My fists tighten at my sides, and I lift my chin slightly higher, bracing myself before meeting his eyes.

"No." My voice is quiet, but firm.

I half expect him to come at me, but he remains where he stands, arms crossed, raising a single eyebrow.

"No?" It's a question, and his head tilts slightly to the side, like he's giving me a chance to change my answer with a warning in his eyes.

No. I'd cross my own arms were they not bound, so instead, I ball both of my hands into fists, digging my sharp nails into my palms to keep me from opening my mouth and getting me into even more trouble than I already am.

I raise my chin higher, looking past Ayer to the road ahead—at his men, still waiting on the two of us. There are a few polite enough to pretend like they're not paying attention, but a few others glance over, curiosity and amusement on their faces.

Ayer stares at me, releasing a low, slow breath before stepping closer, coming into my space, but I hold my ground—not that I could run, even if I wanted to, shackled as I am. I ignore the little voice in my head that screams *RUN* as Ayer draws closer still.

Doubling down, I roll my shoulders back and straighten my spine, refusing to shrink—to cower. If he thought I would make this easy for him, he's about to be disappointed.

"You must not have been paying attention earlier, Princess." His face sours at the use of my title like it leaves a foul taste in his mouth. "You don't get to say no. Not to me." His eyes darken as he stares down at me.

"You're mad."

"A possibility—" he muses.

"A certainty." The words escaped before I could rein them in, and I snap my mouth shut.

A muscle ticks in his jaw. He's too close now—mere inches from my face—but I refuse to look away. I refuse to give him anything more than he's already taken.

He leans in, and my entire body goes rigid at the feel of his breath on my ear, his words low, so only I can hear them. "I'll have those boots,

kitten. Either you hand them over, or I'll take them from you. The choice is yours."

Ayer steps back, granting me an extra inch of breathing room in which to make my decision.

Heat crawls up the back of my neck, my cheeks burning, and the tattoo—rune, whatever the bloody thing on my wrist is—flares hot, blocking the sudden, uncontrolled surge of magic stemming from the burst of rage I feel inside. I curl my fists so tightly that my nails bite sharply into my palms again.

I *don't* nod.

I don't *agree*.

But I *do* realize that I've lost this one.

Clenching my jaw so hard it might break, I slowly—with my head held high—kneel, making quick work of the laces.

Light, that's the worst part of it, I think. I'm practically kneeling at his feet while obeying him.

Acid turns my stomach.

Oh, he will pay for this. One way or another, *I will make him bleed.*

I rip the boots free, all while muttering a string of curses under my breath that would make the roughest sailor blush. I thrust them up and shove them hard into his gut.

Behind him, a few of the men exchange glances.

Ayer gives me a hard look. I would have thrown the boots at him if I didn't think he might just leave them behind entirely.

"Happy?" I snap when he still says nothing. My lip curls involuntarily, revealing the sharp points of my fangs.

"Yes," he says flatly.

Oh, I could smack him. My fingers twitch violently.

Without another word, he turns, dropping my boots into one of his saddlebags before mounting his horse once again. Ayer motions for his men to move out before urging the stallion forward. I don't follow, letting the rope jerk tight before dragging me forward by my wrists.

I stumble, catching myself before tripping entirely. My gaze drops to the muddy, rock-strewn road ahead—and my bare feet.

Fae feet are tough. But *this*—this is going to hurt.

I exhale sharply, falling into step behind Ayer's horse, the rope pulling me along. Being barefoot will make it nearly impossible for me to run

should an opportunity arise.

This is going to be a long day.

A very, very long day.

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CHAPTER 27

ROWAN

It goes exactly as I expected.

Brutal.

I fall.

A *lot.*

Ayer keeps us moving until long after dusk bleeds into the trees.

At first, knowing we're traveling through the Wyldewood on the cusp of night has me on edge. I jump at every sound, tripping often because of the way I'm constantly scanning the surrounding forest.

The way we keep on, I'm almost certain we'll just keep trekking on through the night until I've gone and collapsed for good. Until the last whispers of daylight finally fade away, and a shout rises from the front of the line. A call to halt.

Finally.

Ayer's horse slows before coming to a stop in a small clearing just off the road.

Relief nearly drops me where I stand. It's all I can do to remain on my feet and not crumple to the ground, my legs trembling under me. My bare feet are throbbing—bleeding from several cuts from rocks, sticks, and the occasional stray thorn. The bottoms are black with dirt or blood; I can't be sure, but it's probably both.

When I catch Ayer looking my way, I'm not sure where I find the strength, but I meet his gaze with an icy glare.

His unreadable, stony expression doesn’t waver. I can’t tell if he’s drawing amusement from my prolonged torture, or if just my mere existence is grating on him.

All day, I’ve counted the hours, minutes, seconds—praying for night to come. For rest. But now that we’re here, a sharp prick of fear sets up a fresh wave of anxiety—at what might come next. Ayer’s words from earlier now play on a loop in my head. The promise he made back at the war camp—the one about putting me on my knees.

He can try.

I don’t acknowledge the truth: if it really came down to it, I could put up a strong fight, but Ayer is a mass of hardened warrior, with nearly a foot on me, built and trained for battle and war—I won’t win. Men don’t become captains as young as he is for no reason.

If he wants something from me... he’ll take it.

And with this stars-cursed rune on my wrist, I won’t be able to stop him.

A chill runs up my spine and I shiver, monitoring Ayer as he cares for his horse.

I’m as far from him as the rope allows, standing awkwardly, unsure what to do with myself while the rest of the men are hard at work around us, setting up camp.

Ayer finishes putting up his horse, not bothering to look my way again before going to join a few of the others gathering wood. He shakes his head at something they ask him.

The moment his eyes are off me, I move.

A few insistent steps, and the nearest tree has my weight as I lean hard against it, sliding down to sit at its roots. It’s the same one Ayer tied his stallion to—the horse whose rear I have become well acquainted with along the journey.

I curl in on myself, pulling my knees to my chest. It’s cold and I’m freezing, unable to hold warmth with my bare feet against the icy dirt.

I fight the urge to bury my face in my arms atop my legs, despite my firm resolve. I also fight a war with tears as I lose another battle with exhaustion. I distract myself by inspecting the rough condition of my feet, unable to do much for them aside from picking out any stray pricks of wood or thorns.

A soft nicker sounds above me.

I freeze.

Right. I'm sitting at the feet of a war beast.

Slowly, my gaze lifts.

The stallion above watches me, curious but calm. Not afraid of the little fae at his feet.

Gods, he's beautiful—stunning, truly. I've always loved horses, though I've never been permitted to ride one. *What do you need to ride a horse for if you're forbidden from venturing past the castle walls?* And this horse is breathtaking. His coat is as black as night, feathery around his hooves and ears, shining in the moonlight slipping through the trees. Unlike my father's horses, whose manes are usually cropped short, his silken mane has been left to grow wild, but is still free of any tangles or burrs. Ayer, it appears, at least takes good care of his horse.

A lock of that silken mane falls down over his forehead, giving him a rough, untamed look. On a battlefield, he must be terrifying: broad chest, powerful, with deep lines of muscle rippling under his skin.

Cautiously, I raise a palm, reaching for his nose but pause halfway, leaving my hand midair when I notice him tracking the movement. So I stop, holding it there, letting him decide whether or not to close the gap.

He watches me, and I can see the whites of his eyes as he paws at the earth before throwing his head up in a sharp toss, pulling away from me, suspicion winning out over curiosity.

A small smile tugs at the corner of my lips, and I concede, lowering my hand. "Smart horse."

Sighing, I go back to assessing the day's battle scars; besides the atrocious state of my feet, there are cuts and bruises all up and down my legs, and both of my knees are bleeding—skinned from the many, many times I tripped and fell. Worse than falling was that each time I tripped or lost my footing, I was dragged several feet before Ayer noticed. Each time, he reined in his horse just long enough for me to get my feet back under me before starting forward again.

I suppose I should be at least a little grateful. A tiny, minuscule, itty-bitty bit.

He could have just dragged me the entire way.

But every time I fell, I learned. As the day wore on, I kept as close the rear of the horse as I dared, keeping hold of the extra slack of rope in my hands so as not to trip on it. Once I fell, if I recovered quickly enough, I

could be back on my feet before the slack in the rope caught and dragged me forward.

The extra slack also gave me precious seconds to pick around tricky roots or rocks along the path.

But inevitably, as the hours passed and the day stretched on into evening, the exhaustion weighed heavier on me. And the more tired I became, the more I hit the ground.

I kept my focus on Rusic's back, making silent promises.

The first chance I get, I'll make him pay.

I just have to find a way around the cursed rune burned into my wrist. Sitting here in the quiet, I can feel it pulsing faintly—mocking me. The dark ink is a constant reminder of how helpless I am. Whatever Ayer chooses to do to me, I won't be able to fight back, not against him. And no matter how hard I try to reach down inside myself and drag my magic up, the rune absorbs it, and I swear the ink itself almost grows darker the more I pepper it with power. Not that magic ever really was an option anyway—it's not like I know what to do with it even if I could access it, but it's frustrating all the same.

I sigh, giving up and turning my attention back to the makeshift camp the men have thrown together. While my battle with the road took up most of my time today, I'm still trying to pay attention to the men—what they do, what they say. Maybe I can learn something.

There are just short of twenty of them, and they all wear black leather armour, like their captain. A mix of ages—young and old.

So far, all I know is that we're headed southeast. Closer to Daekhar but also—I sit up a little straighter, feeling a light spark to life inside me—toward Skye.

Toward Kane.

For the first time today, the heaviness lifts, my spirits rising at the thought of my fiancé.

If I can escape… If I can make it across the border…

Maybe this isn't over.

Maybe I haven't lost yet.

I redirect my attention back to the men. If I'm going to escape, I need to look for patterns—routines. Anything I can take advantage of. Most of the men take turns riding ahead, scouting. But Wyatt and Hayes stay close to Ayer. And another man, Marz, brings up our rear.

Ayer rides with a bow slung across his back, over a large sword. He moves as if he were born to command—easy, confident, cocky. I narrow my eyes at the captain, silently glowering at him while he touches base with each of his men.

They respect him. It's obvious. And they all ride as if the forest holds no danger, like the Wyldewood isn't watching us—even now.

But I feel it.

Trying to stay on my feet proved to be a welcome distraction from the forest, but as darkness settles over me, that familiar fear creeps back in. As does an overwhelming feeling of being watched.

I do my best to shake it off, telling myself there's nothing I can do about it, and turn my attention back to my wounds—to my wrists. They are on fire, burning from the ropes constantly chafing against my skin. I fiddle awkwardly with the tightly wound ropes, attempting to loosen them, but there's almost no give at all, even after all day of being dragged around this way and that, they're still as tight as ever. I try shifting them a fraction higher up my arm, to give the raw skin underneath just a little relief, but they don't budge.

I blow out a pained breath at having made things worse in my efforts, and then rest them gingerly atop my knees before tilting the back of my head against the tree and closing my eyes.

I sit like that for a while. I sense the men's eyes on me, checking to be sure I'm still where they've left me while they eat and soak in the warmth of the fire they'd built.

The chill of night cuts deeper as the air turns colder. My clothes are still damp from the mud and river crossings. My stomach growls loudly, and I pull my arms tighter around myself.

While I thought the day would never end, now I worry about the night.

But as deeply uncomfortable as I am, sleep still beckons, exhaustion winning out and nearly taking me under right before I catch a whiff of Ayer's scent. It's mixed with all the other scents of the day: leather, horse, forest, and sweat, but underneath it all is a faint musk of ash and cedar I can attribute only to him.

My eyes snap open. My stomach roils with rising anxiety.

Ayer reaches his horse, swiftly untying my rope from the saddle before giving it a sharp jerk.

Pain lances through the raw skin of my wrists from the pressure, and I hiss softly, giving him my best withering glare while refusing to move an inch.

The rope tugs again; he's clearly summoning me over, but I'm not some dog to be called. I don't move, practically rooting myself into the tree at my back, staring defiantly up into Ayer's dark eyes.

To my astonishment, the rope slackens. The captain steps closer, peering down at me like I'm nothing more than a cockroach in the mud. One he wishes he could crush with a stomp of his boot.

"You can come on your own, or you will be brought."

My frown deepens, and I glare at him—a challenge in my eyes, tempted to be as much work as possible—but he just shrugs.

"Your choice, Princess."

With the end of my rope in his hand, he leans casually against a nearby tree, arms crossed, waiting. Though there's nothing casual about it—*about him*. He might play it off well enough, but the man exudes power, discipline, and if anything, he reminds me of a big cat, tensed up and waiting for an opportunity to attack.

I narrow my eyes.

I absolutely do not want to comply. But the thought of being thrown over his shoulder and carried like a petulant faeling does little for my wounded pride at the same time.

Taking a few more seconds to study him, I sigh, rising slowly and taking my sweet time, wondering just how far he'll let me push him.

The twitch of irritation I catch on his face before it's quickly masked gives me the smallest hint of satisfaction for being the reason behind it.

But my amusement is short-lived when, despite following his directions, he reaches for me anyway. And maybe it's my utter exhaustion fueling hysteria, but his approaching gaze causes something inside me to snap.

Panic—sudden and violent—surges, and I *lose it.*

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CHAPTER 28

AYER

"Will you keep still?" Impatience breaks through my cold facade as the princess flinches away from me, utter panic in her eyes as she once again evades my hand.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I growl. The words come out harsher than intended, sounding far more like a threat than reassurance. I curse under my breath, my frustration with her, with Theo, and this situation only growing.

She freezes. Fear dances in her eyes, and gods, she's looking at me like I'm one word away from breaking her where she stands.

"But you said…" she starts, her voice wavering slightly before she looks away, for the first time unable to meet my eyes.

I drag a hand down my face, releasing a deep sigh of annoyance—or maybe exhaustion. "I know what I said, but just—just keep still. Alright?" I make an effort to soften my voice, unsuccessfully, by the way she just stares back at me. Indecision and distrust are written all over her face.

Well, Princess, the feeling is mutual.

This morning wasn't only a good lesson for my men, but for me as well.

Her mere presence has caught me so off guard that I hadn't considered how little I know about the princess—and what she's capable of. She's not the heir, so any power she might have would be minimal. A non-threat.

Her brothers—I know everything about them. I studied them for years; mainly Fel, but Riven too. Especially considering he is just about to take

command of a contingent of Sitara's forces.

Yet their sister?

Nothing.

Not even her name.

Staring down into forest green eyes, I can't quite seem to recall it—it's possible I never knew it at all—her brothers were my priority. When studying the fae, I was only interested in learning how to defeat them in battle.

How to make them bleed.

I knew she existed, of course, and there were always rumors and gossip circling about the pretty and poised Rose Princess. They said she was everything a rose should be: delicate and demure.

Though, *delicate and demure* don't quite describe the scene I witnessed this morning—with Serik. She's a rose alright… *a rose with thorns.*

Overlooking her during my studies might have been a dangerous mistake.

I make a mental note to speak with Hayes later. He conducted extensive research on the fae kingdoms' history and royal lineages. He might know her name, and if I'm lucky, maybe more.

Theo certainly knows her name, but I hadn't bothered to ask him for it before we set out. And the way she's glaring at me right now, I doubt she'd give it to me if I asked.

Once again, I curse Theo for saddling me with this… distraction.

On my third attempt, I catch her.

I move quickly, my hand whipping out, capturing her bound wrists before she can jerk away. I grip them tightly, easily fending off her attempts to tug them free while I loosen the knots.

Realizing what I'm doing, she finally relents, pausing to watch my every move. Her breaths come fast, while her entire body stays rigid, leaning away from me.

The rope falls away once the last knot is undone, revealing the princess' raw and bloody wrists. She's made it so much worse for herself by constantly fighting against them—trying to slip free.

I loosen my grip, turning her wrists in my hands, inspecting the damage. But she's had enough. With the restraints gone, the princess takes advantage of my loosened grip, ripping her hands away lightning-fast, all while taking a couple of hesitant steps back for good measure.

I allow it.

“Run, and I will hunt you to the ends of the realm.” Shadows creep into my eyes as my gaze darkens. I let that settle, let her feel the weight of the threat in my words. “You might outrun my men, but you will never outrun me. So don’t even think about it.”

I eye her, making sure she’s fucking listening for once. We don’t need a repeat of last night. Gods, she looks like hell. Dirt and dried blood are smeared across her pretty face. There are new tears in her dress, leaving her legs exposed, both of her knees scraped and bleeding from various falls she’d taken before she learned to keep enough slack in the line attached to Dash.

Every time she fell, Dash dragged her several feet before I could pull him up.

I grit my teeth at the state of her. Whether I like it or not, she’s my responsibility, and Theo, for whatever the fuck reason, wants her alive and breathing. And the last thing I want to do is have to throw her over my horse for the rest of the journey.

I give her one more hard look before leaving her there, going to grab the saddlebags I left sitting by the fire. I scoop them up, slinging one over my shoulder before heading back her way.

She’s still standing where I left her, rigid and rubbing at her wrists. So she *can* listen. However, her eyes dart around the small clearing nervously, as if searching for the best means of escape.

She hasn’t tried to run. *Yet.*

“Over there.” I point toward a collection of fallen trees at the center of the clearing. Closer to my men, but still far enough away from the tree line that she can’t just slip away into the forest.

The princess doesn’t move, glancing uncertainly between the logs and me.

“Go,” I order. The words come out like a snarl.

Testing my ever-loving patience, she still hesitates, weighing her options.

Ultimately, she appears to decide it’s not worth the fight and finally moves, taking her time and stalking over to the logs. She tosses her hair over her shoulder like she wasn’t just dragged, against her will, behind a horse for half the day.

Gods, help me. My fists tighten around the saddlebag straps as I resist the urge to grab her by the throat.

Frowning at the moss-covered log, she sits. I sit down next to her. Noticing my proximity, she nearly falls off the log, scrambling like a maniac—trying to get away from me.

I sniff to disguise my chuckle and pull out my knife, then turn my attention to the saddlebag I carried over, feeling her body tense at the sight of the blade. I spin it once in my hand, relishing her discomfort before pulling out an apple.

She shivers so hard, I can feel the sharp vibration through the log beneath us. A cold front has moved in with the night air. And even if her clothes weren't torn, she's not dressed for it. Not even close.

Using my knife, I slice through the fruit in my hand, eating slices of the apple quietly, feeling the weight of her gaze as I do. She doesn't say anything, and neither do I, and the silence sits heavily between us. Once finished, I pocket the knife, turning to toss the apple core into the woods before rising and turning to head back over to the rest of my men without another word to her.

I'd taken about two steps when—

"Wait."

I stop and turn back to look at her.

She looks just about as surprised as I feel at the sound of her voice.

It's hoarse, threaded with fatigue, the volume of it just above that of a whisper. She swallows hard, as if the words cost her something—pride, maybe.

"Do you have any water?" She forces herself to meet my eyes, while hating every second.

Good. She's breaking down for me.

Even though her green eyes burn with all the words she's not saying.

It pisses me off. *She* pisses me off.

I reach down, unhooking the water pouch from my belt.

I unscrew it and start drinking. Slowly. Never once breaking eye contact. Her gaze tracks every little movement.

When I'm finished, I replace the cap, hook it back to my belt, then let it drop against my hip and watch her face fall with it.

Her gaze lifts to mine again.

"What's your name?" I ask.

There are a hundred questions I could ask her. Information I need… information I could force out—take against her will—if I apply just the right kind of incentives. But right now, all I want is her name.

She looks away. I'm sure she's recognized the game already; she's more clever than she looks.

Water for *answers*.

Food for *information*.

Survival for *compliance*.

But as much as she wants the water, she is not quite sure if she's desperate enough to play.

Yet.

She doesn't answer, and so I move down my list: "Where are your brothers?"

Her jaw tightens, and there's a flash of something in her eyes. Anger maybe? Fire, for sure; I bet my rune is already burning her wrist as she silently plots my murder.

"Where did the rest of your court go?" I continue, tilting my head to the side as I study her reaction to each one of my questions.

She says nothing, her jaw locking stubbornly.

I let the silence stretch between us, with her refusing to meet my gaze again, preferring to stare deep into the dark forest instead.

Her silence is an answer for us both.

She'd rather die of thirst than answer me.

Stubborn. So godsdamned stubborn.

I sigh. The Wyldewood is no walk in the moonlight. Our journey over the next few days will be tough, going over some very rough terrain. And I'll consider us lucky if the terrain is the biggest threat we'll face in these woods.

I stare at her for a few more seconds before pulling out a small wrapping of bread and cheese, holding it out to her.

Her eyes snap up, eyeing the small parcel of food in my hand. She doesn't take it, suspicion replacing surprise.

So stubborn.

"If I wanted you dead," I mutter, "I wouldn't do it with bread and cheese."

She narrows her eyes, but still refuses to come any closer.

My patience thins. Roughly, I unwrap the parchment, rip off a small bite of cheese, and place it in my mouth, chewing pointedly before I swallow.

Nothing happens. *Obviously.*

Yet she still doesn't take the food.

I'm too tired for this. I take a step forward, considering just shoving it into her hands, but she steps back—fast. Careful to keep the distance between us, opting for an extra foot this time.

Working my jaw, I freeze, before leaning down to place the bread and cheese on the log just next to me. Then I unhook the water satchel at my belt—the one she just watched me drink from—leaving that behind too.

I don't wait to see what she does.

Eat it… Starve… I don't care.

My jaw clenches tight along with my fists at my side as I stalk irritably away from the princess. I spot Wyatt watching from the edge of the clearing. He gives me a nod when he notices my gaze.

The first watch is his.

We'll rotate.

I meant what I said before; I trust my men with my life, but not with hers. Hatred for the fae runs too deep. And hatred leads to poor decisions. Most of my guys have stories just like mine: lost everything to the fae—to Sitara—and only my loyalty to Theo keeps me from wringing my hands around the little princess' neck.

Theo, Hayes, and Wyatt.

That's it.

The only ones I'd bet her life on.

I drop down beside Hayes next to the fire, taking the bottle of whiskey right out of his hand before helping myself to a long drink, determined to put the spoiled faerie princess out of my head.

Still…

It's not long until my gaze drifts.

Again.

And *again*.

The corner of my mouth ticks up into a satisfied smile when I spy her, curled in on herself for warmth, but taking a small bite of the bread I left behind.

At least she's not dumb enough to starve.

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CHAPTER 29

ROWAN

I wake with a jolt.

The cold ground is rough against my cheek.

I'm not sure when I fell asleep, or exactly how long I was out, but by the looks of camp, it's the middle of the night.

Ayer's men lay spread out around the fire, still asleep.

It's so quiet.

Not sure what woke me… I palm the ground, pushing myself up slowly, and every joint in my body rebels against the movement.

The only sounds I hear are the soft crackles of the dying fire, now just a faint orange glow in the center of the camp.

But something… is *off*.

Goosebumps prickle the skin on my arms and the back of my neck. I can't quite put my finger on it, but… something isn't right.

I scan the trees. As dense with foliage as they are, anything could be lurking out there—watching.

I shift slightly to get a look at the other side of the clearing, startling slightly at the sight of him.

Ayer sits on a log a few feet away from me, quietly carving a block of wood with his knife. He's replaced Wyatt on watch, but hasn't noticed me yet. Or well, hasn't let on if he has.

Even with the captain's eyes off me, I have an overwhelming feeling he's aware of every move I make.

The thought of him watching me while I slept sends a chill down the length of my spine. The wave of cold spreading through me highlights every inch of abuse my body has endured over the last couple of days. Pain. Everywhere. Just a general soreness that echoes through every limb and joint, stiff from the long day of travel and only made worse by sleeping on the hard ground. The chill in the air and lack of warmth haven't helped either.

But as much as it hurts, I'm certain the pain isn't what woke me.

I shift, trying to sit up straighter, and even that little movement feels too loud in the silence. The quiet surrounding us almost feels oppressive; heavy and thick, as if it's pressing in around us.

My heart quickens, and my head jerks back toward the woods, scanning the dark trees again.

The movement draws Ayer's attention, and I see his hand tighten on the little carving blade in his hand. He doesn't move or reach for a weapon, but he's watching me now, his eyes narrowing with suspicion.

But I don't think we have time for the game.

Our eyes meet, but I don't dare speak. Instead, I mouth the words: *Too quiet.*

The man just stares blankly at me. All the while, the forest seems to close in around us. Not a breath of wind, no rustle in the trees, no insects. It feels unnatural… it feels… *dangerous*.

For a horrifying second, I think he doesn't understand—doesn't sense it, or can't feel it—but then, something shifts in his gaze and his eyes turn toward the trees.

Tension spreads through his shoulders.

He feels it too.

One man sleeping by the fire stirs in his sleep, grumbling nonsensically before dragging himself to his feet. Still half-asleep, he stumbles beyond the edge of the clearing, disappearing into the woods.

Alarmed, I look between Ayer and the spot where I last saw the man, and in the silence, the trickle of liquid that follows is nearly deafening. My cheeks heat, while a smirk crosses the bastard captain's face, taking with it some of the tension from his shoulders, as if he's dismissed the threat.

My mouth tightens.

A moment later, that same soldier stumbles back out of the darkness, more awake than he was before, but when he looks toward Ayer, as if to

greet his captain, he stills; only his eyes continue travelling north as his face goes pale.

Looking higher and higher, not at me, not at Ayer, but at something right behind us.

I don't have time to turn before the roar slices through the night.

Ayer jumps to his feet, sword already in hand. The rest of his company awakens with a start as the monster—or whatever it is—releases yet another earth-shattering roar.

Gnarled branches or vines whip out over my head, wrapping around the nearest soldier, who only stares numbly back in horror before the vines rip him off his feet.

I scream, falling back, diving quickly to avoid being hit as the man's body flies over me.

More vines lash out, slamming into men, taking out soldiers left and right.

Ayer ducks an incoming blow from a thicker branch by dropping hard to his stomach.

I scramble backward, taking cover behind one of the fallen logs. Only then do I look up. Just in time to see a tree emerging from the woods.

No—not a tree.

It only *looks* like a tree.

The creature steps out into the clearing, its body a twisted mass of wood and vines. Its gnarled limbs whip furiously about as the monster roars, tearing apart the camp and men alike with a fury unlike I've ever seen before.

And its eyes— *Moons*, its eyes. Hollow and glowing with an otherworldly light.

I gasp at the sight.

A scream sounds, and I tear my gaze away from the monster's face. The scream came from the soldier in the tree creature's grasp. Vines coil tightly around the man's body as he continues to scream, begging for someone—anyone—to save him as the creature chokes the life out of him, thwarting any and all attempts by his friends to rescue him.

Arrows fly.

The men attack with swords, having some success splintering away pieces of bark from its body, though it doesn't appear to deter the assault.

The creature roars with rage, stepping forward.

I duck down, covering my head as it takes a massive step over me, while sweeping a thick limb out, tossing the soldiers who'd struck it.

The scene playing out before my eyes is chaotic and intense.

Some soldiers defend against the creature's blows with their shields, while others dodge, just narrowly escaping being crushed. Other soldiers, however, get ripped off their feet when vines wrap tightly around their ankles before dragging them screaming into the darkness of the trees.

The creature picks up another man, throwing him hard against a nearby tree. His screams cut off with a sickening crunch.

I can't breathe. I can't think as I watch the terror play out.

I lost track of Ayer in the melee, so I search for him now, and find him running for the campfire.

The flames are nearly extinguished now by flying dirt and bodies, but he rips off his shirt, fanning the dying embers furiously to get it back going. Flames flicker up, and he wastes no time lighting one torch and then another, handing one to Wyatt. The two of them exchange a look before both running toward the monster.

The creature pauses, the flames from Ayer's torch reflecting in those hollow black eyes. It swings—hard—and I choke on a gasp as Ayer meets the blow with his sword. The impact sends him flying back, and he blocks another attack with a quick parry of his blade, while using his other hand to thrust his small torch underneath the creature's thorny limb.

The fire catches.

Wyatt has more success, lighting up another couple of the monster's smaller branches and a vine that the creature immediately reels back. The vine flails wildly as the creature screams, attempting to snuff out the spreading flames.

Seeing Ayer's strategy, more torches are lit and the men work together, some blocking blows with swords, or peppering those disturbing eyes with arrows. The soldiers with torches rush forward, pressing flames into the bark and the roots as they fight their way closer into the writhing mass of the creature's body.

The fire spreads quickly, and the creature releases another pained scream. A horrible, anguished sound before it convulses, lashing out violently in its final moments as the flames completely consume it. And with one last thunderous roar, it collapses to the ground, the impact causing the land to tremble beneath my fingers.

The flames take it now, and the eerie glow of its hollow eyes slowly fades into darkness. The vines and branches that had sown terror just moments before now lay unmoving, scattered haphazardly across the little clearing.

Silence.

I stay where I am, my gaze fixed on the creature, heart pounding, taking in deep breaths while my body still trembles. My brain is still trying to process what in the twelve hells just happened.

The men approach it cautiously, ensuring it's truly dead before tending to the wounded.

Slowly, I push myself to my feet on shaky knees, my eyes scouring the dark woods surrounding us for any sign that more tree monsters might be out there.

A moan sounds out nearby, and my gaze drops to a man. The one the creature had in its grasp. He's moving—still alive. Instinct has me walking toward him before I can think twice. He's covered in blood. I can feel the healing magic trapped beneath my skin as if it has a mind of its own, and my fingers twitch.

I take one step. Then another. But I pull up just before I reach him when I meet his glare. He's barely on his feet before pushing a ruddy finger in my face.

"You!" he shouts, his expression hard.

I reel back as he staggers forward. I don't get far—my back slams into something hard and unyielding, and I let out a yelp of surprise, glancing over my shoulder only to recognize Ayer behind me, blocking my escape.

The wounded soldier staggers closer. "It's you. *You* did this."

My breath catches, and I shake my head quickly back and forth.

"Wh—what?" I can barely get the word out. *How could this possibly be my fault?*

The soldier's accusation has drawn the attention of the camp, and I feel more than see everyone's eyes on me. The monster might be dead, but by the looks of hatred all around me, the men just found a new one.

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CHAPTER 30

ROWAN

We move out at dawn.

I feel the men's suspicious glares as they ride past.

Seth—the man from last night—is still alive, though thoroughly battered and bruised. He leveled a death glare at me before riding ahead with the others. There's no suspicion in his gaze, only certainty.

In Seth's eyes, *I'm already guilty.*

Ayer said very little when Seth accused me of somehow summoning the tree monster. He himself didn't accuse me, but he didn't defend me either. The captain just took firm hold of my arm, silently dragged me over to his horse, bound my hands, and left me there, stalking away to address his men and assist with the wounded. Unfortunately, they were too far away for me to hear any of what they were saying, but from the glares and stares leveled my way, I have a few thoughts.

But I think I saw a flicker of regret when Ayer retied the ropes around my already abused wrists, though it was gone before I could work out if my mind was playing tricks on me or not.

Walking is worse today.

Ayer did not return my boots, so every step I take is agony; the forest road is unforgiving against my bare and torn-up feet.

I bite back the pain, distracting myself by taking extra care today to step around the bigger rocks and roots, and despite my injuries, I fall less today.

The company seems to be moving at a slightly slower pace than it did yesterday, due to several of the men being wounded. I also take notice of how they keep a more watchful eye on the thick forest surrounding us.

For better or for worse, the day passes by rather uneventfully. I'm careful to keep my head down, but I keep my eyes and ears open, hoping to catch even just a snippet of where we might be headed—and why. The men mostly ride in silence, continuing southeast along an infrequently traveled road, judging by the amount of overgrowth.

Two days and we haven't once passed another soul—human, fae, or otherwise.

Again we travel past sunset, and when the call finally comes to halt, I'm barely holding myself together—but I made it. And I'm not too proud this time to immediately collapse into the dirt; my legs had threatened to give way on their own if I had remained standing a minute longer.

Ayer takes care of his horse and once more asks me the same three questions:

What's your name?

Where are your brothers?

What happened to your court?

I don't answer, my lips pressed tight, and I don't look him in the eye. Choosing to stare indifferently out into the woods instead—the pain making me numb.

And once again, he doesn't make me.

When it's clear he'll get no answer, he stalks off, but not before dropping a small bundle of food and a full satchel of water on the ground where I can reach it.

Not for the first time, I wonder why he doesn't just torture the information out of me. While he's to blame for nearly all of my injuries—by neglect or some other means—in truth, he himself has barely laid a finger on me.

He needs me alive. Even though he wants me dead.

And he's at war with himself about it. That much I know.

And with the road as hard and as long as it is, he probably can't afford to beat the information out of me yet. Any more wounds and I won't be able to travel. The thought triggers a new wave of anxiety about what they might do to me once they reach their destination.

As much as I want to snub his offerings, I eat all the bread and cheese; there are even a few bites of dried meat today. My hands shake as I down the water, and my head feels light.

Too little food. Too little rest.

Lucky for me, the long day's travel has left me completely and utterly spent. I curl up at Dash's feet, still bound to the saddle when I fall asleep, dreaming of nothing. No pain, no hunger.

Nothing at all.



Morning, once again, comes too soon, and I wake up feeling wrong. There's an overwhelming feeling of emptiness—or detachment. I can see my body moving, but yet… I feel nothing. Like I'm disconnected from myself.

Hollow.

Sleep clings to me, heavy and hard to shake off. All I want to do is curl back up and sleep—maybe forever—but before long, I'm forced up, and we're off again.

Time blurs.

I've lost track of how many days it's been since Rosecliff fell. And worse—I don't care enough to try to work it out.

I fall a lot.

The terrain today feels rougher and more difficult than the days prior, and the lack of food, rest, and boots is catching up to me, leaving me ill-equipped.

I almost make it to sunset before my foot catches on a stray root and I go down hard on my knee. And this time, I don't get up. My jaw locks, waiting for the rope to pull taut, for Ayer's horse to drag me forward until I'm forced to move, but it doesn't happen.

Instead, the sound of boots hitting the ground comes from up ahead; those boots stalk back toward me before coming to a halt as he crouches down beside me.

"You're more stubborn than you look," Ayer sighs. His voice sounds almost tired.

He doesn’t say anything more before he stands and walks away, a sharp command cutting through the trees.

We’re stopping.

I look up for the first time, pulling myself out of the dirt when my eyes stop where Ayer had just been standing. There rests a familiar leather satchel and another small bundle of what I assume is bread and cheese. And they aren’t alone, because sitting beside the food and water is something else: my boots.



The overwhelming exhaustion plaguing me offers yet another blissfully dreamless sleep. Ayer also removed the ropes last night. And while still tired and sore, I start the day with my head just a little bit clearer.

The sun shines brightly today, and the surrounding air is warmer than it’s been the last few days. Or perhaps it’s my now protected feet, warm and snug inside the soft wool lining my leather boots.

The warmth of the wool on my feet makes me think of Maksa, and my chest tightens. If she were here, she would be curled at my feet, asleep and alive. *Stars*, I don’t even know if she made it out of Rosecliff. I wasn’t able to find her after the evacuation started and before the castle devolved into chaos. I don’t know if she’s—

I cut off the thought before it can finish, and thankfully, movement across the clearing pulls my attention away from the dark thoughts haunting me. Ayer leads Dash up from the nearby river, where he watered the horse, then he ties him up before going to retrieve his saddle.

Slowly, I rise to my feet, carefully. I’m still unbound, and I’d like to avoid being tackled by anyone thinking I’m making a run for it. Most of the men are up and busy, cooking up some last-minute breakfast or packing saddlebags.

I walk stiffly across the clearing, carefully making my way toward Ayer’s horse. The dark stallion nickers at my approach. I haven’t tried again to pet him since that first night in the woods, so I leave a few paces between us when I stop.

Standing still and breathing easy, I extend my palm, stopping a few inches away from actually touching him.

Dash tosses his head. His long, shiny mane flies out, getting swept up in the warm breeze that rustles the leaves of the trees above us this morning. He shifts on his feet and I pull my hand back, looking away to hide the brief flash of disappointment I know is shining in my eyes.

Not a moment later, soft velvet brushes against my fingertips, and I look up in surprise at the formidable war horse as his nose meets my palm.

I let my hand rest there, awestruck, his breath soft and warm against my skin. Dash lets out a deep, winded breath, his eyes closing sleepily. My lips curl up into a small smile, and for a moment, everything else fades into the background. I savor the brief moment of peace to start the day, my fingers curling slightly, giving his nose a little scratch.

The stallion's ears swivel, and just as soon as it began, our brief moment is over. Dash's nose slips from my grasp as he swings his head up, pawing at the earth below while releasing a snort.

I *feel* him before I see him. And when I do look up, Ayer's gaze is fixed on me. In it, I find nothing but a cold warning.

My hand drops, and I quickly take a step back, shying away from the horse and skirting around him until I find myself at his rear. My eyes drop to the ground as I wait—like I have every morning—for the rope. To be tied like cattle to the horse once again.

I steal a peek, watching Ayer throw the saddle over Dash's back. His men mount their horses around us, preparing to leave. When my gaze finds his again, I notice he's already watching me—an unreadable expression on his face.

Instinctively, I narrow my eyes, staring up at him defiantly, awake enough now to fend off any of his questions. He pauses, weighing something in his eyes before turning his attention back to Dash and swinging himself up and into the saddle.

The only one eager for the day to start, Dash prances lightly in place.

I stand there awkwardly, not quite sure what to do.

Did he forget?

I glance around, looking to see if someone else—Wyatt or Hayes, maybe—is on his way to tie me to the horse, but everyone else is already mounted. My eyes slide back to Ayer's.

"Don't fall behind."

That’s all he says before giving Dash his head, moving out with the others, nodding to Wyatt who circles his gray mare back behind me once I finally start walking. Shock and confusion are written all over my face.

I rub my sore wrists absently, thankful for what might be a brief respite from the cutting ropes.

Sunshine sifts through the treetops, warming my cheek, and the boots on my feet make a world of difference despite the difficult terrain.

Before long, I smile.

They’re letting down their guard.

All I need now… is an *opportunity.*

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CHAPTER 31

ROWAN

Without having to keep my mind on avoiding tree roots and uneven terrain, I'm able to think—*able to plan.*

I behave. I don't want to give Ayer any reason to doubt the little freedom he's offered. If he and his men stop thinking of me as a threat, they might just forget for a moment to watch me at all. I keep a steady pace behind Dash, giving his rider no reason to tie me back to the saddle.

We stop briefly at a small, clear pond. The men allow their horses a drink and seize the opportunity to refill water satchels.

The woods thin shortly thereafter. The rough path we're on intersects with a road—a real road. And we just as soon start down the new road when a village appears in the distance.

A village.

Ayer tenses, the company as a whole preparing for anything as we approach. Men draw their swords, with a few near the rear nocking an arrow for good measure as we proceed slowly toward the entrance to the village.

My heart sinks as we draw closer. There are no scouts watching the road—the village is unaware of the fast-approaching danger. There are many villages in Sitara, but small ones like this aren't likely to be super loyal to the crown, especially this close to the Daekhar border. Wild fae clans have spread their poison and propaganda far and wide.

I keep my head down as we pass through the village gate, careful to stay close to the horses.

These Kovari soldiers likely hold villager loyalty in Sitara, though whether Ayer's men know this remains uncertain. We still haven't seen a single villager yet, and I'm on edge, bracing myself for what I might see—what the Kovari soldiers might do.

But it's empty.

It seems dinnertime approaches, yet the streets lie deserted. A few doors are left swinging in the day's light breeze. Like their inhabitants had left in a hurry.

That puts Ayer's men on higher alert. They proceed with caution, silently motioning hand signals I don't understand to each other while spreading out in small groups to check the dwellings nearby. Everyone's head is on a swivel—carefully keeping an eye on the tree line and the hills—preparing for a potential ambush.

Nobody talks, relying on hand signals and low whistles to communicate with one another. I'm struck once again by how in tune this group feels—how they work as one.

Ayer slows his horse, and I stick close to them. Now is not the time to go running off with this arrow-happy group of men. I'm practically at the horse's shoulder as we near the center of town.

Should an ambush occur, however...

My gaze drifts over the hollow streets and buildings. I can't help but wonder if perhaps word of the attack on Rosecliff has preceded us, along with news of the approaching contingent of Kovari soldiers.

That's when I see it: halfway down the road, just barely a few yards away, a flicker of movement. My breath catches, and without thinking, my head snaps in the direction of the movement. And sure enough, in one of the cottages nearby, behind a closed window, a curtain swings lightly back and forth.

My heart thunders in my chest, and I quickly avert my gaze, looking everywhere—anywhere else—like I've seen absolutely nothing.

Too late.

Ayer draws up his reins, and I feel his attention burning down atop my head.

Realizing what I've done, I carefully school my face into neutrality as the rest of the company halts around us, following the sound of a low

whistle coming from the captain. My pulse hammers in my throat when Ayer dismounts his horse, stepping up to me with all the subtlety of a grizzly bear.

Deciding to be bold and avert suspicion, I speak first, hoping to keep my voice steady despite my shaking hands.

“Why have we stopped?” I ask, keeping my face blank—innocent. *I saw nothing. I know nothing.*

Ayer stares down at me, wearing a thunderous expression on his face. “What did you see?”

I don’t dare even chance a glance in the direction of the window, working to keep my nerves in check as I shake my head, painting a mask of confusion on my face.

Ayer’s gaze hardens, his eyes darkening, an overwhelming aura of danger exuding from him. Fear shoots through me, snapping me out of the delirious haze I’ve been stuck in all day. It sharpens my senses like a blade on stone.

“What was *what*, Captain?” I ask, adopting my best bored tone, meeting his eyes while shifting impatiently on my hips as if this little pause is an inconvenience.

But Ayer is having none of it, and he steps closer still, shoving a finger in my face. I have to grit my teeth to resist the overwhelming urge to bite off the tip. “You saw something. Just now. Over there.” He thrusts his finger in the general direction of the window, though I refuse to look, choosing instead to maintain my already bored expression.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Ayer’s exasperated sigh devolves into a low growl before he turns, his gaze scanning the row of quiet houses ahead. With his eyes off me, I chance a quick look at the window, relieved to find the curtain still and in place.

“Where?” he asks again, his voice deep and laced with warning.

My throat tightens, but I say nothing. Loyal or not, I’m not about to be the reason someone in this village winds up dead.

He reaches behind his shoulder, unsheathing the mighty black blade he carries on his back. The onyx steel glitters in the fading light of the day.

“Nothing, huh? Well, why don’t we go investigate then, shall we?” He reaches out and grabs hold of my arm, hauling me forward several paces while I fight against him, digging my heels into the dirt, though it’s no use, and soon enough I’m facing the cottage. The one with the window.

I go rigid when Ayer’s attention falls on the little house. The rest of his men close in around us, weapons ready, dark intent in each and every one of their eyes.

I swallow hard and my eyes dart once again to the little window, but there’s still no movement. The curtain hangs still. I offer up silent prayers to the gods that I had only imagined it.

Not wasting any more time, Ayer stalks up to the door, banging his fist against it so loudly I flinch.

Nothing but silence answers him.

Ayer motions something with his fingers, and four of his men step forward, kicking in the door before I have a chance to blink, and all four disappear inside.

Screams and the sound of a terrified child fill the air, and I’m certain all the color drains from my face, my eyes slowly rising, finding Ayer’s.

He’s glaring at me. A muscle in his jaw tightens before he takes a step back, clearing the entryway before his men reemerge, dragging a woman out with them. She’s holding a small bundle of cloth clutched tightly to her chest, but her attention is behind her. Another soldier trails them out; this one holds a small, crying boy in his arms. He must be no older than four years.

The woman implores the man not to hurt him. Her eyes dart wildly at the sight of a small contingent of soldiers dressed in black armour outside her door, first searching for an escape before quickly surrendering to her fate after weighing the odds.

She’s already in rough shape. Dark circles ring her already red-rimmed eyes, the rest of her face pale and hollow. It doesn’t look like she’s bathed or even changed her clothes in days.

Ayer releases my arm, stepping forward to address the woman.

My magic swirls, brushing up against the rune, an overwhelming urge to protect the woman surging inside me. Ayer’s not gone a second before Wyatt replaces him at my side, though he keeps his hands to himself, meeting my eyes before turning his attention on his captain, his jaw tight.

Upon approach, Ayer sheathes his sword, though it does nothing to comfort the trembling woman. When he reaches her, he extends his hand slowly, carefully pushing the woman’s hair back to reveal her ears. Small and perfectly rounded.

A small, shaky exhale escapes me. *Human*. She's human. Relief floods through me.

A sharp cry sounds from the cloth the woman is holding in an iron grip to her chest. Her face pales even further, going as white as death when Ayer's attention drops to the small bundle. Another quiet cry reveals the tiny infant she tried to keep concealed.

Seeming to dismiss the woman as a threat, Ayer glances back at Hayes. "Search the remaining houses. Check for others." His eyes flick to me, just for a second, his face unreadable, before he turns his attention back to the woman.

"Are you alone?" he asks her, his voice gentler than I expect.

The woman looks as if she might answer before fear clamps her mouth shut and she bites her lip, though she gives him a quick nod in response.

Ayer scans the street—the other dwellings—as his men burst into the remaining cottages, though so far, none have turned up any other residents.

"Why are you here alone?"

She searches for her small child. He's still in the soldier's arms, no longer crying but hungrily biting into a strip of jerky the man must have given him. She clears her throat. "Yesterday, a rider delivered a warning." I'm assuming her screaming is what left her voice hoarse. She glances nervously up at Ayer before her eyes find the ground again. "He said Kovari soldiers were coming, and that Rosecliff had fallen." I stiffen at the mention. "The decision was made to evacuate, but Josi—" A sob slips free, her lip trembling. "She's been running a fever for days, refusing to eat." Her grip tightens on the baby as the fear in her eyes gives way to anguish. "She was too ill to journey, thus… we stayed behind."

"All by yourself?" Wyatt asks from beside me. His eyebrows lift in surprise.

The woman's gaze lifts to Wyatt's. "My husband— He stayed too. But when Josi got worse last night, he left to go find help."

Hayes returns, stopping to address his captain. "No one else here, sir."

Ayer nods. "You searched every house?"

"Yes, sir. And the barns and the inn too."

Ayer nods again, looking contemplative before giving his next order. "Check the tree line, and send Kent over."

Hayes nods sharply, then disappears back through the village. A few minutes later, an older man appears.

“This woman’s baby is ill,” Ayer explains. “Could you have a look at her?”

He introduces Kent to the woman as their medic, and while still wary, she gives Ayer a grateful nod before nearly thrusting baby Josi into Kent’s arms.

Kent asks the woman—Nadia, we learn—several questions. Her nervous fearfulness quickly segues into desperate hope; her voice shakes with every answer she gives.

I hang back, on my best behavior, watching the exchange silently. My eyes are on baby Josi. Wyatt lingers nearby. His stance is far more relaxed now that the perceived threat is under control.

But human or not, I’m still nervous for the little family. I don’t trust for one second that Ayer—or his men—won’t harm them.

After several minutes, Kent completes his examination, but the grim expression on his face tells me everything I need to know. “I believe you’re already aware… it’s red fever.” He pauses, taking note of the mother’s trembling bottom lip before shaking his head. “I’m afraid there isn’t anything I can do.” He pauses again and takes a deep breath before leveling a look of pity upon the young mother. “There isn’t much time left.”

The woman releases a choked sob, tears spilling freely as she takes Josi back into her trembling arms, hugging her tightly.

Her little boy looks up at the sound of his mother’s cries, before starting to cry again himself, his eyes flicking fearfully between the soldiers.

Ayer speaks up, his voice soft. “I’ll arrange for a couple of my men to escort you back to our camp. You’ll be in safe hands. No harm will come to you; you have my word.”

I don’t believe him.

He turns to discuss something privately with Hayes. Wyatt inches over to join them, but their voices are too low for me to hear.

I glance around, finding myself suddenly unescorted with no one watching me.

Alone.

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CHAPTER 32

ROWAN

Keeping an eye on the conferring soldiers, I take a single tentative step toward the little family.

No one looks up.

No one stops me.

So I take another. And one more after that.

The young mother, Nadia, is quietly crying, sitting atop the stone wall just outside their home—both of her children in her arms. Her grip on them is tight, as if she alone can stop anything bad from happening to them.

My heart constricts at the sight.

One silent step after another and I'm nearly within arm's reach of them.

The voices behind me cut off.

Damn it!

And suddenly Ayer is there, right in front of me, blocking my view of the family. His face in mine, dark eyes promising violence—he's furious. More furious than I've ever seen him.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Behind him, the sobbing stops as the entirety of the street goes silent. I can feel everyone's eyes on me.

Unprepared for his anger, and seeing as how I'm just making this up as I go, my voice comes out in stutters as opposed to my usual cool indifference. "I—I just…" My eyes flick past his shoulder, at Nadia and her two children. Gods, I didn't think this through.

“You just *what?*” Ayer growls, and I feel the danger growing.

His hand clamps down on my wrist in a bruising grip, tightening—right over the abused skin.

Pain flares, and I can’t help but wince, though I don’t move, and I don’t make a sound, holding in my whimper and planting my feet to prevent him from dragging me off.

I inhale deeply, strengthening my resolve as I make my decision. “I—” My voice drops, softer now. “I thought I could help…” I avert my gaze, staring down at the ground, submissive to him for the first time. I need to help them. I’m not even sure I can, not with his stars-blasted rune on my wrist, but… I need him to at least let me try.

“Why?” he asks, and I try not to be insulted by the sheer look of surprise and suspicion in his eyes.

Why?

Revealing my gift or abilities to him is not an option. My brain races for an alternative, thinking quickly. “There are herbs.” My words tumble over each other as I rush them out. “A—A tonic I know.” Testing him, I inch slightly closer, toward the baby, allowing real desperation and urgency into my eyes. I can’t just stand by and let this baby die, not when there’s a possibility I could save her. “If I could just take a look—”

“No.” Ayer shakes his head, his voice firm, yanking me back harshly with the punishing grip he has on my wrist.

The raw skin under his hand feels as though he set it on fire, and I bite my lip, steeling myself against the pain while digging my heels in, fighting his hold, which only serves to worsen the burn.

“Please.” My voice breaks, my chest constricting painfully. If he doesn’t let me try…

I twist in his grip, my eyes darting to find the mother’s instead.

“Please!” I call to her as Ayer tries harder to wrestle me away. Manhandling me back and nearly taking me off my feet in his efforts. It takes all of my strength to fend him off, and true desperation carries through every word. “I think I can help! I just— I need to hold her. Examine her,” I correct. “Just for a moment. Please!”

The mother opens her mouth, uncertainty shining in her tear-filled eyes along with confusion at what’s happening. But Ayer cuts in.

“I said no.”

He hauls me back, succeeding in dragging me toward his horse this time, but I'm near frantic now. Ayer lets out a curse right before his arm wraps around my waist like a vise, and he hauls me up, kicking and crying.

"No, please!" I'm shouting now. "That baby will be dead in a day if we do nothing!"

Ayer drops me roughly back to my feet, spinning me around to face him. One arm still locked around me, he is absolutely fuming, while the other arm lifts.

Instinct takes over, and my mouth snaps shut. I throw up my hands, quickly turning my face away, bracing for the hit I know is coming.

Seconds pass.

And *nothing*.

The hit never comes.

Cautiously, I turn slowly back to face him, my hands still raised to block any incoming blows, peeking through half-lidded eyes.

He's just staring at me. His mouth turned down in a frown. His eyes are furious.

"No, wait— It's okay."

We both still. The soft voice turning both our heads.

Nadia stands a few feet away. Her eyes are on me when she nods solemnly, offering me the small bundle in her arms.

I hold my breath, my gaze sliding over to Ayer, waiting to see how he responds.

"If she thinks she can help, I don't see the harm in letting her have a look." Nadia's eyes flick between Ayer and me. "Please?"

A long stretch of silence follows before Ayer's eyes drop back to meet mine. I'm suddenly all too aware of how close we are—how tight his grip is on my waist.

Another beat passes before he releases me with a scowl, an ominous warning in his eyes as I slowly approach Nadia and the baby.

Distrust radiates from him, and I feel the sharp bite of his gaze on my cheek when I carefully take Josi from her mother, cradling her gently in my arms.

The captain is a wall of tension at my back, and I do my best to block him out, pretending I don't see the knife he's half drawn from his belt.

I focus on Josi. She's so, so little and oh, so pale. Her skin appears nearly translucent, except for her bright scarlet cheeks.

Red fever.

Kent was right about that. He was also right about there being nothing he could do. At present, there is no cure for red fever, but part of me wonders…

My throat tightens.

She’s so young, barely six months—if that. So new… so vulnerable.

Carefully, I unwrap a small section of her blanket while being mindful of the cool evening air. Just enough to allow me to rest my palm across Josi’s forehead.

Gods, she’s burning up.

Josi fusses weakly, and I rock her gently, my fingers now tracing lightly down her face while I start to hum. Nothing special—just an old lullaby from my memories. The baby coos softly, and a little sigh escapes her when I’m done. Her eyes flutter shut as she falls asleep in my arms.

A soft smile tugs at the corner of my lips.

Carefully, I wrap her back up and turn, placing her into her mother’s waiting arms.

Ayer draws closer, and I can feel his presence like a guillotine at my back.

I clear my throat. “The medic was correct. It is red fever.”

Nadia’s lips wobble again.

“But… there’s a tonic that can help,” I add quickly.

Everyone’s heads whip up.

“There’s no tonic for red fever,” Wyatt’s voice cuts in from somewhere behind us.

I ignore him.

“You’ll need milk thistle root—just a few snippings. Goat’s milk. Raw honey. And a pinch of cinnamon. I can give you the measurements. Let it warm for fifteen minutes to extract the root, and give it to her as soon as it’s cooled enough to drink. And once again in the morning, with one last dose tomorrow night.” I place my hand on the mother’s arm reassuringly. “She’s going to be okay.”

Nadia blinks away the tears that well up in her eyes. Hope flickers there. It’s reserved, uncertain, but it’s there.

“She’ll live,” I murmur quietly, looking Nadia in the eye. “But she needs that tonic now.”

I glance toward Ayer, suppressing a shiver at the dark cloud that descends upon his features. Despite what I already know he’s thinking, he doesn’t interrupt, but his increasingly icy glare sends a chill down my spine.

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CHAPTER 33

ROWAN

"We'll get to work on the ingredients," Wyatt says, giving me a sincere nod before he sets off, bringing Hayes with him.

"We'll camp here tonight," Ayer commands. "Kent, please escort Nadia and her children back into their home so they can get some rest."

Kent nods, shooting me a cold look of disdain before ushering the little family inside the cottage.

As soon as they're out of sight, Ayer takes off.

He hasn't issued me any orders, but I know I'm meant to follow. I scramble after him, nearly jogging to keep up with his long strides.

He doesn't say a word.

Not to me.

Not to anyone.

My stomach twists and I feel a slight burst of nausea as I work to keep up with him.

We stop next to a wooden tethering post near the center of town but still within sight of the cottage. I freeze when I see him pull out a familiar bundle of rope from his satchel.

The silence between us is palpable, and I don't move when he grabs hold of my wrists, winding the rope tightly around them. Tighter than necessary. I suck in a breath as the rough rope digs into the raw skin of my wrists, but other than that, I don't make a sound.

I can feel his fury, the way it writhes just beneath the surface; his silence is utterly deadly, and I have good enough sense to keep my mouth shut.

Anxiously, I search his face, looking for a sign of the price I'm about to pay for causing that fury, but he avoids my eyes. As soon as I'm secured, he steps away, checking the knot one last time before leaving me there. As he stalks back toward the cottage, even the shadows cast by the setting sun seem to gravitate toward him.

I watch him disappear into the cottage before I sink to the ground, my legs shaking from today's exertion. I'm not alone—Ayer's men still mill about the square, collecting supplies for the road and food they've found in the houses. It's nearly impossible to fight the overwhelming urge to sleep. My body aches and my head swims as dizziness takes over, exhaustion taking hold and dragging me down.

My eyes flutter shut. Just for a moment. Then I force them back open. I can't sleep. Not now. Not here.

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch sight of Wyatt returning and sit up a little straighter. I focus on him to keep the seductive draw of sleep at bay. He's carrying a basket—a basket I hope is full of the ingredients I instructed he gather to brew the tonic.

A few moments later, Ayer steps outside with Kent. I watch the latter scan the street, and when his eyes catch sight of me, something in his face snaps. Even in the dying light of day, I can see the rage burning there.

He storms toward me, coming fast. When he's within striking distance, he lifts his foot. My hands come up to protect my face, while my knees curl up. But Ayer catches up to him before his kick lands, hauling the sputtering medic back on one foot.

I lower my hands slowly, but I don't rise, not certain I even can.

"Kent," Ayer warns, his voice sounding tight—strained—for the first time since I've met him.

But Kent is near boiling now; his anger rebounds because he's unable to take it out on me physically. "She's a liar!" He shoots a finger in my face, and my eyes narrow.

I let my expression shift into something akin to boredom, pretending his words don't bother me.

"Look at her! She's enjoying this!" he spits, coming at me again while Ayer holds him back. "It's just a game to her," he curses, "giving that poor woman false hope!"

Kent wheels around to face Ayer. “There is no doubt that the baby is in the last stages of red fever. We all know there is no cure. And for a child that small—” He shakes his head, jaw tightening. “She never had a chance. She’ll never survive it. Least of all with some stones-cursed tonic made of milk and honey.” His eyes slide back to me, sharp and full of accusation.

“Of course not,” I agree, smiling sweetly. “You can’t forget the cinnamon.”

Kent lunges at me. “Why you—filthy faerie trash,” he lashes out.

But Ayer intervenes, and this time I catch his eye; he gives me a look sharp enough to snap my jaw shut.

“That baby will die. Tonight, most likely.” Kent shakes his head in either frustration or despair. His hair is mussed from repeatedly running his hands through it. “All this wretched creature did was add to that poor mother’s torture.” He turns his attention back on me. “How could you do something so cruel?”

I lean my head back against the pole, grateful for the support as my head spins, and the world and both men tilt along with it. I cock my head slightly to the side, offering Kent a slow, sly smile. “Who, me?” I murmur. “Never.” The last word comes out in a whisper.

Oh, I’ve gone and done it now.

Kent loses whatever control he had left, surging forward, but this time Ayer steps fully between us, physically blocking him from reaching me. He beckons two of the soldiers watching the exchange from across the road to assist him.

“C’mon, Kent, she’s not worth it,” one of them tries convincing the medic as they attempt to muscle him away.

I slump further down on the pole; another overwhelming wave of vertigo overtakes me, but I pass it off as disinterest, watching them go.

Then it’s just me and Ayer.

His gaze settles on me, and oh, if looks could kill…

A shot of adrenaline surges through me. Maybe this is it. He’s so close to the edge. I can practically feel the way he wants to wrap his fingers around my throat right now. Perhaps if I push just a little further… I won’t even have to beg him to do it.

Pretending to let my mask of indifference drop, I reveal exactly what Kent alleged I am: cold and cruel. A wicked smile curves up my face.

“Well, that was fun,” I half laugh. “Humans are so gullible.” I add a small, mocking wink for good measure. *Curse my soul to the moon.*

Ayer goes dangerously still, his fingers twitching for the sword at his belt before he tightens them into fists, fully at war with his self-control.

For a second, I think he might do it.

I stare up at him. A smug look on my face.

Do it.

Kill me.

You know you want to.

Do it now.

Before he finishes dragging me *light* knows where. Before he can use me. Before he can break me.

He won’t. I see the moment that light-cursed self-control of his wins. The shadows recede from his eyes, and the fury on his face goes cold. My heart drops when he moves his hands away from his belt—*away from his sword*—shaking his head in disgust while looking down his nose at me.

“I should have known better,” he says before giving me his back, turning and walking away.

Leaving me tied to the pole.

Night has fallen, and with it, a cold wind picks up. I shiver, pulling my knees into my chest in an attempt to keep warm. Pushing away the hurt that bubbles up, how they just assume the worst in me.

They don’t even know me.

I don’t care what they think, I remind myself, tilting my head back against the post and finally allowing my eyes to close.

I’m tired. *So tired.*

I breathe out slowly, letting my breath even out. I’m just about on the cusp of sleep when…

It starts to rain.

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CHAPTER 34

AYER

I wake just before dawn and take over watch so Wyatt can get a couple of hours of sleep before we continue our journey.

The village is quiet.

Nadia was telling the truth when she admitted they had stayed behind alone. My men weren't able to turn up any other human or fae hiding about.

After relieving Wyatt, I make my way to Dash first, brushing a hand over his hide and pulling an apple from my pocket. He nudges my shoulder with a soft nicker before taking it from my palm.

Sighing, I lean back against his warm flank and glance toward the princess.

The anger simmering inside me hasn't cooled. If anything, sleep has only fanned the flames, forging my rage into something tangible like a sharp blade I only wish I could use to run her through.

And leave her body in an unmarked grave—seeing as how I still don't know her fucking name.

The little menace is still asleep, exactly where I left her: tied to the post. She's huddled in a tight ball at the base of the post, trying to preserve what little warmth she can. Her clothes are sodden with mud and rain, her dark hair plastered against her cheeks and shoulders.

A storm passed through in the early hours of the night, unleashing a deluge of wind and rain upon the village. I left her out here. Didn't bother

fetching her any food, and figured she could get her water from the sky.

My eyes narrow as I take a closer look.

She looks pale—paler than usual. And I can see her shaking from here, her body shivering for warmth. She's fae; the cold won't kill her. And it's the least she deserves after what she did yesterday.

She made a fool of me.

Again.

She looked so sincere, so desperate to help. I actually… I actually believed her.

I should never have let her near that child.

My fingers twitch near the knife at my hip.

One problem

One easy solution.

I could walk over there right now. It would only take a few seconds… One quick slash of my blade and I could finally be rid of the little royal menace once and for all.

An involuntary growl forms in my throat when I hold myself back, remaining where I am, leaning against Dash's warmth.

Theo.

Godsdamned Theo. He better be fucking right about the need to keep her alive, because I swear…

I move my hand away from my knife. My loyalty to Theo is the only thing staying my hand.

The fae are wicked creatures—deceitful. Even pretty little ones. I would do best to remember that. The way she had looked up at me… That pleading look in her eyes…

I fell for it.

My fists tighten all over again.

Vicious, manipulative, poisonous creatures. Every. Last. One of them.

Still, my eyes drift to her.

The way she shivers in her sleep twists something low in my gut. It's fleeting, and it's irritating, and I crush it immediately, tearing my gaze away from her.

The sun rises slowly over the mountains, the morning lazily settling in around us. Most of the men spent the night inside the abandoned cottages near the town square. I can't deny how good it felt to have a proper bed after days on the road.

The smell of forest and fresh rain is in the air, leaving behind a light fog. The warm hues from the sunrise stream through, hazy and muted.

We need to get moving soon if we're going to stay on schedule, but the mother and her children complicate things.

A cry cuts through the silence.

The sound of a wailing woman coming from the cottage where the mother and her children spent the night.

I frown and let out a slow breath.

Kent was certain the baby wouldn't survive the night.

I cast one final glance toward the princess—still blissfully asleep, exhausted after playing her wicked little game—before starting toward the cottage with heavy steps.

The door bursts open before I can reach it.

Nadia stands in the doorway. Her arms are empty.

She scans the street with panic in her eyes. The second her eyes find me, she waves me over, the motion frantic. The dark circles under her eyes are more pronounced this morning. She must not have slept last night either. Tear tracks stain her cheeks.

Stones, I have to look away. I've seen countless horrors in battle, and I've seen even worse before, but *dead children*…

That is something I don't think I will ever get used to. Refuse to, more like.

Steeling myself, I lift my chin, preparing to look the poor woman in the eye.

"I'm so—"

"Please," she interrupts, rushing down the steps. "Please, can you send someone for more milk? We're out of goat's milk."

I blink. Unsure what to say in response.

She shifts anxiously from foot to foot, already half turned back toward the cottage.

"We need more for the tonic," she says impatiently. "Please."

I can only stare at her.

"Milk?"

She glares at me. "Yes. Milk," she enunciates more clearly.

I gape at her. "I... Yes, of course. I'll send someone. Your baby…" I hesitate. "Is she…?" I can't quite make myself ask the question.

For the first time since opening the door, Nadia goes completely still. Understanding dawns on her face. Without a word, she reaches forward, grabbing my arm and pulling me inside. Pressing a finger to her lips, she gestures toward the cradle just beside the hearth.

My stomach knots. Slowly, reluctantly, I look over the edge.

Josi lies bundled within a thick wrapping of furs and blankets… asleep. Breathing. A bit of color has returned to her face. Her cheeks are a rosy pink—a far cry from the ghostly pale from last night. Not red either. But *pink*.

"The fever broke overnight," Nadia whispers, softly stroking her daughter's cheek. Her voice cracks. "She's eating, for the first time in days. I thought—I thought we were going to lose her. I was so afraid." Tears spring loose at the whispered admission.

I can hardly believe this is the same baby. I remember the tiny, frail infant from last night, and this baby—this baby looks fine… healthy even.

Remembering herself, Nadia moves swiftly to the table, picking up an empty pitcher. "We ran out of tonic late last night. She drank all of it." She turns back toward me, clutching the pitcher to her chest like it's a lifeline. "We need more for this morning. Could you send someone for milk?"

She's nearly begging, but I can't stop staring at the little baby in the bassinet. As if sensing my gaze, Josi's eyelids flutter gently until bright blue eyes blink lazily open. They find me above and slowly widen, the dark ink on my neck instantly fascinating. Josi coos and then smiles. The expression on her face is innocent—amused. As if the look of utter disbelief on my face is the funniest thing she's ever seen.

Clearing my throat, I straighten, lifting my gaze to find Nadia.

"Yes," I say. "I'll send someone straight away."

Relief floods Nadia's features.

"Thank you," she exhales shakily, lowering herself onto the bed to sit. Her older child still sleeps tucked beneath the blankets.

"You should rest," I tell her, backing toward the door. "It's been a long night. I'll send someone with the milk."

She offers me a weary smile. "Thank you. Truly. And thank *her* for me, will you please? We owe her everything."

My jaw tightens, and I offer back a stiff nod before stepping outside.

My gaze goes immediately to the post.

She's awake.

Watching me.

The instant our eyes meet, hers narrow. And then she turns away, quite deliberately, shifting until her back faces me, her attention fixed upon the open field and the woods beyond.

A coincidence, I tell myself. *It has to be.*

Milk, honey, and milk thistle root. I shake my head sharply for even considering the possibility.

Another beat passes and I remain where I am, studying her tense shoulders as I try to make sense of everything rattling around inside my head.

The voices of my men drift across the village, pulling me back to reality.

Whatever happened to that child, I can figure it out later.

For now, I need someone to fetch more goat's milk for the baby's *tonic*.

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CHAPTER 35

ROWAN

Ayer disappeared inside Nadia's cabin nearly ten minutes ago. I sit very still. Watching… waiting… *needing* to know.

A few more agonizingly long minutes pass before Ayer finally steps back outside.

The expression on his face is hard to read, but if I had to wager a guess, I'd say he looks stunned. He hesitates just outside the cabin, then his eyes find mine.

I can't help but glare back at him before turning, giving him my back.

Asshole.

When I feel his gaze slip off me, I peek back over my shoulder.

Ayer takes a step, flagging down Wyatt, who's just passing by Nadia's cottage on his way to tend to his horse.

"More milk is needed for the tonic," I hear Ayer say in a low voice, careful to keep the conversation just between the two of them—and me, of course.

"More milk?" Wyatt asks incredulously, looking in surprise over Ayer's shoulder at the little cottage. "You mean the baby, she's not—?"

Ayer just shakes his head, and the surprise on Wyatt's face sends a shock of relief through my body, and suddenly, I can breathe again.

It worked.

The warmth that flickers in my chest at the news chases away the bone-aching chill that's settled within me from the night out in the rain. My head

swims and my throat burns a little hotter just then, as if to remind me: of course it worked.

I wasn't certain if it would. I didn't know if the rune's magic would prevent mine from healing someone, but I think I've worked out how the rune only creates a barrier. Its magic only keeps mine *in*. But healing… healing isn't an outward projection of magic, but rather a pull into myself.

A small smile tugs at my lips.

It worked. I did it! I actually did it.

Ayer's eyes slide back to mine, and I straighten my shoulders from where I sit on the ground and slowly lift my chin to take on his gaze.

He just stares at me. His face unreadable.

Good, let him wonder. *Let him question it.* I took a risk healing Josi, which is why I tried to cover my tracks with the tonic. Ayer put that rune on me. He thinks it impenetrable. I'm near certain he'll underestimate my ability to work my way around it.

I can almost hear the questions circling in his head. *The tonic couldn't possibly? Did she do something? Was it just a coincidence?*

I hold his gaze for another long moment before I give him a look conveying only boredom, before turning back to the woods again.

Let him think I don't care. What I did was reckless, and I need them to keep underestimating me, but he knows something isn't adding up. And that *something* might make me even more dangerous in his eyes. And that's not where I want to be.

Kent is summoned for another examination. He's in there for a long while. I perk back up at the sight of Ayer and Kent exiting the cottage—starting toward their horses, which brings them closer.

I keep my head down, pretending to be far more interested in the rock between my fingers than I am with them.

Ayer speaks, dropping his voice, but not low enough that I can't make out the words.

"So the milk and honey—?" he starts slowly. "It really worked?"

My lips twitch.

"By the heavens! No!" Kent scoffs. "We just got lucky, that's all. There's no cure for red fever. Everyone knows that. That baby should have died." He points back at the cottage behind them before frowning. "I can't tell you why she didn't... I can't explain it, but I do know it wasn't no *stones-cursed* milk and honey."



The rest of the morning passes quickly. The men set about gathering more supplies, preparing for the ride ahead. It looks like we'll be spending yet another long and *glorious* day on the road.

I sigh, staying put. My back resting against the post I'm bound to, I savor every minute of rest I can get. *I'm so tired.*

I feel his approach before I see him.

Ayer doesn't say anything to me as he untethers the end of my rope, freeing me from the post. I notice his eyes lingering on the dark ink he burned into my skin.

Yes, it's still there. Still intact.

Without a word to me, he sets off toward Dash, and I follow… in silence.

"The baby is better."

I stiffen at his words, but keep my gaze fixed on the pretty stallion ahead of me, not wanting to give him a reaction, acting like I couldn't care less.

"Kent reckons she'll make a full recovery."

Relief crashes through me at the news, but I keep my face carefully blank, burying the flood of relief under indifference.

"Oh," I say, pretending to inspect the road ahead, ignoring Ayer as he secures my tether to his saddle. His unasked questions fill the air between us, and I shift uneasily under the weight of them.

He suspects.

He has to.

Unfortunately for me, he's not as dumb as he looks. But he still doesn't know *how* I did it—or *if* I did anything at all.

But red fever is notorious for showing no mercy, sparing neither the weak nor the elderly, and definitely not the young. The virus rips families apart, decimating village populations. There are no remedies, and once one's cheeks flare scarlet…

It's already too late.

But not for Josi.

I stare forlornly at the rope tied once again to Dash's saddle and sigh. It appears I've lost walking privileges. My toes curl inside the soft leather of my boots. The rope, I can deal with, but if he tries to take my boots again… we're gonna have to test the strength of that rune again.

Ayer turns to pack up the last of his supplies, and the question tumbles out of me all on its own before I have a chance to stop it.

"What will happen to them?" I ask, quickly slamming my mouth shut. *So much for indifference, Rowan…*

Ayer looks down, studying me for a moment before obliging me. "A couple of my men will remain here, with Nadia and her children. And once they have all recovered enough to travel, they will be escorted back to Theo's camp. Where they will be safe.

I nod in response. My jaw locked, looking anywhere but at him.

The captain finishes securing his bags, swinging his leg up and over Dash before giving me one last curious look.

"Milk and honey, eh?" His arched brow saying everything he's not.

I sigh irritably, refusing to let him get to me.

"And cinnamon," I grumble with a roll of my eyes. "Everyone always forgets the cinnamon."

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CHAPTER 36

ROWAN

Pain.

Gods, my body aches.

I'm not sleeping well. I fall asleep easily, sure, I'm exhausted—my body has all but officially hit its max for outdoor adventure time. But spending my nights curled up on the cold ground with no blanket or shelter…

My battle with my own exhaustion threatens to top the battle of wills I'm waging with Ayer. The fatigue seeps deep into my bones, leaching out every last bit of energy I have left to give.

Nightmares plague what little sleep I do get, unceremoniously tossing me out of dreamland the second it becomes apparent I might actually be getting any rest.

There's a dull pounding in my head that only grows worse the longer the day wears on, either from the interrupted sleep—thanks to the nightmares—or the total lack of sleep altogether. The more tired I am, the more likely it is that nightmares will come. It's likely only to get worse the longer my sleep remains inconsistent.

Even now, during the day, I can feel them.

Lurking.

Waiting.

Never really far off. It lurks in my mind, a monster poised to attack whenever the moment is right.

The nightmares aren’t new. They have plagued me for just about as long as I can remember, but now they have been given new fodder. New horrific memories to twist and force on replay. The night’s shadows seep into my dreams, dragging me further into darkness.

I hear the screams of dying fae—the sounds of the execution at my back when they dragged me from the great hall. And then it’s the Raven. I let out a scream as I watch him turn the castle walls to shadow, seeing the bodies fall—the demon’s shadows swallowing them whole.

I see my *mother*.

I’m under the bed again, just a child, my little arm outstretched as if—as if I can *save her.* Silent sobs wrack through me as I watch in horrified helplessness that demon’s shadows consume her.

Gone.

Gone forever.

No!

My eyes fly open, heart pounding as I stare at the darkness all around me. I sigh, shifting my eyes upward toward the lightening sky. It’s nearly dawn, anyway. I push myself to sitting, leaning my back against the tree nearby, giving up on any further attempts to sleep tonight. Scanning the quiet clearing, I find Ayer has again replaced Wyatt on watch.

He’s sitting on a flattened boulder across the clearing where we’d made camp for the night. Ayer has his body angled toward the woods, his attention on the little wood carving he’s been crafting ever since we left Rosecliff. And even though he never looks my way, I know he’s watching me.

He hasn’t spoken to me.

Not a word.

Not since yesterday, when we left the village.

Ayer shifts, reaching down to grab the full satchel of water at his feet, then pulls out the stopper and takes a long drink.

My throat tightens, and I can’t help but stare glumly at the leather skin in his hands. My own mouth turns to cotton at the mere thought of water.

Just as Ayer hasn’t spoken to me, he also hasn’t given me any food, nor a drop of water.

I force a swallow. My throat burns. *Ash and embers*, it’s like someone lit a torch and shoved it down there, tossing in a few jagged bits of glass for the hell of it.

Don’t think about it. Don’t—

Too late.

My eyes lock on the water pouch, homing in on the sound of the water sloshing inside, the slow tilt of Ayer’s head, the way his throat works as he swallows the liquid down.

My throat is a raging inferno, and I force my gaze away.

But not before his eyes lift to meet mine—catching me staring.

My cheeks heat when I spy that little smirk of his out of the corner of my eye while I stare furiously out into the dark forest.

“Godsdamnit,” I mutter under my breath when my eyes act on their own volition again, seeking out the water pouch that contains the life-sustaining liquid I so desperately need.

Ayer shoots me a little wink.

Shadows-spawned son of a—

He rises, and my heart jumps, quickening as he moves toward me, still wearing that same infuriating smirk on his stupid face.

“Thirsty?” he asks, giving the pouch in his hand a light shake.

The sound of the water sloshing inside nearly sends me crawling toward him on my hands and knees. Every muscle in my body goes stiff as I lock that the fuck down. Gods, do I want to hit him.

Hard.

Despite his amusement, there’s something bitter in the way he’s looking down at me. He’s still pissed about the baby. Without a logical explanation for her recovery, he still thinks I lied. Thinks I intentionally gave that mother false hope to make ripping the rug out from under her all the more painful. A cruel fae trick I played for my own twisted amusement.

The rest of the camp is quiet; the men getting in a few more hours of sleep before what’s sure to be another long day of hard travel.

We just might be journeying to the ends of the continent at this rate. Days and days of arduous travel, with no end in sight. I’m not sure I fear the end of our journey anymore, seeing as how it will never come.

Another scout sits on the opposite side of the camp, his eyes alert and scanning the surrounding trees meticulously. Ayer has taken additional precautions following the tree monster attack, such as lighting additional fires, each positioned along the outskirts of the camp.

There’s always someone up to watch me, a rotation between Ayer, Wyatt, or Hayes. But now, there’s also always someone else watching *the*

woods.

Ayer's heavy gaze reveals a deep hatred burning in his dark eyes. If I thought he hated me before…

"What's your name?" he asks, a stony expression falling over his face as he replaces the cork in the pouch and folds his arms staunchly across his chest.

In my delirium from lack of sleep or lack of water, I almost let loose a laugh.

Of course. It's a game.

Captain Crankypants has certainly stopped playing nice, that's for sure.

"It's a simple question." Ayer shrugs casually when I don't answer him. Not that anything he does could ever be described as casual. No, everything he does—every movement, every order—is deeply intentional. He's not to be underestimated. He watches me like a wolf stalks a deer, eager to draw out the misery, circling mercilessly while closing in. Not above playing with its food.

I keep my gaze on the forest, fixing it on one regal oak tree. Likely thousands of years old, its reach extends hundreds of feet into the—

The twisting sound of Ayer removing the cork from the water pouch has my attention instantly. My neck nearly snaps with how fast my eyes find the water satchel again.

He takes another drink.

I watch him. I hate that I watch him.

The ever-present burning in my throat intensifies. So thirsty. So, so thirsty.

As if in league with the captain, my throat tightens, the now familiar burn flaming into molten lava as if it knows water is nearby and attainable. As if it knows all I have to do is answer one simple question in order to get some.

Gods, it hurts.

I swallow down my whimper, unleashing another wave of fire upon myself.

I'm beginning to question my resolve. With the increasing intensity of the burning in my throat—and eyes—I can't entirely say for certain what I won't do for water once I'm desperate enough. Riven would be rolling his eyes if he knew just how close I am to willingly throwing it all away for just one single drop of cool liquid.

It’s right there.

No.

I shake my head, clearing away the delirium setting in. I can’t set this precedent. If I play Ayer’s game once, he will know he can force me to play again. And his questions will only get more dangerous.

The disappointment hits hard, and I stare longingly at the water pouch in Ayer’s hand.

Refusing to take the bait means no water and probably no food, either—for at least another full day. And judging by the hard expression on his face, Ayer is hardly in any mood to grant favors.

I lock my jaw, narrowing my eyes into a glare sharp enough to sever his jugular if given the opportunity. My gaze drops to that scar of his—the one across his throat.

He sighs, closing the water pouch once again. Annoyance flickers across his face, just for a moment, until it changes into something more like amusement.

Gods, that’s worse.

He turns, walking away from me while calling back over his shoulder. “Let me know if you change your mind.”

Once he and his water satchel are gone, I release a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding, tilting back my pounding head to bang it lightly against the tree at my back.

Moons, it’s going to be a long day.

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CHAPTER 37

ROWAN

The morning goes fine.

I'm careful to leave enough slack in the rope to maneuver carefully around roots and rocks on the trail. *At least I still have my boots.* Ayer probably realized punishing me with bare feet was only slowing them down.

The air is warmer today and the bright sun cuts through the trees, but despite the warmth in the air, I'm freezing. Chills creep in despite the heat of the afternoon, racing down my spine, expending more energy as my body shivers as it fights to generate warmth.

But by midday, everything is harder.

It could just be me reaching for the very last of my strength, but I swear, the terrain has only grown rougher. There are more hills, more inclines, and the ground itself grows increasingly uneven and rocky. My muscles tremble with every step, and I twist my ankle more times than I can count.

The burning in my throat is a molten volcano now. Every single swallow is painful, like sharp razor blades being run down my throat.

Forcing my head up, I keep going. *I have to.*

But it's becoming harder and harder to put one foot in front of the other.

I'm so tired.

Just a little sleep…

I fall.

A lot.

Each time, Dash drags me several feet by my wrists before Ayer notices and pulls up his horse. He waits, just long enough for me to get my feet back under me before we're off again.

I can feel his patience thinning as the cycle repeats itself.

Again and again and *again*.

Until the skin on my palms and knees is raw and bloody.

Ayer's gaze darkens with each fall. He's irritated. I notice our pace has slowed significantly, and I know I'm the reason. But my head feels heavier and I—

I fall *again*.

I close my eyes as I'm dragged once more through the sharp gravel of the stony path. But this time, when I try to push myself back up, my arms shake, breaking at the elbow and collapsing back down, no longer able to support my weight.

Confused, I blink at my hands in the dirt, but as I try again, the world tilts sharply to the right, and now everything is spinning.

Round and round and round…

It's enough to make my stomach turn.

I heave, but there's nothing there. I've got nothing left; I haven't eaten in days. I let my head drop back into the dirt, closing my eyes. *Just let them drag me till I'm dead,* I pray. I breathe out slowly, waiting for the rope to go tight, waiting for Ayer's patience to snap, no longer anticipating the shooting pain that will erupt from my wrists when the rope drags me off.

The pain is no longer there .

I mean, it's still there, it's still… *everywhere*, but it feels so far away, like I've been separated from it. A cold numbness takes over my body. I'm aware of the pain, but I no longer care.

Muffled shouts sound from up ahead.

Let them do what they want.

I'm done.

Darkness shrouds my vision, taking me under for a second, maybe longer—I'm not sure. And when I come to, I put my last drop of energy into focusing on the blurry dark shape that's appeared in front of my eyes.

It's *Ayer*.

He hovers over me, and I just blink up at him. My face is blank, and it takes me entirely too long to realize his mouth is moving. He's saying

something to me, but I can't hear most of what he says—can't make sense of what I do. The tether of my consciousness grows thin, the darkness edging my vision once again.

The next time my vision clears, he looks angry. His hand raises, and at the sight of it reaching back, I flinch, turning my face away, but instead of a slap, it's a light brush of his fingers across my forehead before he pulls them back, dragging them through his own hair.

His frown deepens.

I must black out again, because the next time I come to, he's closer—too close.

I gasp at the sight of his eyes peering into mine. They look almost unreal this close up: steel-gray, almost glinting silver in the sunlight, and ringed in onyx. *Beautiful.* I stare up at them, completely mesmerized as they blur into storm clouds.

Something presses lightly against my lips.

Cool.

Gloriously cool.

Water.

It's water.

I lift my head, and he reaches underneath, propping me up higher. My head now rests in his lap, but I don't care. I'm too busy drinking greedily, anxious to soothe that raging fire in my throat.

With each swallow, I feel a little more relief. I still feel awful, but the fuzziness in my brain lifts slightly, enough for me to hear—enough to make sense of words again.

Ayer pulls back the now empty canteen.

"Stubborn. So godsdamned stubborn," he mumbles, studying me. His gray eyes are unreadable once again.

I make a face at him, attempting to push myself up and out of his lap. The world tilts and my hands shoot out, catching myself as the earth wobbles beneath me.

"Take it easy," he warns, and I'm suddenly all too aware of his hand at my side, steadying me. "We're done for the day. We'll make camp here."

"But—" I grit out, my voice barely audible despite the water; my throat is still a raging inferno. "But it's only midday." I can't have been out for that long. My eyes lift to the bright blue sky above for confirmation.

He pauses, his eyes darkening as they pierce through my own. “Let me rephrase: We’ll make camp here. *You’re* done for the day.”

My cheeks flame hotter than they already are. *I didn’t ask for this.* I didn’t ask to be dragged through the woods relentlessly against my will, but still, somehow, I feel less than for not being able to keep up.

“Okay,” I mutter softly. I’m in no position to argue.

Ayer unhooks a new water satchel from his belt and sets it down in front of me. I stare at it before looking back at him.

“Drink all of that,” he orders. His tone level, his expression giving away nothing of his thoughts as he points to it.

“At what cost?” I whisper, peering up at him. Because with him, there’s always a cost.

A muscle flexes in his jaw. “Just drink it.” And then he’s gone.

Something twists uncomfortably in my chest.

He saved me.

It feels wrong to admit it, but he did. Ayer could just as easily have dragged my body behind his horse for the rest of the day, or even just left me behind to die.

But he didn’t.

He hates me. I know he hates me, so I know this isn’t born from pity or just the nonexistent goodness inside that black heart of his.

No.

He has his own reasons. They can’t very well dangle me in front of my brothers or father if I’m dead, can they?

I clear my throat. Even after the water, it still feels as though knives are stabbing me from the inside.

“Rowan,” I half mumble. My words are so soft, so quiet I’m not sure he can even hear them until he stops dead in his tracks—going utterly still.

Slowly, he turns around.

I pick up the canteen he left for me on the ground, popping off the lid. He didn’t ask this time—or demand. And maybe that’s why I’m telling him as I take another long drink of water. “My name is *Rowan*.”

My eyes lift to his, and for a moment, we just… stare. He gives a curt nod before stalking off to deliver his orders to his men.

A white flag waves between us. A temporary peace offering.

How long will it last?

Hopefully long enough for me to work out how to set the man on fire.

I hold on to that thought, finishing the small satchel of water and attempting to rise just before everything goes black.

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CHAPTER 38

AYER

She's been unconscious for hours.

And for almost the entirety of that time, I've been watching her. Long enough to notice things I shouldn't. Like how sleep softens her in a way wakefulness never does. The stubborn set of her jaw eases. The lines of defiance disappear from her brow. Long lashes rest against freckled cheeks flushed an angry red from fever, and damp strands of chestnut hair cling to her temples from sweat.

She's always looked delicate, but now she just looks fragile.

Almost… human.

The thought leaves a bitter taste in my mouth.

Again and again, my eyes are drawn to the dark rune I seared into her wrist days ago. The black ink a stark contrast against her pale skin.

Rune magic. One of the few kinds of magic humans can still access. Centuries ago, when we fought the fae in the last Great War, the witches, druids, and mages lost everything. Their magic was bound, ripped away, and woven into the tethering to strengthen the fae's own power. It was *stolen.* And that stolen magic still flows through the five crowns.

Our magic.

Turned against us.

The fae will pay—for what they did to Kovaria, to my people, and what they did to me. Starting with Sitara.

I grind my teeth, watching the Sitari princess sleep, and wonder—for what feels like the hundredth time—why I haven't just run her through with my sword already.

Theo wants her alive. Thinks she could be useful when we finally square off against Sitara.

I disagree.

I'll have the revenge Theo promised, one way or another.

Rowan.

For days, I wondered—tried to get it out of her—and now I have it on the tip of my tongue, and it relentlessly circles my mind.

I wish I didn't know it.

Night has fallen, and the camp is quiet. There were no complaints about today's early stop; most of the men were grateful after days of hard riding. Today's terrain was nothing but hills and thick forest, and the air grows colder with every mile we travel closer to the mountains.

We had to stop early because of Rowan.

She collapsed. I found her facedown in the mud, soaked through and shivering so violently her teeth rattled. But then I touched her. She was burning. The heat pouring off her skin startled me; she was slick with sweat while chills wracked her body.

Theo wants her alive, so I couldn't exactly leave her to die of fever in the mud.

I picked her up and carried her over to the fire. Then I removed her boots, setting them to dry beside the flames, and threw every spare fur I could find over her.

I expected her to wake halfway through and snap at me to stop touching her, but… she didn't.

It's been hours.

Admittedly, she is in rough shape. Her skin is ghostly white, almost translucent in the firelight. I checked her pulse earlier; it was there. Weak. Beating too fast. But there.

Bracing her head in my arm, I poured as much water as I could get down her throat before letting her sleep.

Her skin is pale, but her cheeks are a bright crimson now.

Classic red fever.

She must've caught it from the baby.

I study her sleeping face, my jaw tight as I pore over my thoughts. There's just something off about all of this. Fae don't get sick. At least… I didn't think they did. Especially not from something as ordinary as a human virus. And even if they could, red fever doesn't appear this quickly. It takes days—usually close to a week—before symptoms begin. It starts mild, with symptoms of a common cold, which is partly why it's so dangerous.

Rowan held that baby once. For a few minutes. Two days ago.

It doesn't make any sense.

It's possible the virus was able to work faster because Rowan may have been in a weakened state. The battle, her capture, days of little food, too little water, cold days and freezing nights, rain, bruises, sleep deprivation. Any one of them could've worn her down.

All of it together… Well, perhaps even a fae body has its limits.

My gaze drops to her bare feet beside the fire. Yellow and greenish bruises stain nearly every inch of them. *From me.*

Guilt dances along the edge of my emotions, and I act quickly, slamming down that iron wall in my mind and forcing it out. She earned that punishment, and I refuse to waste any sympathy on a fae. Not after everything they'd done. Everything *her family* had done.

And Rowan… At the end of the day, she's still a Valrose.

I sigh, tearing my gaze off her to study the woods instead.

Still, it's not long until my gaze is inexplicably drawn back to the princess.

She shifts in her sleep, pulling the furs closer, which accidentally exposes one leg. There are wounds there too—newer ones. Fresh cuts and bruises from errant branches along the trail and all of her falls. A thin trail of blood has dried just underneath a deep gash on her knee.

Then I notice something else.

My eyes narrow at the thin, silvery scars that crisscross down the back of her exposed leg. They're old. Not random. Not the kind left by an accident but by repeated injury. Some of them are still a little pink—newer than the others.

I stare at them for longer than I should, trying to imagine what could've made marks like that. But nothing comes to mind. I have to resist the urge to uncover her other leg and check for the same.

Almost without realizing it, I find myself moving closer. I crouch down beside her, studying her face again, searching for something—anything that

makes this female make sense. Instead, she only becomes more of a puzzle.

Rowan.

I scrub a hand over my jaw and lean back with a quiet curse.

"*No trouble, my ass*," I mutter to the unconscious princess.

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CHAPTER 39

ROWAN

The warmth is a surprise.

Days and days of such bitter cold, and now I'm waking up to—

My heart stutters when I realize I don't even remember falling asleep. Last thing I knew, I was lying in the middle of the road, still tied to Ayer's horse. But that doesn't seem right. Did I pass out again?

Did he drug me?

I tear through my mind, trying to remember—getting flashes of memory, but it's all too fuzzy to grab hold of.

Slowly, I open my eyes. Only to slam them back shut quickly against the bright glow of the fire right beside me.

No wonder it's so warm.

Turning my head away from the flames, I try again. This time, my gaze falls upon a dark forest of thick trees. Their leaves reflect the sunset glow of the fire on my other side.

I make a half-hearted attempt to sit, but the movement brings a severe pounding from deep within my skull, forcing my head back down. A groan of pain escapes me.

I'm still fighting my way out of the haze when a deep voice sends a different type of chill racing down my spine.

"I thought you weren't going to be any trouble?"

The familiar rough voice whips my attention back, and immediately, I regret the motion. I touch a hand to my temple as the pounding in my head

intensifies.

Eventually, I'm able to make out the shape of Ayer's enormous figure sitting atop a log nearby.

Knowing he's so close, I try to get up again—feeling vulnerable on the ground. This time, I almost black out from the pain inside my head. I bring both hands up, putting pressure on my throbbing temples to try to ease the growing pressure in my brain.

Ayer rises from where he sits, then shakes his head as he crouches down beside me. "You never learn, do you?"

I freeze when the back of his hand gently rests against the skin of my forehead, and I stare up at him in shock.

"It's gone down."

Gone down? What's gone down?

He leaves his hand there for several seconds before removing it and rising to his feet, going back over to his log to search for something.

I'm no longer on the road; instead, I'm stretched out on the ground by the fire. Something soft beneath me, a bedroll, along with several thick furs draped over me.

I don't remember walking out of the road… I watch Ayer with a wary gaze. *Did he carry me? Did he drug me again?*

"You passed out," he answers, as if reading my mind. "You were burning up with fever, so I carried you over to the fire."

"You carried me?" I give a start, and my head pays the price, forcing a wince.

"You were face down in the mud." He shrugs. "Thought you'd prefer this."

Like he cares what I prefer... I attempt a scoff, but it comes out as a weak cough instead.

I give up on any more attempts to sit up, laying my head back down on the soft furs underneath me. Gods, I feel awful—like I'm burning alive from the inside.

"You could have left me there." *To die*, I don't say.

"Aye." Ayer levels me an unreadable look. "I could have."

I turn my head to face him, meeting his gaze and holding it despite my weakened state.

"Why?"

He releases a breath, finally breaking eye contact—looking away, to the trees.

“You know why.”

“No, I don’t,” I counter, deciding to press the issue.

“I need you alive,” is all he says, still refusing to look at me.

“Why?”

I catch the flash of irritation on his face and a newfound tension in his shoulders. Oh, are questions pertaining to my life and death annoying you, Captain?

“For what?” I press again, catching the way his hands tighten into fists and his jaw ticks.

“It’s not your concern.”

Forgetting all about my head, I try pushing myself up again, anger fueling a burst of adrenaline. “Not my—”

“I didn’t know fae could catch red fever,” he cuts me off, leaning forward on his knees as he gives me his full attention.

My mouth snaps shut.

“Interesting. Don’t you think?” His head tilts predatorily to the side, as though he’s hunting for proof of whatever theories he’s cooked up in his head.

I sniff, allowing my eyes to roll and setting off a new wave of dizziness.

“There seems to be a lot you don’t know about fae.”

“It came on quick too.” My eyes narrow as he continues. “Symptoms usually don’t show up for a week or two after exposure. That’s part of what makes red fever so dangerous, seeing as the patient is contagious all the while, and no one around them knows until it’s too late. But you—” His head tilts further. “You just held that baby two days ago.”

He knows something happened—suspects the tonic was fake—but he’s fishing, watching me carefully and trying to read my reaction.

I just shrug, throwing up a mask of boredom as I redirect my attention to the fire. *He’s right, of course*. Fae rarely get sick. And if they do, they certainly aren’t susceptible to human viruses like red fever, but… he doesn’t need to know that.

“Where’s Wyatt?” I ask, deciding to change the subject. Usually Wyatt takes the first watch, alternating with Ayer sometime in the night.

Ayer doesn’t look up as he leans over, adding more logs to the fire. “*Wyatt* hasn’t had red fever.” He eyes me over the flames. “And I don’t need that shit spreading through my soldiers.”

While red fever is usually fatal for infants and young children, it’s unlikely to kill a relatively healthy adult. It is, however, highly contagious and a positively miserable experience—which, judging by how *awful* I feel right now, I can personally attest to. If any of his men were to catch it, it would probably slow us down significantly.

I eye Ayer with a flicker of curiosity. “But *you’ve* had it?”

"Yes.” His answer is clipped and short, and I consider pressing him for more details, suddenly desperate for conversation—*any* conversation. The last few days on the road have been painfully lonely, and while Ayer is the *last* person I’d ever seek out for company, the thought of him leaving me alone again sends a fresh pang of anxiety rising through my chest.

But Ayer shows no sign of leaving, settling back on his log, though he stays silent for a long time. I don’t look his way. But I can feel his heavy gaze on my cheek while I stare up at the dim stars overhead.

A moment later, his leather water satchel lands on my stomach, eliciting a cough as the heavy pouch nearly knocks the breath out of me.

“What the—”

“Drink,” he orders, his voice firm.

I frown at the water and then at him. My throat is burning, but something in me balks at following Ayer’s orders.

“Don’t be stupid.”

I glare at him and attempt to lift my head—and the satchel—at the same time. I fail miserably at both.

Stars. What was I thinking, leaving myself vulnerable like this?

An image of baby Josi’s red, flushed cheeks, and Nadia’s tear-stained ones, enters my mind, reminding me exactly what I was thinking.

I had never healed a sickness before, and admittedly, I didn’t know *what* would happen. Whenever I healed a wound or an injury in the past, I needed to take it onto myself either completely—or share it, lessening the severity of the wound for both me and the patient.

And then, of course, Ayer’s rune had to factor into it as well. The rune blocks magic from leaving me, but as I just learned, it doesn’t stop me from taking it in.

Ayer sighs audibly, coming closer and picking the satchel up off my stomach before crouching down beside me once again.

“Come here.” His fingers slide into my hair, supporting my head as he gently lifts, but I fight him, feebly trying to push his hands away, not wanting or needing any more of his help.

“Rowan,” he growls, and I go absolutely still, forgetting for a moment that I told him my name.

We enter a silent standoff. Both of us staring each other down. My mouth is pressed firmly shut, his water satchel open and tilted, like he’s debating whether or not to just waterboard me with it.

“You’re burning up,” he reminds me, and my body instantly weakens as if remembering too.

He seizes the opportunity, pushing the satchel closer and pressing it to my lips. His brows raise, as if to say *open*, but he refrains from actually giving me the order. With a deep sigh, I open my mouth, allowing him to trickle in some liquid..

Light, I needed that, I think when the cool water alleviates the worst of the burning in my throat.

Ayer tilts the satchel a little further and I drink, desperate for more. He angles it slowly, controlled, so I don’t choke.

He’s so close. I steal the opportunity to study him, my eyes pulling to the scar I hadn’t quite noticed before, concealed by war paint and dirt.

The silvery lines slash down from his forehead, right through his brow before trailing down his right cheek. The blow would have taken his eye, if not for those high cheekbones of his. Ayer’s eyes darken as he catches me looking at it. Those steel-gray eyes with their shadowed edges bore into me, the tiny flecks of silver glinting in the flickering firelight.

Everything about Ayer is hard, sharp—unforgiving. But tonight… his touch is gentle, his movements careful, as though I’m something fragile he’s afraid might break. This is the same man who held a knife to my throat and promised me death, but despite everything… it's almost as if he doesn’t *want* to hurt me. It’s jarring, seeing this soft side of him, and I don’t quite know what to make of it.

I drain the rest of the water and Ayer pulls it away, gently laying my head back down to rest atop the furs.

“Shall I have my men fetch some milk and honey?” I don’t miss the slight trace of amusement in his voice, though his face remains serious,

without even the hint of a smile.

I sigh audibly. “And cinnamon.” I add in a dramatic roll of my eyes. “And no. I’ll be fine without it.” *I hope*. Fae aren’t supposed to catch red fever, so who’s to say how long it might last?

I wait for him to move away, but he doesn’t, his gaze fixed on me.

“That baby surviving,” he shakes his head slowly, his eyes boring into mine, “was nothing short of a miracle.”

“Perhaps it was the hope her mother was able to cling to in that dark moment that helped her baby pull through.” I throw his venomous words back at him. How he accused me of giving Nadia false hope, before viciously punishing me for it.

“No amount of hope could have brought that baby back from the brink of death.”

The air between us grows thicker, and I feel my heartbeat quicken. If Ayer figures it out, I don’t know what will happen, but it most certainly won’t be good.

“There’s nothing worse than feeling powerless when everything you love is on the line. Even the tiniest drop of hope can push back the darkness. A little bit of hope can be the difference between fighting and folding.”

“For the tonic to work…” Ayer’s tone is skeptical, and the look in his eyes tells me he knows I did something. He just can’t figure out what.

“It was a fifty-fifty chance,” I mumble, averting my eyes and throwing in a ration of truth. “Sometimes it will work—sometimes it doesn’t.” I’m talking about the tonic, but really I’m thinking about my powers.

He leans in further, as if hoping his proximity might shake me up. “You seemed pretty sure.”

“I was hopeful, yes,” I hedge, my heartbeat quickening the closer he gets.

His eyes narrow, likely remembering how adamantly I assured Nadia her baby would be okay. He studies my eyes—weighing the sincerity in them. He works his jaw but looks away, nodding absently while looking out at nothing.

It takes effort to keep from collapsing with relief at no longer being the subject of his hardened gaze, but in its absence, the exhaustion quickly creeps back in.

“Any more questions, Captain?” I lift my chin, daring him to voice the suspicions I read in his eyes.

His gaze slowly trails back to me before the corner of his mouth ticks up.

“Just one.”

Stars.

My eyes track the movement of his hand as he reaches down to where he sheathes his knives.

“I was just curious how long until you tried using this?”

I can’t help the choking sound that escapes me at the sight of the blade in his hand. The intricately carved rose on the handle.

My blade.

“No, no, no, no, no—” Frantically, my hand shoots to my thigh, tearing at my skirts for the blade despite already knowing it’s gone.

“That’s *mine*.”

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CHAPTER 40

ROWAN

"Not anymore."

Twelve moons, I wanted to strangle him—still do. I mentally mark the section of his throat I'd wrap my hands around while I watch Ayer pack his saddlebags across camp.

He found my dagger.

My dagger.

He must have found it when he hooked his arm under my leg, carrying me off the road.

Light, Rowan. Look what you've done.

I stare at his belt, the black sheath where he's keeping it.

The dark rune burned into my wrist might prevent me from hurting him, but it won't stop me from taking it back.

That's mine.

My head spins as I push myself up further.

Just maybe not today.

Despite the delicious warmth from the fire and furs, I didn't sleep well. The body aches and relentless pounding in my head kept me up. And now and then, an icy chill rips through me so harshly it forces out a small whimper of pain.

I haven't dared to look over at Ayer. I didn't need to look to know he was watching, as usual—not that I was in any shape to try running away. His woodsy scent lingered nearby all night: ash and cedar.

As if summoned by the mere thought of him, he turns and stalks my way. The breeze shifts, blowing the leaves on the trees high above, and sunlight streams into the clearing. I wince as the bright light hits my face, the pain like a sharp knife to the skull.

A dark shadow passes, blocking out the offending sun and providing instant relief that loosens my shoulders. Then I look up and grimace. The dark shadow isn't a trick of the light.

It's Ayer.

"Time to go."

I give him a curt nod to let him know I heard him, bracing myself with a deep breath before attempting to stand. I move slowly so as not to overwhelm my head that's struggling to keep up.

Just rising to my feet takes considerable effort, and instills little confidence in my ability to get through what's likely to be yet another full day of travel.

Finally upright, I waver slightly, feeling Ayer's eyes on me still.

"Don't you have anything else you could be doing?" I snap, humiliation burning hotter than the fever. I *hate* that Ayer gets to see me like this.

The insufferable captain leans his back against the tree, pulling an apple from his pocket and taking a bite. A look of amusement on his face.

"No."

My cheeks blaze, and as adrenaline crashes through me, the world lurches violently around me. I'm forced to close my eyes, holding out my hands for balance in order to prevent myself from toppling over.

After a few long seconds, and once I feel like I'm no longer in danger of pitching forward face-first into the dirt, I tentatively open my eyes. I breathe slowly in and out before carefully leaning down to pick up one of the furs I slept on last night, rolling it tightly before reaching for the next.

Ayer straightens from where he was leaning against the tree. "You don't have to; Hayes will get those."

"It's fine," I mumble as I finish rolling up the second fur, needing to do something other than just exist. I feel his eyes on me for another moment before he walks over to give the remaining apple core to Dash.

As soon as his eyes are off me, my knees buckle under my weight. I stumble over to the same tree Ayer had just been using for support and let it steady me.

You can do this.

You have to do this.

There is literally no other choice but to do this.

Ayer's men have set a fast daily pace to wherever-the-stars-know we're going, and I know yesterday's delay cost them. There is no way Ayer is willing to sacrifice another whole day on account of me. I'm just going to have to figure out how to get through this.

Hayes strolls by, dropping off a little bundle of dried meat and fruit alongside another waterskin.

Although I've barely eaten in days, I'm not hungry. But aware of just how grueling the day will be, I force the food down my throat, hoping it will stay down. I need all the help I can get just to survive today.

I reach for the waterskin, meaning to down it quickly, but at the first taste, I immediately pull back when something thick and sweet fills my mouth. I frown down at the leather skin, sniffing the opening before taking another sip, slower this time.

Milk.

But it's sweetened… milk thistle root, and honey, I think? And *cinnamon*.

Damn him.

I nearly choke, suppressing either a snort, a chuckle, or both.

My eyes find Ayer, busy saddling Dash and prepping for the day. I can't tell if the pouch is meant as a kindness or a taunt, but either way, the smooth liquid feels good on my throat, and I wash the rest of it down.

The men have begun mounting their horses, so once I'm finished, I carry my blankets and empty waterskin over to where Ayer and Dash are waiting.

It's going to be fine. You can do this. *Do this.*

Ayer takes the bundle of furs out of my hands without a word. I take a minute to greet Dash, rubbing my palm down the stallion's velvety neck. The horse gives me a playful nudge with his nose.

The push, however gentle, still nearly takes me off my feet; the world tilts violently, and it's work to steady myself.

Quickly, I glance over my shoulder, finding relief when I confirm Ayer did not see.

Or—at least I don't think he did.

Circling back around Dash, Ayer reaches into his pocket, pulling out the cursed ropes.

My stomach twists.

He takes my wrists in his hands, tugging me slightly closer as he winds the rope around. I inhale sharply as he ties off the first knot, holding my breath again when I catch his cedar scent in my nose. Turning away, I keep my eyes on the woods as he finishes tightening and knotting the cords before dropping my hands as if I burned him.

The sudden release throws me off balance again, but I recover quickly, steadying myself before I can stumble, hoping Ayer doesn't notice otherwise.

If he does, he doesn't say anything.

He swings his leg up and over Dash, and we're off.

We're not even out of the clearing yet before my boot drags a little too much, catching on a loose stone. I overcorrect, and the rebound sets me off kilter, sending me crashing down onto one knee.

With only a second to recover before the rope drags me, I force myself back to my feet, teetering, but upright and walking.

One step after another. *There you go, now do it again,* I coach myself, my eyes on the ground. Which is how I nearly crash straight into Dash's hindquarters a second later, completely unprepared for him to stop.

My throat tightens when I notice Ayer dismounting, and the look on his face is stormy, dangerous.

I take a few steps back, as far as the rope will allow, putting as much distance as possible between me and the irate captain.

"I don't have time for this today," Ayer says, stalking toward me, his voice sharp with irritation.

"It's fine. It won't happen again," I rush out, refusing to meet his eyes. I keep my gaze fixed on the trail ahead, watching the rest of his men disappear around the bend.

"It's not fine," he growls, gesturing at me. "You can barely stand."

"Not true," I argue. "I'll have you know… I'm standing just fine." I lift my chin, rolling my shoulders back to showcase just how well I *am* standing. Hardly a sway in sight. *For now.*

"Get on the horse."

Shocked, my gaze snaps to his, and I immediately regret it. The world tilts violently, and a sharp pulse of pain lances through my skull. My hands fly up to my forehead and I squeeze my eyes shut tight, trying my best to manage the bite of the pain in my head without letting him see me cry.

“No, thank you.” I straighten my shoulders again, pretending my head’s not still running circles around us.

“It wasn’t a question.”

“Was it an order?” I lift my eyes to his.

“Yes.”

I straighten, despite the fever making my knees tremble. “How’s that been working out for you so far?”

“Princess…” Ayer’s voice holds a dangerous undertone of warning, but I ignore him. Out of the corner of my eye, I see his jaw flex, his annoyance giving way to anger.

“Get on the godsdamned horse, Rowan.”

That catches my attention.

Rowan.

Not *princess*. Not *kitten.*

My name sounds different on his tongue.

I eye Dash nervously, swallowing down the rising anxiety before dragging my gaze back to Ayer, forcing my expression into something more like disdain.

“I don’t take orders from you.”

He moves fast.

Too fast.

My first instinct is to run, but I’m already at the rope’s end.

There’s nowhere to go.

I barely have time to brace before he shoves me. He might as well have thrown me off a cliff for how my body reacts. The small push is enough to send the world pitching sideways. Vertigo crashes over me, stealing any sense of up or down. My legs, already trembling beneath me, give out, and my knees buckle.

I’m falling.

Strong hands catch me before I hit the dirt.

“On the horse. *Now*.”

I consider refusing again, but the barely contained fury radiating off of Ayer decides for me. I’m in no state to test just how far I can push him.

“*Fine*.”

I wrench myself out of his grip, nearly careening over, but somehow stay upright. I stomp toward Dash, grabbing a handful of his mane to center myself before attempting to haul my body up on top of him.

Hands close around my waist. Before I can protest, I’m lifted clear off the ground and set atop the saddle like I weigh nothing at all.

Suddenly finding myself on a horse, I don’t have time to be angry as fear overtakes me. My heart races in my chest.

It’s too high.

The horse shifts beneath me. Just a single step, but it feels like an earthquake. My breath comes in sharp, frantic bursts. My hands shake so badly I can’t tell if I’m holding on or slipping. The panic claws higher, and my entire body goes rigid.

I’m going to fall. I’m going to—

A hand settles on my thigh, steadying me against the saddle. Not forcing. Just... holding me there.

“Princess.”

His voice cuts cleanly through the noise in my head.

“Look at me.”

My eyes refuse. Then, slowly... they find him.

Gray. Just gray eyes watching me with an intensity I haven’t seen before.

“Are you with me?”

With a death grip on the saddle and my mouth tight, I nod.

Ayer removes his hand, only to swing up behind me in one smooth motion.

With him right there, at my back, I become acutely aware of the significant tear in my dress, and how my right leg is nearly fully exposed. I wish I could at least attempt to readjust my skirts and cover my bare skin, but my hands are still bound, and I don’t dare release the death grip I have on the saddle to even make an attempt.

I try to shift forward, inching away from him, but there’s only so much space in the saddle.

“Relax.”

Gods. He’s right there. Ayer’s dark, velvety voice in my ear sets off an unfamiliar twisting of nerves deep in my abdomen.

Dash prances beneath us, tossing his head, and I suck in a breath. Before I can panic, his arm snakes around my waist, firm and unyielding, drawing me securely against him. His grip isn’t gentle, but it’s steady—a solid band of strength that leaves no room for me to slip.

Ayer gives the stallion his head, and we set off after the others at far too brisk a pace for comfort. Every muscle in my body is stiff with tension.

Dash's gait is irregular, and he dances beneath us, eager to catch up with the others, wanting to go faster while Ayer holds him back. I cling tighter to the saddle, my knuckles whitening. Terror holds me in a vise—the fear so overwhelming there's no room for any trace of excitement I might have had.

I wanted this once. Desperately. I begged for riding lessons, spent nearly every day in the stables during the summers when I had more free time; watching the horses, feeding them treats, but despite my pleading, my father would not have it.

A princess has no need to ride astride, he'd said. It would be… improper.

"*Twelve moons,* Princess! Take a breath; you're acting like you've never ridden a horse before." I can hear the eye roll in Ayer's words with no need to see it.

My cheeks burn with embarrassment. He's right: I've never ridden a horse before.

And certainly not like this.

It's not enough that I don't feel well, or that his insane horse is dancing all over the road, fighting for control of his head. But being tucked in, so close to Ayer… It only serves to fuel my anxiety past its breaking point.

His breath is on my neck, the weight of his body shifting against mine with Dash's every movement.

My back is ramrod straight, and I'm trying my best to keep the distance between us, but the slick leather of the saddle betrays me, and I slide back—more than once. Each time, scrambling awkwardly forward again.

The next time I scramble away from him, I swear to the gods I hear him snicker.

Asshole.

But the more tense I get, the more Dash seems to act up. My heart leaps into my throat when the stallion presses his ears back against his skull with an accompanying sharp toss of his head.

I swallow hard, squeezing my eyes and legs tight.

Dash bolts forward, and a scream tears from my throat as the burst of speed sends me flying back.

"Ayer—"

He catches me, wrapping an arm tightly around my middle to keep me in the saddle while Dash gallops forward. He holds me flush against his chest while he works to rein in his horse.

“Easy!” he barks, not at me, but at the horse.

The stallion fights his hold, tossing his head, his hooves pounding against the earth.

My pulse hammers in my chest. I can’t breathe. I cling more fervently to the horse, my legs squeezing his sides.

Another burst of speed presses me further into the captain’s chest, and he takes several seconds to bring the giant beast back to a spirited walk. His grip on me tightens like iron as his mouth nears my ear again.

“You need to relax,” Ayer hisses into my ear. “Stop squeezing your legs.”

I scoff, my breath choked up and uneven. “Says the man with the crazy horse who’s two seconds from bucking us into the dirt.”

“That’s exactly what’s going to happen if you don’t calm the fuck down.”

“I am calm,” I hiss between clenched teeth as Dash flattens his ears against his skull once again.

The exasperated sigh at my back tells me just how much he believes my lie.

I flinch when his hand comes around, landing on top of the death grip I have on the saddle.

“*Relax*,” he breathes lightly into my ear, pressing the soft leather of Dash’s reins into my hands.

“What are you doing?” I rush out, unable to mask the panicked edge in my voice. Especially when he drops the reins completely, leaving me in full control of the horse.

That’s it. I’m going to die.

Ayer ignores me, and I feel his hands drop to either side of my hips, applying a light pressure before he breathes softly into my ear again. “Keep your hands light, and relax your hips.”

“Take them back, Ayer,” I say, trying to shove the reins back into his hands, the pitch of my voice rising with every word. “I’ll kill us. I’ll steer us straight off a cliff, and—boom—dead. Both of us. And I know how you feel about me dying, but—”

His grip on my hips tightens.

“Rowan.”

I shudder again at the sound of my name in his deep voice.

“Relax your hips. Feel Dash’s movement beneath you, and instead of fighting it, move along with it.”

I bite back at least eight insults and try to regain control of my rapid breathing, feeling light-headed.

“The reins are in your hands,” he continues, his voice steady in my ear—calm. “*You’re* in control.”

My grip on the reins tightens.

“Breathe,” he reminds me, and I do, having forgotten how for a moment.

Despite my disdain for the feel of his hands on my hips, his touch is grounding, and I feel my heart rate slow as I take several deep breaths.

“That’s it. Now, focus on Dash’s long strides underneath you,” he says quietly. “One, two, three, four.” He counts the steps, and I focus.

Right. Left. Right. Left.

“Anticipate the next one.”

The rhythm starts to make sense, becoming more predictable, and slowly, some of the tension eases.

I concentrate on the movement, how we sway gently back and forth, relaxing into it. I’m also increasingly aware of the feel of Ayer’s hand on my right thigh. With the tear in my skirt, his hand rests just inches above bare skin.

I force my breaths to steady.

“Relax your legs,” he says, his tone almost patient now. “The reins guide him, but most of the communication between horse and rider is here.” Ayer’s hand trails a fraction lower, just grazing the exposed skin of my thigh.

I lift my chin, pretending not to notice and doing my best to slow my heart rate as it races again.

“Squeezing with your legs tells him to go—to run. Relaxed legs and steady hands—tells him he’s safe.”

It’s true. The more I follow Ayer’s instructions, the more Dash settles beneath us, falling into a steady, calm, and predictable gait.

After a few more minutes of calm, Ayer quietly takes the reins back from me.

“Hold on,” he warns before I feel him squeeze his legs behind mine, quickening Dash’s pace until we’re caught up with the rest of the group.

By the time my breathing finally steadies, exhaustion has claimed what little strength I had left. With every mile, I lean a little more of my weight against Ayer, too tired to stop myself.

Because falling off the horse would be inconvenient.

He’s there. I need the support.

That’s all.

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CHAPTER 41

ROWAN

The day drags on, the late afternoon bringing a bit of frost in the air.

But I feel better.

The worst of the red fever symptoms have eased. The dizziness no longer threatens to dump me from the saddle with every other step.

And I'll never admit it… but I'm thankful that I'm not fighting for my life behind Dash for the day.

But as my symptoms and crushing exhaustion fade away, they're replaced with something else… *boredom*.

And *pain*.

We've been riding for hours—all day. Apparently, Ayer is attempting to make up some of the lost time from yesterday by not stopping for breaks today. My body aches, sore from both the journey and the saddle. It's becoming increasingly difficult to sit still.

Ayer is silent as we ride, and after all the excitement of this morning… it's nothing but trees and dirt—and more trees and dirt.

I first attempt to distract myself by trying to loosen the ropes still tied tightly around my wrists. I move carefully—as discreetly as possible to avoid Ayer's notice, using the pommel of the saddle in front of me for leverage.

Gods, Ayer tied them so tight today. Blood stains my skirts, the skin even more irritated after days of abuse.

If I could loosen them… just a smidge...

Determined, I place my hands on either side of the saddle's pommel, attempting to force it between the ropes, hoping to create just a little bit of space. But I have to be subtle; I don't want to catch Ayer's attent—

"Stop it."

After being silent for hours, his sudden bark right next to my ear, and my resulting flinch, nearly sends me careening to the ground.

But his arm wraps around my waist just in time to keep me in place.

I recover quickly, gripping the saddle like it's all I was intending to do the entire time.

"I didn't do anything." My words pour out far too rushed to be completely innocent.

At my back, Ayer just clears his throat, which says as much, but he doesn't argue the point.

Another long stretch of silence follows as dusk falls upon us.

It's not long before boredom sets in again, and after about an hour of thinking about it, I reach for a lock of Dash's mane. I let the long, silky strands run through my fingers several times before I start to braid them.

"Don't do that."

Seeing as how my actions are innocent this time, I don't bother hiding the irritation in my voice when I respond. "Do you have a problem with everything?"

Strangled laughter comes from our left—where Wyatt's been riding. When I turn my head to look at him, he's giving Ayer a sideways glance, nudging his horse faster to put more distance between us.

"War horses don't have braids in their manes," Ayer grumbles.

"Why not?"

"Because they... don't."

I roll my eyes. "It's not *braids*. It's *a* braid. And I think it looks good." I finish the braid, tying it off with a strand of Dash's hair at the end.

"Take it out."

"No."

It's a risk testing him like this. I'm not sure how far I can push him before he dumps my ass right back on the ground behind his horse. But I've got to be getting close.

The deep sigh behind me suggests he's considering it too. "I think I liked it better when you didn't talk."

The corner of my mouth twitches up, despite myself. Perhaps I can annoy the broody captain to death.

I open my mouth but freeze—the skin along my arm prickling suddenly with unease. Snapping my mouth shut, my eyes dart around the surrounding forest.

There's no way to explain it other than to say… something just feels *off*.

The forest is thicker here… darker—the sunlight blocked by the heavy canopy of trees up above, and it's quiet. Memories of the tree monster flash in my mind, and I stiffen in the saddle, listening closely.

I hear no birds, no frogs, nor any other woodland animal noises, even with my elevated fae hearing; it's just… silence.

My eyes scan the surrounding woods as my nerves alight. Dash picks up on it, his steps quickening below.

Are the shadows moving? Or am I just being paranoid?

"What is it?" Ayer asks, noticing my sudden change in demeanor.

"The quiet—" I whisper, keeping my eyes on the trees, still unsure if I'm just being paranoid.

Ayer's body tenses against my back, and he lets loose a long, low whistle.

Not a soul glances back or even changes their pace, but something spreads through the air. The whistle was a warning.

Ayer's arm tightens around my waist; I hadn't even noticed it still wrapped around me. Slowly, he slides me backward in the saddle until I'm flush up against his chest—securing me, should we need to make a run for it.

My back rests against his warm leather armour, my hips bracketed firmly between his own. I keep as still as possible, wanting to avoid accidentally grazing something I shouldn't. My pulse beats a frantic rhythm in my chest, but I'm not sure if it's because of the enemy captain's proximity at my back—or what might await us in the dark.

A bit of both, I suppose.

I turn my head, hoping to steal a glance behind us, but a low whisper in my ear freezes me in place.

"Just keep looking ahead," Ayer murmurs in my ear as Dash plods along at an easy gait. "Act… natural."

Natural. I almost laugh. There's nothing natural about being stuck on a horse with the enemy captain who kidnapped you.

I don't call him on it though, instead forcing my attention back down to Dash's mane. With shaking fingers, I pick up another thick lock of hair, braiding it carefully.

My fear feels like lightning trapped beneath my skin.

The odds of who or *what* is stalking us being friendly are low.

And even if they were—maybe even someone sent to help me—Ayer's grip on me is firm. And I've never been more certain that if it comes down to it, he'll kill me himself rather than allow me to be rescued.

A shout sounds from the front, and my gaze snaps to the bend in the trail ahead.

A line of men appears, all of them dressed in armour—like a unit, but I don't recognize the colors or banners.

My heart only falls a little when I don't see the familiar Sitari white and gold or even the black and gray of Skye. I don't want anyone dying for me today.

No, the soldiers ahead are dressed in brown with bronze armour and, despite drawing their swords, they have not yet launched an attack. Instead, they block the road entirely, forcing Ayer's contingent to come to a halt.

The second we come to a stop, more soldiers pour out of the trees, bronze armour flashing through the shadows. It's an ambush. My heart stops when I catch sight of their ears…

Tapered ears.

Fae—they're fae.

Shocked, I search for anything familiar or reassuring, but when I meet their eyes, they're anything but friendly. In fact, when they notice me, a hunger appears in them that sends a chill straight down my spine, driving me further back into Ayer's chest.

The Kovari men clash with the onslaught of fae soldiers, sword on sword in the tight space.

We are outnumbered.

Ayer hangs back, his arm locked tight around me as his men fend off the attack. He pulls Dash backward, creating more distance between us and the fight.

But I can still see everything.

The fae have the obvious advantage: they're bigger, stronger, and more agile. But the Kovari men move and attack as a team. They keep a tight formation, and it's immediately clear this is a group of soldiers who know one another well—a group of soldiers who have fought many a battle side by side and have each other's back.

They hold the line.

Ayer shouts out orders, smart and controlled, but the fae soldiers keep coming—spilling from the trees and flooding the narrow trail.

The road is narrow here, and the vegetation thick. There's no room for anything but close-quarters combat. Sword on sword, the sharp clang of metal and shouts fill the air.

A fae soldier manages to break through the line, surging toward us. He's fast, dodging Ayer's men and their attempts to block him. The male charges straight for us, his blade raised, his dark eyes fixed on me.

I scream, but he doesn't make it five feet. A knife whistles past, finding a new home in the fae soldier's forehead. I watch in wide-eyed horror as the male crumples to the ground—dead before he even hits the dirt.

I'm too caught up in the shock of it all to notice Ayer dismounting behind me, until he's pulling me down with him.

Death.

Everywhere—surrounding us. Blood soaking into the dirt, bodies litter the narrow path.

Ayer spins me where I stand, turning me away from the brutal fight to face him. My breath stutters when I meet his gaze. Staring down at me is the face of the Kovari captain, his jaw hard, and his eyes cold.

My eyes drop, catching the movement as he reaches for his belt, pulling a knife free.

Mine.

It's *mine*.

I recognize the carved gold rose on the hilt instantly.

Gods, is he going to kill me with my own blade?

Panic spikes and I try to step back, but he catches hold of the rope binding my hands and drags me back, bringing the sharp end of the blade closer, slipping it between the ropes—a quick slice. The ropes fall away, and in the same moment, he releases his hold on me. Flipping the knife mid-air before pressing the hilt into my palm.

I stare up at him, and the look he gives me is severe. I stare into the dark depths of his eyes, which seem to darken further, wild with rage.

“Don’t die.” That’s all he says before he grips hold of Dash’s reins, spinning him before slapping the horse hard on the rump, sending the stallion careening into the forest. And then his back is to me, already engaging the nearest fae soldier in battle.

I’m frozen where I stand, gripping the dagger tightly in my hands as my eyes dart around the chaotic scene before me.

Do I fight?

Should I run?

Ayer’s company only has fifteen men. The fae have nearly double, but the humans have managed to hold the line against them. The tight space has only proven to be an advantage as it keeps them together, forcing the fae to fight them one on one.

Stay or run.

I don’t recognize the fae warriors, and their armour—it’s unfamiliar, unmarked with any fae kingdom’s crest. And that one soldier, when he made that run at Ayer and me, there was hate in his eyes. And not for Ayer, but for me. There was no mistaking that his intention was to kill me.

Fae or not, these soldiers are not my friends.

Scanning the fight, I seek out Ayer. He’s in the thick of battle now, moving fast, lethal. He cuts through soldiers as if they’re standing still, striking with brutal efficiency.

I take a hesitant step to my right, edging closer to the dark and empty woods. No one stops me—no one can.

I take one more bold step before breaking into a run, diving between the trees and leaving Ayer, his company—leaving it all behind.

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CHAPTER 42

ROWAN

I run until my lungs burn and my legs feel as though they can't take one more step, coming to a stop inside a small clearing somewhere deep in the woods.

The commotion of the fight has faded away, along with the light. Night has fallen and, by the sounds of it, no one's followed me—at least not yet. What I *do* hear is rushing water somewhere close by.

Good. That means fresh water is nearby.

Relief courses through me.

I did it. I actually did it! I got away.

I sag back against the trunk of a large oak, taking a second to catch my breath. The fever broke hours ago, and most of my symptoms have ebbed along with it, but it's left me feeling hollowed out—weak, shaking, and exhausted.

Running for my life certainly didn't help.

And it's freezing. The cold air threatens to leach the last of my energy from my bones with incessant shivering. So cold.

But I don't dare attempt a fire. Armed only with my dagger, a fire could attract more fae soldiers, Kovari soldiers, or worse…

An image of the tree monster flashes through my mind, and I slowly lift my gaze to inspect the tree at my back—making sure it's not about to come alive and try to eat me.

Once assured my tree is just your regular old run-of-the-mill tree, I nod off for a bit. I just need a few minutes of rest… Only to startle awake, who-knows-how-long later, to the sound of male voices nearby.

My body tenses, and I tighten my grip on my dagger. I fell asleep holding it. I regret not choosing a more concealed hiding spot. In my exhausted state, I left myself vulnerable where I sit, exposed to anyone who might walk through the clearing.

The voices are so close I remain perfectly still, afraid to even breathe too loudly; the slightest crack of a branch and they'll hear me. I weigh the risks, uncertain whether to stay or catch them off guard and make a run for it. But ultimately, I don't get to choose. They find me.

Two large males I don't recognize stalk into the little clearing; my eyes immediately check their ears.

Relief fleeting for a moment until it dies a quick death the second their eyes land on me and their weapons lift. I find myself staring straight down the end of a pointed arrow.

One of them shouts, and more appear. Five in total. All of whom look far too delighted to see me.

Unease flickers through me, and I rise—slowly—to my feet, my hands raised in front of me. I had quickly sheathed my dagger before they noticed. It's hidden once again by my skirts.

"Please," I start, my voice soft—pleading, hoping to appeal to their better nature. I clear my throat to increase my volume. "I need help. I was a prisoner of the Kovarian army, but I escaped. They're—they're probably tracking me." My eyes scan the group, not finding an ounce of compassion or pity in any of their eyes. A dark feeling sinks into my chest. "I need to find the Iron Fae—Skye." I make sure to let my voice shake, and to stumble my speech over the last word, keeping my eyes wide with fear.

Not a threat.

Harmless.

In need of help.

One of them—a broad, thickly built male—laughs.

Any remaining hope inside me slips away. Especially when the male in front, the blonde—their leader, from the looks of it—smiles.

It's not a reassuring smile. No, it's a smile a snake might make if it were looking at a trapped mouse.

I swallow hard, glancing to either side of them now, searching for an escape route, but the group closes rank. The two at the rear have slowly circled around until I find myself in the middle of a small circle.

The blonde male considers me. “Kovaria rarely keeps fae prisoners.” I try not to squirm when his eyes trail the length of me. The bronze armour they wear catches my eye.

They are from the ambush.

“Where are you from?” the male continues, and I’m thankful for the first time to still be covered in dirt and grime from days of rough travel on the road. I don’t think being recognized as the Princess of Sitara will do me any favors with this crew.

“Sitara,” is all I say, trying to keep my eyes on all five of them at once as they slowly edge closer.

“Kovaria is known to execute their fae prisoners upon capture. You must be very important, or very lucky.” His gaze drags over me again, and his lips curve up. “She is a pretty one, isn’t she, boys?”

They laugh, and my stomach drops into a pool of dread.

One of them licks their lips.

My own lip curls in disgust.

“If they kept her alive, and they hunt her now, still,” the fae male with dark hair next to the blonde speaks up, looking between me and his leader, “I’d bet Kovaria would pay a small fortune to have her back.”

“No—” I choke out, the words giving me a start. I study their armour again: no visible sigils or colors, just that ruddy brown and dull bronze. “But you’re—fae?” I trail off, looking up at the blonde again.

“We’re entrepreneurs,” he corrects, smirking down at me. “And right now, you’re looking like a mighty fine investment.”

Cold understanding settles through me.

“You’re raiders,” I say, narrowing my eyes and dropping all pretense, my voice flat. I’ve never encountered raiders myself, but I’ve heard all the stories. Raiders kept Fel and Riven busy at the border. Particularly Daekhar’s.

Bands of raiders like this group roam the land, scattered across all kingdoms, and are a threat to both humans and fae alike. Known for stealing crops, goods, coin, and even taking slaves to sell for profit—particularly young females.

The blonde draws a knife from his belt, holding my gaze while he lets his fingers trail along the sharp steel edge. “We heard a rumor that Kovaria captured the Sitari princess in the fall of Rosecliff.” His smile shows too many teeth. “Feared dead.” He looks me up and down. “They say she’s *real* pretty too.”

My back presses harder into the tree as he takes a step closer. His eyes gleam in the moonlight when he tilts his head back toward his friends, though his eyes never leave mine.

“Alive,” he tells them. “She’s worth far more to Miselys breathing.”

Miselys? King Mavros? My eyes narrow, and he laughs.

“Behave, Princess. I’d hate for my men to mistake your resistance for an invitation to have a little fun.”

That’s all I need to hear before I turn—and run.

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CHAPTER 43

ROWAN

The raiders form a semi-circle around me, hemming me against the tree at my back. So I have to move fast, swinging myself tightly around the trunk and slipping between the two large idiots behind me.

I sprint toward the sound of running water.

I'll never outrun them, *but if I can make it to the river*… maybe I can take my chances in the water… The roar of rushing water grows louder as I burst through the trees and down the steep embankment. The river stretches wide below me, the white water churning over dark rocks. I'm halfway down the hill when—

Abruptly, someone's hand wraps around my arm, wrenching it back roughly and cutting off the fleeting burst of hope.

Pain explodes through my shoulder, and I cry out. A second later, a fist tangles in my hair, ripping my head around. A scream tears out of me at the searing pain in my scalp.

"Got you," the raider grunts, proud of himself. He holds me up by my hair like I'm some prized fish.

My fist connects hard with his side, and he curses, shaking me hard, but unfortunately, he doesn't let go.

I fight hard, but he's more than twice my weight. I can't stop him from dragging me forward until I find myself once again face to face with the blonde fae leader.

I might’ve considered him to be handsome, if it weren’t for that oily smile of his—and the way it doesn’t reach his eyes.

He straightens slowly, as if he has all the time in the world, making a show of fixing his hair that my sudden dash for freedom must have mussed up. There’s a knife in his hand, but I don’t flinch when he suddenly points it in my direction, clicking his tongue.

“I told you to behave.” His gaze trails over me. “I’m disappointed.”

“My specialty,” I snap, smiling coldly at him.

“We have orders, Noz.” My attention flicks to the dark-haired fae standing next to him; I hadn’t noticed him a second ago.

A wicked gleam flashes through Noz’s crystal blue eyes.

“Orders can wait a day—or two.” His eyes drop to my chest, and the interest there sends my stomach roiling with disgust.

But alongside it—anger. Red-hot, furious rage boils deep inside. I feel my magic rise up venomously, and the burn of the rune tattooed on my wrist when it flares, forcing the power back.

I am so tired of being at the mercy of cocky, arrogant, asshole males. Both fists tighten at my sides.

Noz steps forward, a smug smile on his face—convinced he has me cornered. His hand reaches out for me, but I draw back, staying just outside his reach.

“Don’t touch me,” I warn, my eyes darkening as I feel the rage inside me converge.

The look of defiance in my eyes displeases him, and his smile fades to a frown.

“Sweetheart,” he clicks his tongue again. “Allow me to educate you on your new reality.”

The male who caught me is still at my back; he grabs both my shoulders, shoving me roughly forward. I stumble right into Noz’s grasp. He wraps his fist in my hair, forcing me closer.

The scent of him is nauseating. Sweat, blood, and something else—something *sour*.

Holding me still with one hand, he traces a finger down my cheek with the other, and when he reaches my mouth, he swipes his thumb along my bottom lip. “Let’s get something straight: I’m going to touch you *wherever* and *whenever* I want.” His eyes drop once more to my mouth, and darken with desire. “I’ll have you on your knees before I’m done with you.”

Smirking victoriously, he lifts his chin back toward his buddies, all of whom snicker in agreement.

But I'm done playing the mouse.

I reach for my knife, and once it's in my hand, I ram it hard into the soft swath of skin between his ribs.

Noz's breath catches, his blue eyes flying back to me, his pupils blown wide in genuine shock.

His goony friends are still too busy laughing at my expense to realize what's happened. They are still completely unaware of the dire shift that has just played out right in front of them.

Noz's grip loosens on my hair, and I rip the dagger out, a rush of blood spilling out with it. He stumbles, a choking sound escaping from his throat before he falls to his knees.

"Or perhaps," I flash the pearly whites of my fangs, looking down my nose at him, "I'll have *you* on yours."

My blade flashes again when I slice it clean across his throat.

Blood pours out, and Noz collapses fully to the ground, his grunts and gurgling growing quieter until there is only silence.

I smile at the raiders circled about. None of them know what to do; they just stand gaping at me while I spin the bloody knife in my palm.

"Who's next?"

One of them roars and charges at me, but before I even have time to brace myself, he drops—an arrow jutting out of his skull.

Shouts ring out as panic scatters the group. All of them scrambling, frantically scanning the area… looking for the shooter.

I'm curious too, but I seize the opportunity to back further away—inching closer to the raging river on my left.

The familiar zing of another arrow cuts the air, earning my attention. I look up just in time to watch another raider drop.

My head whips to the right, tracing the black arrow back to—

My blood goes cold.

Ayer.

The Kovari captain is a sight to behold in that black armour of his; his long dark cloak billowing out behind him as he descends the hill on foot. He already has another arrow nocked and drawn back, ready to loose.

The two remaining fae hesitate—freezing for a moment—glancing around wildly at both their dead companions and then each other before

they split apart.

One charges uphill—toward Ayer, while the other lifts his sword, rage in his features as he comes straight for me.

“Shit.” I backpedal, my heart slamming against my chest, but my heel catches on a rock and I go down—hard. The fall knocks the breath out of me. On the ground now, I scramble to get out of range of his sword, but I’m not fast enough. The fae raider stops above me, raising his blade high above my head, a look of satisfaction in his eyes just before they roll back into his skull.

He falters.

I roll hard to the side as his body collapses, landing where I’d just been sitting—a knife buried deep in the back of his skull.

I stare at it.

At him.

And then up.

Ayer is still only halfway down the hill.

Too far.

Impossible. That throw—

I survey the carnage before me. Four males lay dead, three of whom by next-to-impossible shots, made within mere seconds of each other. I’m not the best shot, but even I know that for that level of accuracy—from that distance…

Impossible.

The last surviving raider freezes, his gaze snapping back to his fallen buddy. He takes one glance between Ayer and the body of his friend before he turns, high-tailing it for the tree line.

He nearly makes it, too. Ayer waits until he’s nearly reached the tree line before his arrow takes him in the back of the head.

Silence falls.

It’s just Ayer and me.

He starts toward me, but I inch backward—moving closer toward the river. The icy spray of the wild water hits my cheek.

My heart pounds violently in my chest as he quickly closes the distance, slowing as he draws closer. I still don’t know what Kovaria wants from me—why they kept me alive. Wherever this journey through the Wyldewood ends, it ends soon.

I’m alive for a reason. Purpose or pleasure—I don’t know yet. But I don’t want to find out.

I steal a glance back at the river raging below. Water crashes through the narrow gorge in a frothing wall of white, hurling itself over jagged boulders with enough force to shake the earth beneath my boots. The current tears at everything in its path, the sound of it nearly deafening this close.

I can’t swim.

I turn back.

Ayer has reached the bottom of the hill now, closing the distance between us with long, purposeful strides.

My gaze darts back to the river. Then to him.

The river.

Ayer.

The *river*.

His pace slows, understanding flashes across his face, and his eyes go wide. “No!”

I can barely hear the word over the crashing sounds of the water.

He promised me death. With Ayer, death is certain. An inevitability.

But this way… I look back once more at the raging water below.

I can choose.

“Rowan—” The sound of my name in his rough voice pulls my eyes back to his.

For one suspended heartbeat, neither of us moves. Then he reaches toward me, his mouth opening.

But I don’t wait to hear whatever order will follow. *He won’t be able to use me, and my brothers will be safe.* I make my choice, stepping backward.

For the briefest instant, there is nothing beneath my feet, and it’s as if I’m flying. Wind tears through my hair, stealing the scream from my throat as the river rises to meet me. The roar swallows everything: the pounding of my heart, Ayer shouting my name, even my own thoughts.

Then—

The river hits me.

Or maybe I hit it.

The impact is brutal, the freezing water knocking every ounce of air from my lungs. Water crashes over me with the force of a battering ram, driving me deep beneath the surface, darkness swallowing me whole.

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CHAPTER 44

ROWAN

The current takes me before I can even fight for the surface.

This must be the Blackstone River. Flowing down from Izel in the north, the Blackstone River twists its way through the continent, through almost every kingdom.

The bitter cold seizes my lungs, my muscles, my body; I'm locked in an icy vise.

The cold, however, is the least of my worries. The water is chaos. It spins me, flipping me end over end through the water. My shoulder slams into something hard enough to send blinding pain exploding down my arm.

I think it's a rock, or maybe a tree.

There's no time to recover before the river drags me away.

No more than a few seconds later, pain wrenches my side as the river slams me into yet another boulder. The impact forces me up, and I hit the surface, inhaling nearly as much water as oxygen when I do.

My fingers scrape frantically along the slick stone, desperate for purchase, but there's nothing to grab. The force of the current is too strong, quickly sweeping me around the massive rock.

I don't know how to swim, but even if I did, I don't think it would matter. The river is in control, and I am completely at its mercy.

It's all I can do to get enough oxygen into my lungs before the current drags me back under.

Something sharp slices along my leg as I'm dragged past it—a branch, another rock… I don't know. I cry out again at the sharp pain, only to have even more water rush into my open mouth. Coughing and choking, my lungs burn and I'm desperate for air.

Pain.

It's one thing to choose to give your life to the river; it's another thing entirely to actually let it drown you.

Panic sets in as I'm swept further away. The water's moving fast, slamming me into rocks, trees, and submerged debris over and over again.

I try desperately to cling to anything, not even to escape, but just for relief—a full breath of air, at the very least. But it's all too slippery. I need to catch my breath. I need to—

The fight drains out of me far sooner than expected. I'm tired—so tired, my muscles scream with effort until they start to fail. I stop fighting for control and start fighting just to keep my head above water, but it's no use. The river plunges me down mercilessly, under and under, rolling my body in its churning fury.

I don't know how long I've been in the water. It could have been several minutes or close to an hour, but I know my time is running out. As my body tires, I begin to spend more and more time beneath the surface.

Darkness presses in, thick and murky, threatening to swallow me whole.

Air. I need air.

My lungs feel like they're on fire without it. I try kicking for the surface again, but the water relentlessly pushes me down, and there's just— I just have nothing left.

The current drags me down deeper, and this time… this time I don't fight it.

My body goes still, and I sink faster. My limbs feel heavy—like they're not mine anymore. The tumultuous sound of the roiling water around me fades away and everything gets…

Quiet.

I don't feel the cold anymore.

I don't feel the violent churning of the surrounding current.

I don't feel… *anything*.

My eyes lift to the surface; the sunlight is barely visible through the rough waves, but *it's there*. I can *see* it. *It's beautiful.*

I close my eyes, wanting that to be the last thing I see as I finally hand myself over to the darkness.

For once, the void is welcoming.

But then, my wrist catches on something. My body jerks so violently, and my injured shoulder screams in protest.

For one disoriented heartbeat, I think he's found me.

The Raven.

The shadow demon that has stalked my nightmares since I was a child. It took my mother, and now it's back for me.

Fingers tighten around my wrist. *Real* fingers. Not shadow or hallucination—real. Pulling me back. Pulling me *up*.

My eyes fly open, and the darkness appears to part just as something else wraps around my waist, strong and unyielding. *An arm*, I realize through blurred vision.

It drags me upward until I break through the surface. Sunlight chases off the last of the shadows, and I'm coughing and choking, sputtering as my lungs reject water in favor of air.

Air.

The arm wrapped around my waist keeps me above the surface long enough to take a solid breath, giving my body much-needed oxygen.

A wave crashes hard over my head, and I'm dragged back up again, the arm tightening around my waist as my vision clears, and a violent gasp escapes me.

Ayer.

I can barely register the sight of him next to me before we're pulled back underwater by the relentless current. I panic, not wanting to revisit the icy dark I'd almost been lost in.

Ayer drags us back up to the surface, keeping me pressed hard to his chest. Using the last of my strength, I cling to him, my fingers digging into his soaked leathers.

"I've got you," he breathes out roughly, as he fights to keep us both above water.

The current slams us hard against another submerged boulder as if trying to break us apart. But he doesn't let go. Not even as the river twists and turns, trying to wrench me from his grip—to reclaim the life he stole—but *Ayer never lets go.*

The rapids finally give way to rough waves, and at last, the violent rolls of water quiet as the river widens, the current losing strength.

No longer completely at the river's mercy, Ayer swims diagonally for shore with one arm. The other, he keeps firmly wrapped around me.

I barely have the strength to hold on.

Relief crashes through me when his boots finally hit bottom, finding purchase and finally halting our descent downstream. He doesn't relinquish his grip as he half-carries, half-drags me into the shallows. When all four of my limbs are on solid land, he lets me go. I collapse, and so does he.

My hands sink into the deep silt of the river's edge. Every muscle in my body shakes as I cough and convulse, and there's a sharp pain in my chest as my body ejects all the dark water I swallowed, again and again until my breaths even out and the pain eases.

With trembling arms, I push myself up until I'm resting on my knees, still sitting in a few inches of water by the shoreline. The water laps around me in soft, gentle waves, nothing like what we just experienced further upstream.

For a moment I just sit there. *And breathe.*

In and out. In and out. Gods, I have a whole new appreciation for air.

Speaking of…

I look up, glancing around me—searching until I find him.

Ayer.

He's on his back, not far from where I sit. Half on shore, eyes closed, his chest moving up and down.

He jumped in after me.

Whether to save me or prevent my escape… I don't know. Though, likely the latter.

My gaze lifts higher, to the tree line.

Run.

My instincts are screaming at me and I try; I really do. When I attempt to stand, my legs won't hold me. So I crawl.

Light.

I barely make it a few feet before my body reaches its limit. My legs collapse under me at the shoreline, the gravel of the riverbank the last thing I see before darkness claims me.

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CHAPTER 45

ROWAN

I wake with a violent shiver, startling further at the darkness surrounding me.

Disoriented, I lift my head, cringing immediately away from the heavy pounding inside before somehow finding the strength to push myself up out of the thick mud of the riverbank. My arms strain with the effort.

Gods, what I would do for a feather mattress to sink into instead.

My body is weak and slow to respond, as if the icy water stole away all its energy.

I'm half submerged in water, my clothes soaked through and freezing. The cool breeze of the night air feels like a whip against my skin, eliciting another violent shiver that rips through my entire body.

I glance around.

Trees.

Endless trees.

We're deep in the forest; the river potentially dragged us miles further south.

I shake off another shiver, crawling further up the river bank until I'm fully out of the water, ignoring the pain screaming through my shoulder.

Glancing back at the river, I can see where the narrow stream of rapids spills out in a rush into a wider basin of water. The current slows into something deceptively calm, the surface of the water glassy, reflecting the silvery glow of the moon high above.

Unrecognizable. It’s so peaceful and serene, despite having just tried to violently drown me.

I cough hard, expelling more water still from my abused lungs, and I can feel every breath I take, each one an extra effort; my body doesn’t quite seem to remember how to breathe properly yet. I sit there for a long moment while I catch my breath. My eyes scan the riverbank again, catching on something dark in the water.

I go still.

Ayer.

He’s a few yards downstream from me. Eyes closed—passed out, maybe. Not dead. I’m not that lucky. His body lies half submerged in the shallows, wrapped around a thick log, which keeps his head propped out of the water.

The tide has crept up while we’ve been out, and his face is just barely above water.

Barely.

The log sits precariously along the shoreline, shifting in the gentle current—unstable. Any minor disturbance in the water threatens to dislodge it.

I swallow hard, remembering the feeling of his arm around me in the water. The river tried to wrench me from him, to take back what it had already claimed, but he never relented.

He never let go.

Why?

The question circles in my mind as I stare at him. I don’t dare move, lest it wake him. My eyes dart back toward the tree line, silently calculating how much of a head start I might get if I could slip away undetected into the woods—assuming he does, in fact, live.

That log… One strong wave and it will slip free, taking the captain with it.

Backing away, my eyes stay vigilant, scanning every inch of him for the slightest hint of movement as I move further away. If he so much as twitches a pinky, I’m bolting.

But before I turn, my gaze catches on something clutched in Ayer’s fist. I frown, not wanting to get any closer, but it’s hard to make out in the dark. It’s small, wooden… a carving, I think.

He’s been carving something every night this week beside the campfire.

Puzzled, I peer closer, and even in the dim light, I can make out the shape: a winged horse. It's delicately crafted.

It's the first good look I've gotten of his work-in-progress. The hand-carved horse is unexpected and such a stark comparison to the cold and dangerous war captain I know. Maybe he's carving it for someone. Does he have someone waiting for him? A wife perhaps?

Just like the fae soldiers in Sitara's army, the Kovari soldiers must have families too. People who love them. People hoping to see them again.

The notion sits heavy in my chest.

I huff, annoyed with myself for the delay, and shake the thought away while rolling my eyes at my bleeding heart, willing it to harden.

Ayer is dangerous. And he wants me dead.

Maybe not today, considering he pulled me from the river, but I know that hasn't changed. I'm sure of it, even if I don't understand it. He could hurt me, use me; he could have just let me drown. And yet…

He hasn't.

Not yet, I remind myself sharply.

Is he an asshole? *Yes.*

Dangerous? *Without a doubt.*

Ayer has had every opportunity to touch me—torture me—or worse. *But he hasn't.*

Yet. My inner voice screams reason at me.

I eye the captain warily, my feet frozen in the river's muddy bank, distrusting my assessment of the battle-hardened captain. I take in the hard line of his jaw, resting on that log, his nose only a hair's breadth above the dark water below.

If he slips *one more inch* while unconscious, he'll drown.

I should let him. I should leave him exactly where I've found him and do all of Sitara a favor.

Or better yet… *I should end him myself.*

My gaze drifts back to the wooden carving in his hand.

He wasn't holding it in the water earlier. He must have taken it out, checked for it, and made sure he hadn't lost it, even as he was losing consciousness.

Because he saved me.

I curse under my breath. "Stupid, idiotic, asinine—" I grumble, starting toward him, reaching for my newly returned knife on my thigh, just in case

soldier boy doesn’t live up to the angel reputation I just painted in my head.

Crouching down beside him, I first check his chest to ensure he’s even breathing.

It rises.

Alive, then.

An emotion flickers inside me. Disappointment or relief, I don’t know. I try not to linger on the latter.

Carefully, I lay my knife down on the sand before I reach for him. I have to hold my breath when my fingertips accidentally brush his cheek.

Slowly—so, so slowly—and carefully, I take his head in my hands, turning it away from where it’s hanging precariously over the water. Then I reach down, pull a rock from the water, and wedge it underneath the log to stabilize it.

Satisfied with my good deed, I lift my fingers, breaking contact with Ayer’s skin. Wasting precious seconds, I hesitate to study his face. It’s— He looks *different* like this. Unconscious, his features are softer. He looks younger than I had guessed before, more… innocent, and less haunted, maybe.

I scoff. *Innocent*.

He’s *not* innocent.

Not even close.

Pushing away the thought, I reach for my knife. I’ve done enough, more than enough—more than most.

Time to go.

I fully intend to put as much distance between us as I can before he wakes up.

But the moment my fingers close around the hilt, I feel it. An awareness—a prickle running down my spine. My eyes drift reluctantly up, only to find steel-gray staring back. The shadows gathering in them make my heart rate stutter.

His gaze drops to the knife in my hand.

Oh, hells.

I open my mouth, an explanation ready on the tip of my tongue, but it’s too late; I’m already on my back. The impact knocks the breath from my lungs, giving him the advantage in his efforts to pin me under him.

I curse, twisting and thrashing beneath him, trying to buck him off. Water splashes everywhere. Adrenaline surges. My knife is gone—he’s

already taken it, or perhaps it's lost in the water.

His hand closes around my throat, and I still.

Ayer glares down at me. His grip is firm, but not tight enough to choke. My head hovers just over the surface of the water, my neck straining to keep it there. I'm aware of every single breath I take in as Ayer holds them in the palm of his hand.

"I saved your life..." He searches my face, as if he's trying to understand me. "And you try to cut me in my sleep?"

The breeze picks up; the icy chill of the water steals the last of my warmth away, and I shiver violently, teeth chattering as I try to speak.

"No—I—" I fumble, struggling to get the words out between the cold and his hand threatening my larynx.

"You *what*?" he snaps impatiently.

"I was making sure you were breathing!" The words rush out, a jumbled mess, but the way his body stills over me… I know he heard them. He shifts, his body tensing while his eyes narrow; there is nothing but suspicion in his eyes when he looks down at me.

"It's true!" I spit out between my teeth. "It's not like I can hurt you, anyway. Not with this," I mutter, lifting my arm out of the water, showing off his dark rune still on my wrist.

Long seconds of silence pass between us.

His grip on my throat loosens.

"Sure," he says before releasing his hold, shifting off of me and leaving me heaving in the freezing water.

I push myself back up on shaking arms, scrambling back up the bank while he watches.

"What exactly was the plan?" he asks, and I peer up at him, still trying to catch my breath. His dark eyes dripping with disdain and irritation. "Drown?"

"Maybe," I mutter, dragging myself to my feet.

"No, seriously, Princess, I want to know." He crosses his arms across his chest, staring me down. There's a slightly mocking edge to his voice before he comes at me so fast I almost fall back into the river as I scramble away. "What in the *twelve hells* were you thinking, jumping into that water in the first place?"

"Oh, now you want to know what I was thinking?" I shoot back, refusing to cower to him, not caring if he drowns me after all.

“Yes!” he growls back, a dark storm brewing in his eyes. “I want to know why you would do something so—so reckless and idiotic, like jumping into white water.”

I bristle at his words. Anger flares, emboldening me, and I lift my chin to look him in the eye.

“Alright, Rusic.” I laugh, but there’s no trace of humor in it. “I’ll tell you what I was thinking.” I tap my finger against my chin as if pondering the thought myself. “Let’s see… Well, to start, I was taken captive,” I say, shooting an accusatory look his way. “And then, I got jumped by a faction of fae raiders. So when given the choice between death by drowning or eventual certain death by the perpetually miserable captain of the Kovarian army, who wishes to—hmm, what was it?” I tilt my head to the side as if to consider it. “Oh, right! Yes, who wishes to see me on my knees because of my brother’s mysterious alleged *sins.*…”

Ayer’s jaw tightens.

“If you think you were the *better* choice, I think you may have taken one too many hits to the head, Captain.”

He’s silent for a beat, considering me. “And so then what? Say you survived your brazen water escape, only to find yourself *alone* in the Wyldewood? How did you plan to defend yourself against all the monsters that go bump in the night?”

I open my mouth only to shut it quickly. My lips press into a thin line. It was a split-second decision. I didn’t exactly think everything through. In truth, *I just planned on drowning.*

Ayer’s words remind me of the threat the woods hold, and I break our gaze to glance warily at the dark tree line up ahead.

As if reading my mind, Ayer just shakes his head, turning away from me to climb up the embankment toward the forest.

I’m frozen—uncertain whether I’m supposed to follow.

A howl cuts through the night, somewhere far in the distance, but it’s enough to send me scurrying after him.

As much as I hate to admit it, I’m not getting very far without him.

“Hurry up!” he calls out, without sparing a glance back to check if I’m even following.

His gruff tone and air of authority grate against my already bruised ego as I trudge out of the thick muddy bank of the river, wincing as my sore muscles and battered body protests every step.

Ayer disappears into the trees.
I stop at the tree line, gritting my teeth before following in after him.
Should've let him drown.

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CHAPTER 46

ROWAN

The full moon above gives the forest an eerie, silvery glow that I admit might be worse than darkness.

At least in the dark, the shadows don't move. The shadows tonight refuse to stay still, shifting with every breeze until I can't tell what's real and what's my fear or exhaustion.

I'm hypervigilant. I can't stop imagining some monster watching—lurking just out of sight.

Ayer doesn't bind me, but I stay close to him anyway.

I hate it with every fiber of my being, but the last thing I need is more ropes on my wrists, and that's exactly what I'll get if I stray.

The forever grumpy captain remains as stoic and unreadable as ever, confidently moving through the forest along a game trail we stumbled across a bit ago as if he knows *exactly* where it leads.

And me… Here I am just blindly following him through the woods.

What would Riven and Fel think?

Light.

My jaw tightens, and my cheeks heat with shame. All that time spent training, wasted. *I can't even touch him.*

He hasn't said a word since we left the river, and neither have I, both of us moving forward in a tense silence that grows louder with every hour that passes.

I’ve got my eyes on my feet, carefully picking around the loose rocks and exposed roots, when I notice the forest has gone quiet.

Too quiet.

I lift my chin, staring at the *empty* trail up ahead. My brow furrows, and I glance over my shoulder.

Nothing.

Ayer is nowhere to be seen.

My heart lurches, and fear trickles up my spine as the shadows of the night appear to close in around me. I swallow hard, my eyes darting between the dark trees.

“Ayer?” I whisper as loud as I dare, spinning around slowly. *If this is his idea of a joke…*

But… *nothing.*

I’m frozen where I stand, caught between staying and making a run for it. It’s as if the forest itself is holding its breath, the quiet unnerving me further. I take a couple hesitant steps back, wincing when I snap a twig with the heel of my boot. I might as well have fired a canon, the way the crack echoes around me.

“Ayer?” I try again, a little louder this time, unable to hide the shake in my voice. There’s still no sign of him. *Did he ditch me? I didn’t even notice him slip away.*

My hand drops down—to the empty sheath at my thigh. Remembering too late how I lost my blade to the river.

I swear it’s only gotten darker in this little corner of the forest, and the longer I stay here, the worse I panic, so, keeping my eyes on the trees and my head on a swivel, I start forward again. Ignoring the rush of blood pounding in my ears and the goosebumps prickling at my skin.

My steps quicken until I’m practically running. I make it nearly to the bend up ahead when a hand shoots out from the darkness, hooking around my waist and yanking me off my feet. At the same time, another hand clamps down hard over my mouth, silencing my scream.

I lose it, thrashing violently as I twist and fight to get away, though I fail miserably in my panic.

“Shh.”

I freeze at the familiar dark voice in my ear.

He spins me quickly, slamming my back hard against a thick tree trunk. Readjusting his grip, he keeps his palm firmly pressed to my mouth while

caging my body between his and the tree at my back.

“Don’t move,” he breathes, his words just barely audible.

My gaze lifts, and I find him staring down at me—a dark urgency in his eyes.

He’s got me pinned to the tree, and the way his arm is pressed up against my chest, I know he can feel my wild heartbeat thundering underneath.

I can’t move. His hold on me is so tight—intent on keeping me still. The scent of him fills my lungs and I want to scream, twist, *run*—but instead, the opposite happens. A little bit of tension eases from my muscles, my body relaxing slightly in his hold.

He hasn’t looked away, but something flashes in his eyes before his gaze slides to the left. I follow it.

At first, I see nothing but trees and darkness, but just as I start to doubt him, something *moves*. I go rigid, and Ayer’s grip on me tightens as he presses his body further into mine as the creature comes into full view.

It could almost be mistaken as human or fae, with a round head, walking on two legs. But it's too tall, and its limbs move… *unnaturally*, bending at the wrong angles. Its gait uneven as it steps out of the woods and onto the trail. With moonlight shining down, I can make out the gray of its skin, gaunt, and rubbery. Dark hair hangs down from its scalp in long, greasy strands.

Every bone is visible. I can count every rib, every vertebrae… The creature appears emaciated—or like it just crawled out of a grave. And when it turns its head, I’m grateful for Ayer’s hand still pressed firmly against my mouth, my gasp caught by his palm at the sight of the creature’s hollowed-out black eyes and huge mouth full of razor-sharp teeth.

Light.

I’ve never seen anything like it.

The creature starts forward, inching closer to where we’re hiding. Ayer shifts us carefully to the side, keeping the tree between us and the stars-blasted monster only several feet away.

I can’t see it anymore, so I keep my eyes on Ayer, watching his eyes track the beast, keeping us quiet and out of its sights.

I hear the creature sniff the air as it comes closer, gnashing its teeth together hungrily. A tremble of fear ripples through me. *Run, run— We should run.*

Ayer’s eyes drop to mine, slowly shaking his head back and forth as if reading my mind.

He still has his sword strapped across his back, knives sheathed along his belt. He hadn’t lost everything in the river but yet he hasn’t tried to attack. He doesn’t move. He just holds me here, hidden within the narrow shelter of the tree, his body shielding mine.

The creature is right behind us now, and I don’t dare move. It creeps closer, the guttural clicking of its throat churning my stomach.

Ayer’s grip on my mouth loosens, while his eyes stay fixed on mine, willing me to stay quiet as he releases my mouth, reaching back slowly to grip the hilt of his sword.

A few more agonizingly long breaths and a branch cracks somewhere in the forest. The creature wheels around, surging past us at a shockingly high speed as it chases the sound, disappearing back into the forest's shadows.

Ayer doesn’t release me yet, waiting several seconds before finally exhaling and stepping back. The sudden loss of his warmth is far more noticeable than it should be. For a moment, nothing happens, we just… stare at each other.

“What was that?” I finally ask. My voice comes out hoarse; my throat is dryer than I thought.

“A slough demon,” Ayer replies while giving the forest a thorough scan. I suppose he’s waiting to be sure the monster has fully cleared off before continuing on.

I tense at the word *demon*. Clearing my throat, I reply, “Never heard of it.”

I feel his gaze find me again, his focus lasering in as he tilts his head to study me. “You’ve *never* heard of it?” I can hear the skepticism from here.

“Should I have?”

“It lives in *your* kingdom...” His brow lifts and I bristle at the call out.

I don’t know anything about the Wyldewood or anywhere else for that matter…

I push on with the conversation. “What is it?”

“A demon.”

I clench my jaw, trying hard not to roll my eyes. “I gathered that. So it’s a predator. Does it eat…” I swallow, chewing my lip while doing a quick scan of the trees. *“People?”*

“Mostly.”

“*Mostly?*” I ask, my head whipping back toward him, needing to know more.

Ayer stares down at me. “Sometimes it eats fae.”

I glare at him, catching the flash of amusement in his dark eyes. He indulges himself another few seconds before he releases a sigh. “A slough demon is one of the more dangerous pure-blooded demons to roam these woods. It’s remarkably hard to kill since that rubbery skin you saw is impenetrable. The only way to kill it is to take off its head by attacking the throat. It will eat just about anything with warm blood running through its veins. But not before immobilizing you, causing injury just enough to keep you from running away. Then it slowly strips the skin from your body, savoring each and every bite, while you can do nothing but watch.”

My jaw goes slack and I can only stare back at him.

He shrugs, looking away. “I thought it was best we try and avoid it entirely.”

I can’t say I don’t agree, but I won’t verbally acknowledge he was right. Instead, I remain quiet, blocking visions of being skinned alive, all while staring into the bottomless black depths of its eyes.

An awkward silence settles between us. I fill it by brushing some dirt off my skirt.

“You’re welcome by the way,” Ayer says, finally breaking the silence, assessing me with his gaze.

“For what?” My eyes narrow, already suspecting where he’s going with this.

“For saving your royal ass… *again*.” His lip quirks up, and with it, I see red.

“I never asked you to save me. Keeping me alive is *your* problem, not mine. You’re just a good little soldier, following orders.” I try pushing past him, moving for the path, but he blocks me with his body, stepping into me until he has me cornered once again with the tree at my back. He braces his arms against the bark, caging me in. I have to tilt my head to keep his eyes.

“Bonus points for creativity, Princess, but there’s only one way you’re dying while you belong to me.” His voice drops low as his eyes appear to darken. “Beg me.”

My lips part as my mouth drops open, and I watch as his gaze drops to them.

“Are you ready to get on your knees for me, *Princess*?”

My blood is boiling and my cheeks flame pink, a knot forming in my stomach at his words. I swallow, unable to form a worthy retort under the intense weight of his gaze.

He clicks his tongue at my continued silence. “Remember, kitten,” he bites down on each consonant, his words crisp and precise, “my offer stands. But until then, you live because *I* say you do.”

Without warning, he steps back, and I can finally take a full breath of air.

“Stay close,” he calls as he backs away, slowly heading back toward the trail. “Slough demons travel in packs.”

I have no idea if that’s true, but the possibility sends me jolting off the tree. I grind my teeth, glaring at Ayer as I reluctantly follow after him.



We’ve been walking for a few hours when the game trail intersects with a road that continues winding its way through the woods.

I can feel Ayer’s smirk, though I refuse to look.

The wider path leaves us more exposed; the breeze picks up and I shiver. We’re both still soaked through from the river. But what was just uncomfortable at first is quickly becoming dangerous. I wrap my arms tighter around my body for warmth, shooting a withering glare at Ayer’s back.

I scent rain on the wind; a storm is brewing.

We need to stop—to rest. I need shelter, a fire, and *sleep*. But I’m not about to be the one to break our war of silence and say as much.

“There’s a village around the bend.” His deep voice startles me after hours of silence.

I peer down the darkened path and see nothing. Nothing but shifting moonlit shadows.

A harsh caw cuts through the quiet.

A raven glides overhead, its black wings eclipsing the moonlight before it disappears beyond the trees ahead. My gaze follows it until it’s gone.

Even with my fae hearing, I catch nothing that suggests civilization lies just beyond the bend.

I turn back toward Ayer, finding him studying me carefully.

“Maybe they have an inn,” I say quietly, unable to keep the hope out of my voice. The mere thought of warmth… food… *a bed*…

Gods, I might cry.

“We’re still in Sitara.” His words are clipped, and for the first time since I met him, he looks uncertain.

I blink up at him, confused until it dawns on me.

“It’s not—” I start, stumbling over my words in my exhaustion and sheer desperation for rest. “They won’t recognize me,” I try assuring him, dropping my gaze to the ground. “If that’s what you’re worried about?”

I feel his eyes linger on me; the pull of his gaze is strong, but I refuse to look up.

“I’ve never been through the Wyldewood—never been to any of these villages. They won’t know who I am,” I insist, raising my eyes to meet his.

I reach down, tugging at my mud-stained, soaked, and torn dress while letting loose a tight laugh as I survey it. “Especially like this.”

Before I can say anything else, Ayer’s hand shoots out, gripping my jaw and pulling my gaze back to his.

“Listen closely, *Princess*,” he says, his voice low and threatening. “I don’t trust you, and if there were a better option…” His jaw tightens because we both know there isn’t. And I at least know just how close we are to freezing to death. “We’ll go to the village, but on one condition.” His gray eyes blaze with silver fire as he stares down into mine. “You do everything I say.”

My eyes narrow, and his grip on my chin tightens as though he expects an argument.

“If you draw attention to yourself, if you try to seek help in any way…” he shakes his head, his expression grave, “there *will* be consequences.”

Despite my utter exhaustion, anger bubbles up and I squint my eyes defiantly, leaning into his threats. “What more could you possibly do to me, *Captain*?” I spit his title at him like it’s a poison on my tongue.

His expression darkens, and he leans in closer until his mouth brushes against my ear as if he’s about to share a secret. I fight the urge to pull away —to put some distance between us—but I also want to hold my ground.

“Oh,” he breathes, and the warm air… I shiver again, but this time not from the cold. “There is *so* much I can do to you, *Princess*,” he murmurs low in my ear.

Something twists in my stomach, deep in my abdomen, and I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from flinching. My cheeks flush pink.

“But it’s not *you* I would worry about tonight, love.”

I frown, confusion knitting my brows together. “What do you mean?”

He pulls back just enough for me to see his face again.

His hard, cold, dangerous face.

“The villagers,” he says, gesturing lazily with his free hand in a way that is far too casual for the dark tone of his voice, “the innkeeper… Perhaps he has a wife… children too, maybe.”

My stomach drops, a grim understanding sinking through me.

“If they learn who you are... who I am…” His eyes are nearly black. “They’ll be the ones to pay for your mistakes, Princess,” he says, throwing my own title back at me.

I swallow hard. The gravity of Ayer’s threat hangs heavy in the air. Before, I only considered the village a source of warmth and food, but now, the thought that innocent lives might be at risk if I try anything, or if someone recognizes me, presses down on me. .

I nod. Slowly. Reluctantly. I agree.

A few beats pass, but Ayer doesn’t move. His hand remains on my chin and his gaze lingers, his steel-gray eyes studying mine, reading my expression until finally, he seems satisfied by whatever he sees there, and his hand falls away.

“Good,” he mutters, shaking out the hand that touched me before gesturing down the path. “After you, *Your Highness*.”

I don’t bother masking my scowl as I stalk past him.

The silence is thick between the two of us again as we round the bend together, a small but tidy village coming into view. Together we start down the hill, the power struggle between us a delicate but dangerous dance.

“Behave yourself, Princess,” Ayer warns one last time as we close in on the village entrance, his tone cold and unyielding. “For your sake, and *theirs*.”

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CHAPTER 47

AYER

The village is nearly as silent as the woods when we finally enter the nearly deserted street. The billowing smoke from the chimneys shows that, unlike those of the other villages, its residents had not yet abandoned this one. It's the middle of the night, and there are only a few people moving about.

The two mud-covered strangers walking through town draw interest until their curious gazes fall on my dark scowl, and suddenly they find an urgent need to be, well, anywhere else.

The inn is not difficult to find. A quaint little building just on the edge of town, there's a soft orange glow coming from the windows, and smoke curls from the chimney above.

I can feel the princess' glare on my back, but she can't make me regret my threat. I meant it, too. I'm here for one reason and one reason only: to protect my people. There is no limit to what I will do to keep those I love safe. And one spoiled, bratty princess won't stand in the way of that.

When we reach the inn, naturally, I hold the door open for Rowan, getting far too much enjoyment out of the way she rolls her eyes at me.

The tavern is empty, aside from a single man standing behind the bar, wiping the already spotless surface down with a rag. He's older, heavy-set, with a pleasant smile and kind eyes that widen as he takes in the sight of us.

“*My stars*,” he breathes, taking me in first before his gaze pulls to Rowan beside me.

The man’s eyes linger on the princess a heartbeat too long, and my fingers twitch toward the dagger at my belt. I clear my throat, forcing my hand away from the hilt, reminding myself that this man isn’t a threat.

Old habits.

“Do you have any rooms available?” I ask, hoping to pull the man’s attention off Rowan, disliking the way he stares. “My—er—wife and I were hoping for a brief respite from our travels.”

Wife. Where in the *stones* did that come from?

Rowan makes a tiny, imperceptible choking sound, nearly snapping her neck at how fast she whips her head toward me.

I ignore her, keeping my face carefully blank while smiling politely at the innkeeper. Calling her my wife is the most believable story. Married couples travel together. And that little menace isn’t leaving my sight.

The stout innkeeper just blinks at the two of us for another half second before seeming to remember himself, nodding vigorously. “Yes, yes, but of course.” I clench my jaw when he looks her up and down. “My stars! Please don’t take this personally, but you two look like you’ve been through it!” He shakes his head as he looks us both over, his brows furrowing. “No bags?” he questions, looking right at me. His tone is light, but his eyes are sharp.

Suspicious.

I open my mouth, my hand drifting subconsciously down to the hilt of my blade.

“We were robbed.”

My head turns to Rowan. Slowly.

“By raiders. And not long afterward, I fell into the river and, well…” she explains smoothly, all while looking the innkeeper right in the eyes. No hesitation. No stutter. “We would be so grateful for your hospitality. I’m just desperate for a place to dry off and sleep.”

My brow lifts. *Fell?* She’s so convincing. I might have even believed it myself had I not lived it.

The little liar even blushes.

The man’s expression softens instantly.

“Oh, you poor dears. I have one room left!” he says, already moving. “It’s all made up. Top of the stairs. I’ll have hot water brought up for a bath,

and there's still some stew left from dinner if you're hungry." He plucks the single remaining key from a line of hooks and hands it to me.

"Thank you." I nod gratefully, taking the key and ushering Rowan up the tiny stairwell with a light hand on her lower back. At the top, I unlock the door, revealing a tiny but charming room. A fire's already been lit, and the heat from it is a welcome greeting. The warm glow illuminates a tidy bed, a small wardrobe, and another wooden door that I presume leads to the bathing chamber.

I linger on the threshold. Rowan too. Both of us staring at the *one* bed. For a moment, neither of us moves.

The innkeeper's voice drifts up from below; he's barking orders to someone—likely the maid. They'll be headed up soon with that hot water he mentioned. Not wanting to raise further suspicion, I quickly nudge Rowan forward, pushing her into the room before closing the door behind us.

She crosses her arms, leveling me with a glare. *Don't touch me,* I read in her eyes.

I don't bother reacting. The situation is less than ideal, but it beats camping outside, soaking wet in the middle of a rainstorm. We can both survive this little… *inconvenience* for one night.

A minute later, there's a knock at the door. It's the maid arriving with hot water for the bath, followed closely by the innkeeper—Hari, as he introduced himself—who sets down a tray of food. There's steaming stew, fresh bread, and two cups of tea.

I'm holding the door open for them to leave, but Hari hesitates, hands on his hips as he studies Rowan again. I watch them closely. "My dear, that dress has seen better days."

He's got a point… Her dress is in a state, soaked and stained from days on the road, and torn beyond repair.

Rowan flushes scarlet, but before she can protest, Hari is already waving the maid back toward the door. "Jenna! Find something warm for the poor girl to wear."

She scurries off without question, returning a few minutes later carrying a folded bundle.

"My daughter's," she murmurs quietly to Rowan, slipping them into her hands. "She's outgrown them, so they won't be missed."

Rowan takes the bundle from the woman. "Thank you."

Before she can say more, Hari and Jenna take their leave, but not before wishing us a good evening. “Breakfast will be served in the dining room after sunrise. If you need anything else, just shout.”

Once the door closes behind them, silence settles over the room again.

I start toward the food, my hunger already ravenous. Without a word, I hand the first bowl and loaf of bread to Rowan before practically inhaling my own. It’s hearty, chock-full of meat, potatoes, and carrots. I haven’t eaten this well in days.

She too eats quickly. Once she’s done, I nod toward the washroom. “Ladies first.”

She doesn’t argue, almost eager to get away from me. She slips into the washroom; a second later I hear the click of the bolt sliding into place. My mouth twitches.

I sigh, stripping off my armour and leathers. My shirt peels away from my skin, still soaked. I lay it all out to dry by the fire.

The faint sounds of water sloshing—and Rowan in it—permeate through the washroom door. Inhaling deeply, I focus my attention on cleaning any remaining river muck off my blades before arranging them atop the table, taking only my knife with me over to the bed.

I don’t have to worry about the weapons with Rowan. As much as I’m sure she’s tried, she’s not getting past that rune on her wrist. There are only two ways to remove it: if I myself remove it, in the same way I put it on, or by my death—which, because of the nature of the rune, can’t be by Rowan’s hand.

She’s been in the washroom a long while now. I stare at the door, listening to see if I can make out any sound, but all I hear is silence. Lightly, I pace the room, glancing every now and again at the washroom door when I still don’t hear a sound. The silence stretches so long that I’m nearly convinced she’s fallen asleep in the tub.

I cross the room and stop outside the door, listening closely. Nothing. I raise my fist to knock, and the lock clicks.

The washroom door jolts open, revealing a wide-eyed Rowan who freezes at the sight of me. I catch a whiff of her—or whatever soap she’s used. The faint scent of wildflowers and honey catches me off guard. It’s soft and sweet, and I like it more than I should.

Her dark chestnut hair is damp and combed free of leaves, dirt, and tangles, and her face is freshly scrubbed, her cheeks still flushed a soft pink

from the heat of the bath. The dress Jenna gave her fits well; it's simple, made of a good, sturdy cotton, and is far more appropriate for traveling, unlike the thin, expensive fabric of the dress she had been wearing. The darker earth tones suit her, bringing out the green in her eyes. It's a little small, highlighting more of her curves. She looks different. Less royal and more…

No.

Don't finish that thought.

Rowan's gaze travels between my raised hand and my face. "Were you about to knock?"

Her voice brings my attention to the fact that my fist is still hanging midair between us. I drop it quickly. "You were in there forever."

She frowns. "I was bathing…"

"I was making sure you hadn't drowned."

Her brows lift. "In a *bathtub?*"

"I wouldn't put it past you." I take a step back from the doorway, suddenly too aware of how close I am to her. I make my way back toward the bed, gesturing to her side as I circle round to my own. "Bedtime."

She's still staring at me. "You're sleeping on the floor, right?" she asks smoothly, but I detect an unfamiliar waver hidden within her voice. I watch those pine green eyes trail south and continue lower, traveling over my bare chest.

"Nope," I answer while pointedly settling down on the bed, leaving ample room on the other side for the uptight princess.

Rowan frowns, turning back to survey the tiny washroom she just left as if considering climbing back into the tub to sleep.

Sighing, I rap my knuckles on the wooden frame above. "It's a bed, Princess. Don't make it into something it isn't."

She stares sullenly at the bed for another moment.

"Your choice, kitten."

Indecision wars on her face, her eyes flicking between me, the bed, the bath, and the floor. I know she's sore and tired, and the bed is feather-stuffed, warm, with fluffy pillows and thick furs.

Rowan glares at me before finally inching closer

"Fine," she huffs, irritation written across her face, "but if you even think about touching me, I'll cut off your balls and feed them to you."

I stare at her.

I should punish such a threat, but I'm more shocked at the unladylike words I just heard escape the princess' lips. All I can do is stare at her as she edges slowly out of the washroom, tiptoeing lightly across the room, her feet bare.

Bold threats from someone who knows she can't harm me, but even still, I incline my head once, keeping my face carefully blank so as not to betray any hint of amusement and encourage this defiant demeanor. "Noted."

Seemingly appeased, the princess climbs under the blankets, keeping to the very edge of the mattress as though one more inch closer to me might prove fatal.

I try not to roll my eyes.

She finally settles in, and the room falls silent save for the crackling fire.

I'm tired—fucking exhausted. But yet, I can feel the anxiety rolling off the princess beside me. We're close enough that I can hear every breath she takes. They come too fast—too shallow. She's awake, staring at the wall—me, the rafters.

I don't trust her. She doesn't trust me. She would have rather drowned than let me catch her.

I can't fall asleep until she does, and I'm near certain she's waiting for me.

She can't hurt me, but that doesn't mean she can't run. I should stay up, but I'm going on nearly forty-eight hours awake, and I'm approaching my limit. I'm a light sleeper, but nevertheless, I took precautions, moving the bureau to block the door. It's heavy, and while she might be able to move it on her own, there's no way for her to do it quietly.

She's stuck here.

With me.

So she might as well go the fuck to sleep.

Irritation spreads through me the longer she holds out. Lying there, still as a statue, but I *know*… I know she's awake.

Stones. This is ridiculous. War, sieges, ambushes, *monsters*, and somehow my greatest battle this week is seeing who *falls asleep first.*

A soft huff sounds from her side of the bed. She's frustrated.

Good. So am I.

The silence stretches on until the sound of rain taps against the roof overhead. A few drops at first, then a dozen more, building into a steady rhythm.

I look up.

She does too, rolling onto her back and drawing my attention.

And for a brief moment, our eyes meet, and something between us shifts. The tension in the room eases as a silent understanding passes between the two of us.

Rowan rolls back over, keeping her back to me, but finally allowing her body to relax into the mattress. Her breath slows, and she’s out. Just like that.

Quietly, I slip from the bed to wash up myself, listening carefully for any sounds as I make quick work of it. When I return, I find the princess exactly as I left her.

The rain falls steadily, but I listen to the sound of her breathing. Slow. Steady. Until I feel myself start to fall, too. Sleep finally claiming me.

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CHAPTER 48

ROWAN

Morning comes too fast.

Content that Ayer hates me too much to try anything, I passed out as soon as my head hit the pillow.

It was the first relatively good night in what feels like ages. No dreams, no nightmares, just blissful *sleep*.

A shift in the mattress beneath me pulls me back to reality. My hand immediately slides to my thigh, fingers searching for my knife, but… it's not there.

Right. The river took it.

Frustration drags me further into consciousness, my eyes fluttering open just to find the devil himself watching me. My attention drops to the blade he's spinning lazily between his fingers.

My blade.

I bolt upright at the sight of the familiar rose-carved dagger, and I just stand there, glaring at him.

"That's *mine*."

"I know," he says, amusement dancing in his eyes. They're free of shadows for once.

"You stole it."

"I think you mean… I *confiscated* it."

"Same thing."

"Not really."

I narrow my eyes. They dart between his face and my blade in his hand, calculating just how fast I'd have to be to swipe it off him.

I thought the river took it.

Gods, starting the day already this pissed off is really a less than auspicious start.

"Give it back," I growl venomously.

"Ask nicely."

The audacity of this man. "No."

"You could at least say please." He tilts his head expectantly to the side as if waiting for me to say it.

"Fuck that."

The captain's eyebrows lift at my colorful language.

"I thought I lost it."

"I know."

"You *let* me think I lost it."

"I did."

"You're a monster, you know that?"

He laughs, and I don't know what to make of it. A genuine bona fide laugh spills out of the man who wouldn't know a smile if it bit him. I want to slap him. Hard.

"It's not funny."

He chuckles again. "I never said it was."

I can only glare at him—pointedly.

"To be fair, you *did* try to stab me with it."

"No, I *didn't!*" I shout in exasperation. The man has already succeeded in getting under my skin. "I was *actually* in the middle of *saving your life*, but you're just too dumb to notice."

He frowns; the blade spinning in his palm goes still.

"It's mine," I say softer this time, my eyes fixed on the blade, on the intricate rose carved into the handle.

"So you've said—a few times now," he replies flatly.

"Gah, you're insufferable, do you know that?" I'm pacing the room now like a caged animal. *I hate him. I hate him. I hate him so much.*

He *smirks*. The bastard is enjoying this. Ayer twirls the knife once more, tossing it up, flipping it mid-air so that he catches it by the blade before holding the hilt of it out. Offering it *to me*.

I freeze.

I don’t take it yet, eyeing him with suspicion. *A trap*, surely, knowing him. But to what end? My eyes dart around nervously, marking the exits. The door is clear now. The bureau Ayer dragged in front of it last night—a makeshift alarm should I try to escape—has been pushed back into place.

As if reading my thoughts, Ayer sighs, his shoulders sagging slightly. I notice the dark circles under his eyes for the first time. He looks… tired.

“Just take it.”

I hesitate for another few seconds before reaching up slowly, watching *him*, watching *the blade.* My fingers close around the familiar handle. It’s *warm*. The feel of it in my hand is an unexpected comfort. I wait for Ayer to pull it back, to twist this into something else, but he doesn’t.

He just… *lets go.*

I tense when I spy him reaching into his bag again. Ready for anything.

But he only pulls out an apple, holding it out to me the same way he did the blade.

“*Twelve hells*, relax, will you?” he huffs out, as if *he* hasn’t been a constant source of aggravated terror since I first encountered him. I’m almost certain it’s anger I catch flashing in his eyes, but it’s gone just as soon as it appears. “It’s a little soft, but it’s better than nothing.”

Hesitantly, I take the fruit from him.

He reaches back into the bag, taking out another apple for himself. He takes a bite, shifting off the bed and moving across the room to stoke the fire.

I set the apple down on the bed; I’ll eat it later. Between the chaotic eating schedule and how much river water I swallowed last night, my stomach isn’t quite liking the idea of food yet.

“What is this, Ayer?” I ask, lifting the blade slightly.

He looks back over his shoulder. “Well,” he says slowly—seriously, “it appears to be a small, artisan-crafted blade—”

Did he just crack a joke?

“I know what it is,” I snap, *so* not in the mood for any more games. “But why give it back?”

He turns his attention back to the fire, poking at the dying embers. He’s crouched down beside the flames, his posture relaxed, completely at ease. Like he didn’t just hand me a weapon.

Like I’m not a threat.

And the sad truth is, *I'm not*—not to him anyway. At least, not until I get this shadows-cursed rune off my wrist. And when I do, all bets are off.

It's clear now why Ayer was appointed captain despite his young age. *I saw him.* I saw the way he took out those five fae raiders—all on his own. *Impossible* shots that he made look effortless—*lethal—precise*. Precision that shouldn't be possible from such a distance.

Ayer is far more dangerous than I first thought.

My grip tightens on the hilt of my dagger while I stare at him, the rune burning faintly against my skin.

A reminder.

"We have a full day's hike ahead of us, and there are creatures far worse than you prowling these woods."

Worse than me. His comparison of me to a forest monster grates a little, but I bite my tongue.

I turn the knife in my hands, using the sharp steel edge to slice a small tear in my new skirt, and slide it back into its sheath where it belongs.

"So it's mine to keep, then?" I push, wondering if he'll just *confiscate* it again once we rejoin the others.

He sets down the fire poker, rising to his full height before facing me. "So long as you do nothing reckless with it."

I almost swear that's amusement sparkling in those gray eyes of his when he shoots me a knowing look.

I ignore it.

Reckless is exactly what I plan to be.

Just… not yet.

Not here. Not with the innocent villagers' lives still at stake, should Ayer make good on his promise.

But soon.

Like it or not, I'm stuck with him—for now.

Stars. I jumped into a fucking river and still wasn't able to shake him. My next escape attempt requires planning—strategy.

I don't say anything—I don't agree. Instead, I find my boots and slip them on. The leather is hot on my feet. I left them close to the fire last night to dry, and the warmth from the boots seeps into my skin, and I nearly groan at how good it feels.

"Why didn't you leave me to drown?"

Ayer’s voice cuts through the quiet, and I look up to find him studying me like I’m some sort of puzzle he needs to solve. “Back at the river,” he clarifies, noting my confusion. “I was unconscious. You could have run, but you didn’t. Why?”

My throat tightens, and I suddenly find my nail beds in need of my direct attention.

“Why didn’t you?”

I look out the window, at my hands, anywhere but at him. It’s uncomfortable, being put on the spot like this.

I can feel his gaze on me, can feel the intensity in it burning against my cheek, as if he could pull the answer from my mind if he just stared intently enough.

“I don’t know,” I admit finally. My voice is quiet. I really can’t say; admittedly, I’m a little irritated with myself for not leaving him behind when I had the chance. Especially right now. At this moment. “I couldn’t—I couldn’t just leave you there. Not after you”—I kick at a few clumps of dirt on the floor—“after you pulled me out.”

“Who would’ve thought a faerie would have a moral code?” he says at last, a small smirk tugging at his mouth.

A smirk I immediately want to smack off his face.

“Says the man working with a Raven,” I fire back.

Ayer’s amused expression shuts down immediately, a familiar glower returning to his dark gray eyes. “That’s none of your concern.”

Too late.

“None of my concern? That—that thing—” my voice sharpens, anger rising hot and fast, “—has killed hundreds, maybe even thousands with just half a thought. You’re responsible for letting that monster loose on villages and cities, and you want to lecture me about morality?”

I scoff when I see the muscle working in his jaw, his mouth a thin line. He doesn’t answer, avoiding my gaze and staring hard into the fireplace instead.

“You made a deal with the devil, and I hope it comes back to haunt you.” The last known Raven fractured the tethering while destroying Daekhar in the process. Demons have been hunted for generations for a reason.

Silence falls again, power bristling under my skin, the rune burning hot on my wrist as Ayer continues to stare hard into the fire.

But I’m done. Done with this conversation and done with him. I sigh loudly, shifting my body away from him.

Silence falls heavy between us while I finish lacing up my boots, watching Ayer buckle his leathers out of the corner of my eye.

Neither of us speaks.

Once he’s finished, he moves toward the door but doesn’t open it. His hand rests against the worn wood, unmoving for several long beats. Then, without turning around, he says quietly, “I know."

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CHAPTER 49

ROWAN

We take breakfast to go.

Hari presses warm egg sandwiches into our hands, along with small satchels of bread, dried meat, and fruit. Reluctant to leave the warmth of the inn, I murmur a quiet thank you. The storm is over, but it's left behind a raw and bitter cold.

Ayer says little, just nods his thanks, already focused on the road ahead.

I notice, though, just before we leave, he drops a few extra coins onto Hari's desk.

The crisp autumn air bites my cheeks, and I scrunch up my nose. I'm so thankful for the cloak Hari was also kind enough to supply.

Ayer's already moving, setting a blistering pace as we follow the river back upstream. It's clear he's dead set on making up as much ground as possible, moving like he's trying to outrun something, or maybe just trying to get through as much of the woods as possible before nightfall.

We travel in silence. Nearly half the day goes by without either of us uttering a single word.

The road we're on winds us closer to the river; I can see and hear the rough rapids through the trees on our side. Gods. I can't believe I survived that. The water is angry, white foam exploding out from where it crashes over jagged rocks and fallen trees. Dark currents swirling and twisting, like the one that almost swallowed me whole.

I shake my head, trying to block out the near-constant roar.

As the sun begins to set, I’m glad when I stumble across a berry bush. My stomach growls at the mere sight of them. I gather a handful, hesitating before picking off a few more.

I glance up, finding Ayer waiting, his eyes on me. I rise to my feet, pushing back my shoulders as I walk toward him, and give him some of my berries before he has a chance to refuse. He lifts his palm to his nose to take a whiff, eyeing the little blue berries as if I had just handed him poison.

I roll my eyes, reaching over and grabbing a berry out of his palm, then pop it into my own mouth with a dramatic show. I shoot him a look and turn away, focused on eating the rest of my own berries.

But out of the corner of my eye, I spy him finally toss the berries into his mouth.

The corner of my lip twitches.

The silence that follows isn’t as sharp as before.

Ayer finally relents after the last of the sunlight fades away, and we finally stop to rest.

I sit against a fallen log, my feet propped up on a rock, running my finger along the edge of my dagger. I used a small stone earlier to sharpen it while we walked.

Ayer lit a fire, and he’s preoccupied with roasting the rabbit he shot earlier with his bow.

“We’ll reach the fort in a few hours,” he says at some point, breaking the tense silence between us.

The fort.

I don’t respond, really having nothing to say to that. Whatever “the fort” is, it won’t be great for me.

A tingle runs over my skin, and I glance up from my blade to find his eyes on me. Again.

The moment my eyes meet his, he drops them, focusing back on the spit he’d fashioned in order to roast the meat.

I sigh, putting my knife away through the slit in my skirt.

“Why do you do that?”

Ayer looks up from his task. “Do what?”

“You’re always watching me.”

“I am not.”

“Every time I look up, your eyes are on me.”

“It’s my job to watch you.”

“I thought you weren’t watching me?”

His jaw ticks, and I feel a smirk play on my lips at the small victory.

“Mmm,” I hum eyeing him. “Well, you take your job seriously.”

Still nothing.

I tilt my head, studying him now.

“If the captain of the Kovarian army has to keep watch himself, I must be *very* dangerous.” A question lingers within my words. One that’s haunted me for days. Why me? Why keep me alive? Surely it would’ve been just as satisfying to kill me and rub it in my brother’s face, if that’s what they’re really after. And why did Theo give me to Ayer? At first, I thought it was for another reason… but Ayer appears to have no interest in touching me.

His exhale is quiet, but I hear it. “Theo wants you alive.”

Our eyes meet.

“To what end?” I ask.

He shakes his head once. “I don’t know.”

I believe him. It had been Theo’s order that kept me alive. And Ayer’s made it clear from the start, he would’ve preferred me dead.

“You two seem close.”

He dips his chin slightly.

“Closer than most…” I press harder.

He studies me right back. “You’re observant.”

“You learn a lot when you’re quiet.” I flash him my best court smile.

The corner of his lip ticks up in response to mine. “Clever, too.”

I open my mouth to respond but snap it shut when every muscle in Ayer’s body tenses, a frown replacing that small smile. He whisks a finger over his lips while slowly reaching for the bow that’s resting a few feet away.

My hand flies to my dagger, my heart pounding as my mind conjures up imaginings of monsters that I pray to the gods are far worse than whatever’s actually lurking in those woods.

Ayer draws an arrow from his quiver, nocking it onto his bow, and waits.

Sweat coats the palms of my hands as I scan the tree line, searching for any sign of movement.

Ayer’s listening intently. To what? I don’t know; I hear nothing. He’s so still, his eyes trained down at the dirt, listening… waiting.

I nearly jump out of my skin when he moves. In one fluid motion, he spins, releasing the string of his bow. The arrow flies—and a rabbit drops from the brush with a soft thud.

And just like that, the brief truce formed between us breaks with the sharp reminder of what he is: dangerous, lethal, and *the man holding me captive*.

Silence falls, once again hanging between us like a knife. Ayer's busying himself preparing his new quarry for the spit, and I turn so that my back is to him, looking instead at the night sky above. Clouds cover most of it, only the light from a few stubborn stars breaking through.

"Eat."

I flinch at the sudden closeness of his voice, having not heard him approach. Startled, I look up and realize he's offering me some of the meat he cooked over the fire. I accept it without a word.

I take a cautious bite. It's not—it's not terrible. Perhaps an acquired taste. I eat quietly, but after a while, I find my eyes drifting back to him, despite myself.

"Have you always hated the fae?" I ask. The question spills out before I can stop it.

He doesn't hesitate with his answer. "Yes."

"Oh," is all I say, looking away.

He sighs. "Many villages, especially those on the border, face the same threat. Year after year, the fae raid. They come, they steal, they kill. People disappear in the night." He shakes his head as if to clear away dark memories playing behind his eyes. "You won't find many humans who feel anything but hatred for the fae."

I frown. "Then why continue with these senseless border battles? If you would only stop attacking—"

"Attacking?" Ayer's words are sharp, and there's a new, dangerous gleam in his eyes. "Are we *attacking* when the fae come on our lands, take our food, our crops, our *people*?" My chest tightens. "Are we *attacking* when they come in the night and burn an entire village to the ground, just because they can?"

"That's *not* true," I say quickly, shaking my head vehemently.

"It *is* true," he growls. "I've seen it. With my own eyes."

"You're a cynic."

"And you're naive."

My cheeks heat.

“Better yet,” he continues, his voice dropping into a lower, menacing tone, “I’ve lived it. Are you really going to tell me what happens on a border you’ve never seen?”

I open my mouth—

“The fae killed my father. My brother. They set our home on fire with my mother and little sister still inside. And my best friend, Ridge…” He trails off, his jaw tightening along with his fist at his side.

My heart clenches.

“Raiders…” I start, but Ayer rises to his feet, cutting me off.

“They weren’t raiders, and they weren’t wild fae. They were soldiers from Sitara.” He glares down hard at me. “Soldiers sent on the *King of Sitara’s* orders.”

Stunned at his accusation, *at the lie*, all I can do is shake my head.

“I nearly lost everyone on your *father’s* orders.” There’s a sharp bite to his words.

“No, that can’t be true,” I say, but the words come out barely a whisper.

They wouldn’t. He couldn’t. Not innocents…

“You don’t know *anything*, Princess.”

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CHAPTER 50

ROWAN

The argument last night shattered whatever fragile truce Ayer and I had somewhat stumbled into.

And another restless sleep on the ground has us both crabby.

We travel the whole day in silence.

Again.

My stomach grumbles, but I ignore it. Ayer's pace has increased over the last couple of hours, and I feel we're closing in on our destination. The day is nearly at its end when his body goes tense. The rigid set of his shoulders is subtle but unmistakable. I notice it just before the forest thins, revealing a stone outpost.

I swallow hard, chewing my lip as I glance up at the formidable stone walls of the fort. The sight of them sets off an overwhelming urge to run. They grow taller and maybe even thicker the closer we get. My steps slow, and I nearly trip over myself when I catch sight of the banner flying from the nearest bastion.

A blood-red crescent moon with a small black raven perched atop it, with five smaller ravens flying in the background.

My stomach drops. I hadn't realized we had fully crossed out of Sitara and into the broken and cursed Daekhar Kingdom. This must be an old border fort.

I jump when men I don't recognize emerge from the trees. Their armour isn't black like that of Ayer and his men; theirs gleams silver instead, with

the winged sword of Kovaria on their chest. They greet Ayer before escorting us the rest of the way to the fort.

Heavy gates creak open when we reach the fort's entrance. My stomach twists as I walk through them, into a training yard for its soldiers. My feet are heavy. The stone wall of the fort encircles the entire compound. It serves a dual purpose: to keep enemies out and prisoners in.

The slam of the heavy gates closing behind me sends my heart rate flying.

Inside the compound, I recognize a few familiar faces, Wyatt among them. He strides forward quickly, his face solemn, immediately murmuring something low into Ayer's ear. The captain nods once.

I can feel it. The tension. *And I don't like it.*

Ayer continues forward, and I follow, keeping close to him. I'm not safe—he's still my enemy and my captor, but… at least with him, I know what to expect. He's familiar. *The devil you know.*

And the looks these silver-clad soldiers give me… My eyes flick from soldier to soldier, making sure none of them get too close. I don't realize that I've pressed myself as close as I have to Ayer until he stops. I notice a little too late, too busy eyeing my new surroundings, and I crash hard into his back.

Ayer whips around and my eyes go wide, suddenly finding us chest to chest. His jaw tightens, and his hand shoots out, wrapping itself around my arm and steering me roughly forward, toward a larger grouping of silver soldiers waiting in front of the entrance to the fort itself. As we draw closer, Ayer releases my arm, but the look he gives me says enough.

Stay quiet.

Wyatt and Hayes close rank behind us, far too casually to be unintentional.

I lift my eyes, keeping my focus forward, nearly tripping over myself when I see who waits up ahead.

Riggs.

He smiles when he sees me looking, and I balk against Ayer's grip, which only forces him to tug me forward again.

Bile rises in my throat at the memory of Kovaria's corporal. Memories of his *hands* on my body, creeping up my thigh.

Ayer's grip on me is unyielding, but I slow my pace, deliberately—carefully—dropping ever-so-slightly behind Ayer, feigning deference to the

captain. Gods, I hope Riggs fears Ayer enough to leave me alone for however long we're here.

The smile on the corporal's face is less than reassuring.

His sleazy smile only widens as he watches me. I do my best to keep my face blank, but it's work to keep my fear from my eyes.

Ayer lets go of my arm to step forward, leaving me with Wyatt. I have to resist the urge to go with him. There's something different; I catch the shift immediately. Over the past week, he'd blended in easily with his men, still their commander but one of them all the same. Now, as he approaches the corporal, that ease vanishes. His shoulders square, his gaze sharpens, and there's a newfound authority in the way he stalks forward, his cloak billowing in the increasing winds, the skies above darkening with storm clouds.

Ayer stops in front of Riggs, partially blocking the corporal's view of me. Riggs' eyes finally slide from me to his captain.

"Captain Rusic!" Riggs exclaims rather boisterously, reaching forward to clasp Ayer on the back as if they are old friends. I don't miss the way Ayer bristles at his touch, or the warning that dances in his eyes. "To what do we owe this pleasure?" Riggs' head tilts to the side, his eyes finding me again.

"Corporal." Ayer returns Riggs' greeting with a curt nod. "I think it would be best if we talked inside."

Riggs waves his hand dismissively, disregarding Ayer's formality. "Plenty of time for that. You and your men look tired. Why not take a rest first? Eat! Drink! Then perhaps we can discuss whatever errand Theo sent you out here for over dinner?"

Ayer stiffens, but Riggs doesn't give him a chance to refuse.

"Come now," the corporal presses, his grin widening further. "A couple of hours' rest won't end the world." He looks around, and a few of his men laugh at the joke.

Ayer exchanges a quick look with Wyatt. The latter is uncharacteristically stone-faced as he nods. "Fine." He agrees reluctantly, his frown deepening. "We will discuss over dinner."

Riggs claps his hands together. "Excellent!" And then his eyes find me again. "I'm surprised to see you still have your little fae pet." His smile turns darker—crueler—as his voice drops lower. "Tell me, has the little bird

sung yet?” He tilts his head, his eyes scanning the length of me while my stomach churns violently under his assessment.

I keep my eyes on the ground, watching him from my periphery. Something tells me Riggs is not one to taunt with a challenge.

“She looks a fair bit more contrite since the last time I saw her. Tell me Theo found the rest of that Sitara royal filth and burned them alive?”

My fingers twitch toward the blade hidden under my skirts at the mention of my brothers, but I resist the urge to snatch it free, not wanting to give Ayer a reason to *confiscate* it.

My muscles lock as my body tenses, every instinct screaming to attack —to gouge the man’s eyes out—but I keep my feet planted, my spine rigid, taking care to school my face into neutrality. I have years of court training to thank for this level of emotional control. It’s clear Corporal Riggs gets off on provoking others, and I will not let him bait me.

Indeed, his smile fades when I fail to react. I keep my gaze fixed on the dirt below, though I catch the change in his expression from the corner of my eye. A muscle feathers in his jaw before his gaze goes back to Ayer.

The captain is watching me too. I can feel him—see him out of the corner of my eye, while I keep my focus on Riggs, not trusting him for a second.

“Last we heard, Rosecliff is secure; however, there’s no trace of the Rose Court or its princes.”

I blow out a breath of relief, shifting on my feet despite myself. Riven and Fel are safe.

They’re safe.

Riggs clicks his tongue. “Curious,” he muses. “Yet their princess appears alive and well.” He frowns at me before his attention shifts to Ayer. “You let your history with Fel cloud your judgment. *She* knows where they are, yet somehow *we* still don’t.” His eyes drift back to me. “No broken bones, no bruises worth mentioning, *and* she’s unbound? With no signs that she’s even been questioned at all?”

I bristle at the mention of my brother. My fingers twitch once again toward my dagger. Beside me, Ayer’s eyes darken, a warning flashing in the shadows that form in the corners of his eyes.

“Your greatest weakness has always been your lack of patience, Riggs,” Ayer muses. “It’s what cost you the rank of captain.” Riggs’ eyes go cold. “Don’t mistake restraint for mercy. Pain is a useful tool. And so is fear.

Useful, yes. But nothing compares to hope." My eyes snap up, finding Ayer's already on mine. "You break a body with pain, but you break a mind with *hope*."

I swallow, gripping hold of my skirts to hide my trembling fingers.

"She *thinks* something changed on the road. That perhaps something between us shifted. It was over for her the moment she stopped looking for escape and started looking to *me*." My breath catches, and he sees it—he sees *everything*; his eyes never leave mine. "Fear breeds defiance, but hope," he pauses, the ghost of a smile on his face, "hope breeds obedience." He looks at me again, smile gone, his eyes cold—harder than before, if that were possible. "No ropes or chains, and yet she followed me through the woods for days. She hasn't touched that dagger at her thigh because I told her not to."

My heart pounds in my chest.

"That's what makes hope the most dangerous weapon of all," he continues quietly. I can't move. I can't breathe. I can't tear my gaze from his if I tried. I'm frozen beneath the weight of his words. "I didn't even have to drag her inside," Ayer says, gesturing at the surrounding fort. "She walked into this cage *willingly*. And by the time I'm finished with her, she'll be begging me for more than just death."

Panic claws at my chest, and my heart pounds so hard it threatens to burst right out of it. I don't know what's happening. But I know one thing: this isn't the same Ayer I've spent the last week with on the road. The man who acted as if my mere touch was a disease he didn't wish to contract. Was he playing then? Or is he playing now?

Either way, I stop struggling, choosing to conserve energy, knowing I won't escape him.

There's a new look of satisfaction on Ayer's face when he looks back up at Riggs, who's looking down on the two of us in disgust.

Without warning, Ayer shoves me away, and I fall backward into Wyatt. His third is quick to catch me, holding me tight in his arms. I'm fairly certain I catch a flash of sympathy in those deep blue eyes of his.

I'm shaking. The gates have already closed behind us. There's nowhere to run.

The fort walls loom higher, appearing as though they're closing in.

Ignoring me, Ayer turns his attention back on Riggs. "We have matters to discuss; best get to it. Do you have somewhere secure where the princess

can wait?”

Riggs’ expression brightens. “Of course.”

I draw further back into Wyatt’s chest as Riggs motions for two of his guards to come forward to take me.

Neither Ayer nor Wyatt stop them from wrenching me away, and genuine terror fills me as they drag me inside.

“And have someone clean her up.” The casual tone of Ayer’s voice as I fight the guards’ grip grates on my nerves. “I want her presentable when she’s brought to my chambers tonight.”

Everything in me turns to ice.

I struggle as they drag me away, looking back over my shoulder—looking for Ayer.

But he won’t look at me.

Not once.

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CHAPTER 51

ROWAN

I sit with my back against the stone wall, staring into the darkness, my knees drawn to my chest.

They dumped me into this cell. It's one of three that sit adjacent to the armoury deep within the bowels of the Daekhari fort.

It's cold. And wet. And dark.

Quiet too. I thought there might be screaming, especially given how Riggs likes to run things, but alas, I am Kovaria's only prisoner on this night.

Oh, that's right, Kovaria doesn't take fae prisoners.

Other than me.

"When she's brought to my chambers tonight."

My eyes close, and I fight back the tears burning inside. I can't allow him to win the mental war it turns out he's been waging against me all this time. And crying now would be conceding. Rage burns, and my magic flares in response; the searing pain of the rune on my wrist can't even bring me to open my eyes. Ayer shouldn't have the power to make me cry. When did I give that to him? That his words—the trap he laid—hurt so much is further proof that somewhere along the way, I had dropped my guard.

Idiot girl.

He nursed me through that feverish night, taught me to ride horseback, pulled me out of that river, and I—stayed close to him. I was more afraid of the monsters in the woods than I was of him. I trusted him to protect me.

And he knew that. Used that to manipulate me exactly where he wanted me.

A cage.

The darkness doesn't help.

The second the heavy iron door slammed shut behind me, almost all the light disappeared with it, leaving me alone in the darkness. There's no torchlight, no windows the moonlight might sneak through… just suffocating darkness.

I couldn't breathe. I was at the door in an instant, tugging on it, banging against it with my fists, screaming—begging to be let out. But no one came, no one cares. I swear I could hear snickering on the other side, mocking my cries, but I was too afraid to be ashamed, pounding desperately until I was left shaking. My back slid down the freezing iron until I was crumpled on the floor, holding my knees. Where I remain.

It's been a few hours now. My chest is still tight, and it's a struggle to breathe. The darkness is everywhere, pressing in on me—suffocating me.

My head and eyes dart back and forth, whipping around at every slight noise—every creak imagined or otherwise, watching the dark shadows of the cell, half-expecting anything to come out of them.

It's been years. Years, but the darkness still gets to me. Anger rips through me at how much I let my fear control me. I shove myself back up to my feet, pacing the small space. I need to move. I need to— I need to think.

Riggs, Ayer— At the moment, I don't know who's a bigger threat, but I need to be ready for whatever their next move is.

First things first, I need a weapon.

My hand travels down to the slit in my dress. My knife is still there.

A wave of relief rolls through me. I didn't fight them when they brought me down here—didn't want to play into any more of Ayer's games. And for that, I got to keep my knife.

It's a small comfort, but one little knife will hardly be enough to get me out of this fort or over those walls.

I look down, tugging up the sleeve of my dress. In the dark, I can just barely make out the thick lines of that cursed mark upon my wrist.

It's been a few days since I tested it… Maybe the thing weakens over time. I take a deep breath, fighting to steady my mind and my breathing

despite my still trembling hands. My emotions are volatile, but honestly, that's usually better for drawing out magic.

A small burst of satisfaction blooms when I feel it respond to my call. It's there, the warmth of it briefly chasing off the chill of the freezing cell. Like a living flame beneath my skin. I try to pull—try to push it out of me, but the rune mark on my wrist just burns hotter and hotter the more I try. Gritting my teeth, I ignore the pain, focusing harder on the feel of my magic.

I am royal-born fae of the Valrose bloodline. Not to mention the Miselyian royal blood on our mother's side. The power running in my veins is ancient, and it is strong. I can break some *shadows-cursed* ink mark.

I push and push until my skin is on fire, again and again until I yell out, releasing the hold I have on my power with a scream so raw it leaves my throat burning just like my wrist.

Tears well up again, but I shove them back down.

No tears.

No bloody tears today.

Why didn't I fight harder? I should have fought harder to get away. I've been too complacent, too… *obedient.* Even when I thought I was being defiant, I was playing right into his hands.

I ball my hands into fists just thinking about it.

I need to be ready, seize any opportunity no matter how small. If I run and they catch me…

My jaw tightens.

Hells, what's the worst they can do?

Kill me?

The thought settles in, heavy but strangely steadying. Maybe trying to run will even force their hand. There are a lot more men here; only Ayer seems to care if I live or die. I just need one of them to do it…

If they kill me, they can't use me.

He can't use me.

That's how I win.

Mind made up, the nervous energy coursing through me is too much for this little cell to hold. I pace and pace, but still can't get the anxiousness I feel fluttering inside my chest to settle. If anything, my heart only beats faster the more I try to calm myself.

I distract myself by searching for anything—anything else to focus on.

It’s not long until I start to pick up the sound of voices, laughter, and shouts drifting down from above me. The soldiers have begun to ply themselves with food and ale. The sound of music even makes its way down to the dungeon cells.

Bad music. I wince at the gods-awful screeching of strings that were meant to be a tune. But the laughter only grows louder the more drunk the soldiers get.

Good.

The drunker they are, the better my chances.

Now, if only Ayer will partake… I almost laugh out loud at the notion.

No.

It’s hard to picture the grumpy captain up there, enjoying a drink and a laugh with some friends—hard to picture him enjoying anything, honestly. The man lives in a perpetually cold state of misery.

As the hours drag on, I’m thankful once again to Hari, as I wrap the thick cloak he gave me tighter around myself.

The cold is settling into my bones. I can see the warmth of my breath in the air. I force myself to focus, making plans of escape, playing through various scenarios.

I will not *beg* him for *anything*.

I will *not* kneel.

Not to *him*.

Not to *anyone*.

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CHAPTER 52

ROWAN

Time passes slowly when you're locked in the dark.

What's it been, hours? Days? Years, maybe? Years certainly feels like a possibility…

My body trembles from the cold, from the dark, or the anticipation of what's coming… I'm not sure which.

Not being able to see has me on edge, and I jump at the slightest sound. Every little creak—a threat; every shift in the wind outside—a monster.

I sit with my back against the wall farthest from the door. My eyes stay peeled on the dark corner I know holds the cell door. I don't dare sleep, even though I'm exhausted.

Watching.

Waiting.

I think I hear something from behind the door, and immediately, it has my full attention. It's late—very late if we're considering dining-hall time… The men upstairs have gone quiet—off to bed or passed out on a bench, perhaps. It's far closer to the morning hours than the evening.

I can make out the faintest jingle of keys behind the door as the bearer searches for the right one.

My heart leaps into my throat.

This is it.

I check my thigh for what must be the five-hundredth time, checking to be sure my knife hasn't decided to just up and walk away in the last minute

or so since the last time I checked.

Nope. Still there.

Just breathe.

The sound of metal scraping against stone attacks my ears, and I rise slowly to my feet, clinging to the wall for support. I'm trying to keep my stance casual, but every muscle feels tight, like the string of a drawn bow.

The door pushes fully open, and I'm momentarily blinded by the light pouring in from the hallway torches. I blink quickly, making out a dark figure in the doorway, but between the darkness of my cell and the blinding light at his back, I can't tell who it is. But I know—somehow—without a doubt in my mind, it's not Ayer.

"Well, hello there, little fae."

My breath catches as revulsion twists through my gut.

Riggs.

I shrink back before I can steel myself, an instantaneous reaction, for once seeking the shadows as a place of refuge, pressing into them as if they might hide me. My stomach violently twists at the sound of his smarmy voice.

The vile corporal steps into the darkened cell, peering further in. He can't see me, unable to make out my shadowed form in the dark corner.

"Where are you, little fae?" he sings, far too cheerily. I wring my fingers. Riggs never would have risked coming down here if Ayer was anything but indisposed.

The corporal sways lightly on his feet.

He's drunk.

Hope flickers to life inside me.

Drunk means sloppy. And *sloppy* equals opportunity.

I steal a glance past him, looking down the hall. It's empty. *He came alone.*

His eyes still scan the dark corners of the cell.

Unsure if he's spotted me yet, I inch closer, wondering if I might be able to dart right out past him.

"Tsk, tsk, tsk," Riggs' tongue clicks, and I freeze. "Trying to run away already?" He smiles. "I was hoping you'd be scared."

I swallow my panic and force myself to go still, lowering my hands and fixing my eyes on the rough stone floor.

Submissive.

Not a threat.

Just a scared, helpless, little female.

“W-where’s Captain Rusic?” I ask, forcing the stutter into my voice, hoping mention of Ayer might deter him—considering what happened last time—or piss him off.

Riggs scoffs, and I feel the ghost of a smile grace my lips when he steps closer.

“Who do you think sent me, Princess?”

I swallow. Hard. My smile fading.

“You’re part of the deal we struck tonight, little *fae*,” Riggs croons, taking another step forward until he’s close enough to touch.

For a moment, I forget to breathe.

Ayer.

He *gave* me to Riggs?

The thought twists painfully through my chest, but I shove it away almost as quickly as it comes. *No*. He may want me gone, and he may despise what I am, but he wouldn’t hand me over.

Would he?

I try not to flinch at the feel of Riggs’ grubby little fingers tracing along my tapered ears. I can’t help but flinch when he brushes the sensitive tips. My mask of submission shatters, fury taking over as I shove his hand away with a glare.

“*There* she is,” Riggs gloats, grinning down at me, pleased with my reaction. “We’re going to have fun tonight, you and I.”

Unable to stand the feel of his hands on me anymore, I slip out from under him, racing for the cell door he left open behind him.

Riggs catches me almost immediately, his hand clamping down on my arm and twisting. I cry out at the sharp burst of pain, right before he violently wrenches me back.

My head slams into the stone wall. For a moment, my vision blurs. I let out a groan, pain exploding throughout my head.

It costs me valuable time.

By the time I’m able to see through the pain, Riggs is already on top of me. His hands are—everywhere. His fingers hook into my side, yanking me closer with a filthy, possessive grip. His palm skates over my breast, and nausea takes over. He has me pinned against the wall, holding me up with

his knee. I squirm, trying my best to push him off, but he leans in heavily, pinning me down.

I'm still swimming in pain, and my limbs feel slow and heavy, resisting the effort it takes to fight him, and darkness edges my vision.

Focus, Rowan.

I bite down on my lip, hard enough to taste blood. The slicing pain sharpens my thoughts and pushes back the dark cloud threatening to envelop my mind. My head clears just in time to see Riggs pull a knife from his belt.

The cold steel of his blade ghosts the skin of my upper thigh as it slices through the fabric of my dress, exposing me.

I force myself to lie still. If I fight now, he'll only enjoy it more.

Riggs' rough hands trail indecently high up my leg, exploring his newfound access before raising the knife higher. He makes quick work of cutting through the bodice of my dress; leaving me in only my corset and white underskirts.

His lips twist with sick satisfaction as he looks down upon my heaving chest before he presses the sharp steel against my cheek, trapping my face between the wall and his knife.

He taps his blade against my cheek, letting it bite me. Warm blood trickles down my cheek. "If you scream," he leans further in so that he's whispering into my ear, "I'll fuck you with it." I don't say anything, and he slides his knife further down my cheek until the sharp steel brushes against my lips. "Nod if you understand."

My eyes flick to his. His smile is too wide, and I feel something hard pressing into my gut. I remain completely still. My head doesn't move. And since the edge of his blade rests just over my mouth, I don't dare open it.

Riggs' dark eyes flash with anger at my continued silence, and he repeats himself, his knife pressing harder when I still refuse to nod—refuse to agree.

I let out a pathetic little whimper as his blade breaks my skin again, cutting my lip this time. My gaze darts from his face to the knife, fear shining in my eyes.

The corporal's frown curls into a triumphant smile, and he lifts the knife from my cheek.

"Good gir—"

As soon as his blade is off my skin, I'm moving. Reaching, not for the knife, but for his wrist. My fingers curl around it, wrenching with all the strength I have left while Riggs howls in both surprise and pain, dropping the knife.

Releasing his wrist, I drop out from under him, my other hand shooting out to catch the knife midair. I spin, my foot sweeping out, connecting with the back of his knee.

He yelps in surprise, but Riggs is a big man, and though he falters, he doesn't go down. Instead, he stumbles a few steps before recovering. His face turns a crimson shade of red as he draws himself back up.

My eyes flicker to the exit, and he tracks my gaze, sidestepping quickly so that he's blocking my path. "You're going to regret that, little fae." Riggs lunges, and I slash at him with my stolen blade. He jerks back just in time—not realizing I had caught it—and I just miss his throat.

Taking advantage of his momentary confusion, I kick—hard. My foot slams into his chest, and he staggers back with a grunt, but not before retaliating with his fist. I avoid the blow to the face, but he catches the back of my hand. The knife slips from my grip, skittering across the floor.

Stars.

We both go for it.

Riggs goes for the blade, but I switch directions, going for him instead. My body slams into his, using his own momentum against him. I throw all of my weight forward, sending him crashing to the ground.

He lands hard, flat on his back. He wheezes and chokes as he works to recover his breath, losing valuable seconds.

Seconds I now have to reach the door.

I run, only glancing back once I've reached the threshold.

Riggs is still on the ground, coughing while struggling to get his feet back under him.

I pause long enough to meet his eye, giving him a small glimpse of my fangs before I speak. "Aww, little human," I mock. "I hope you like your cage."

Riggs scrambles harder, lunging for the door, but I slam it shut just before he crashes into the other side. The lock clicks into place automatically, and the door shakes violently as he roars behind it. Curse words spill out; threats and worse come pouring out of his mouth while I

wipe the blood from my own, standing back to admire my handiwork with a grin.

My smile fades at the soft jingle of keys coming from inside the cell.

Shit.

I don't wait around, turning and sprinting out into the main hallway.

To my surprise, the guard positions are empty. My eyes dart wildly around, body tense as I prepare to take on more soldiers. But the hallway is empty. I remember seeing them on the way down. Riggs must have dismissed them when he came slinking through.

Heart racing, I continue quickly down the long hall, forcing myself to slow as I near the corner, listening closely for any sounds before peeking out.

No one's there.

I move. Fast. Adrenaline surges through my veins as I round another corner, looking for the armoury we'd come through—looking for the exit.

A loud crashing sound at my back has me breaking into a run. I find the armoury and skitter to a halt, nearly passing right by it. Another slam, and the sounds of boots chasing after me. I sprint through the armoury without stopping, diving for the nearest twisting set of stairs, taking them two at a time.

My legs feel like jelly beneath me when I finally reach the top landing. There I pause, unsure of the best path to take. To my left—a dark hallway waits; up—more stairs. I wince just thinking about it, and down—footsteps. Coming fast.

Instinct screams *left*. Decision made, I bolt to the left and down the hall.

It's dark and difficult to see, but I know the dungeon cells were definitely underground, which means this level is likely the ground floor. My best chance for escape.

If I can just find a way out…

I need an exit, a window… anything.

I try each door as I pass it.

Locked. All of them locked.

"C'mon, c'mon," I plead with yet another locked door. The last one in this hall. When it, too, refuses to open, I slam my fist against the heavy wood with a silent scream of frustration.

“Just wait till I get my hands on you, little fae,” Riggs’ voice echoes from down the hall, and my head whips back as panic rises. *Shit, he’s closer than I thought.*

I spin, sprinting in the opposite direction. I throw an arm out, swinging myself around the tight corner, not noticing how the rough stone changes over to marble until it’s too late.

I slip, and my feet fly out from under me. I catch myself at the last second, barely managing to stay upright, but before I can even lift my head, I collide with something *solid*.

The impact sends me reeling. I brace for the hard hit of the ground as I fall backward, but it never comes. A hand catches me mid-fall.

It’s strong. Unyielding.

I stop breathing.

His grip on me tightens, and I choke down a swallow as I tilt my chin upward, up and up, until I’m staring into dark, steel-gray eyes.

Ayer.

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CHAPTER 53

AYER

I should already be in bed.

The men are still up, drinking, but when a few of them found their song, I decided it was as good a time as any to go double check the fort's defenses.

I should be celebrating too.

I should be happy.

We took out both a mystery fae military squadron and a host of fae raiders all in the same day. And the men are still riding the high of taking Rosecliff and freeing Theo, and it's their first chance to really celebrate safely. All threats tonight are outside the walls of Fort Firelle.

I could be drunk, or have my cock half buried in one of the many girls who offered already tonight, but *no*.

The irritation burning under my skin hasn't lessened with either a full stomach or even after a few rounds of Daekhari whiskey.

My thoughts keep drifting back to two stones-cursed green eyes.

*Reckless. Stubborn. And so godsdamned infuriating. S*he jumped into a raging river just to get away from me. Nearly drowned for her efforts.

Foolish. Brash. Hard-headed—

I round the corner, prowling for the stairwell leading up to my chambers when I go still, tilting my head toward the dark corner up ahead.

Did I just…?

Listening intently, my hand slides over my shoulder to my back on instinct, gripping the hilt of my sword, and I take a step further down the hall, moving away from the stairwell that leads up to my waiting bed.

Several beats pass, and I hear nothing but drunken laughter echoing in from the dining hall behind me.

I could've sworn I heard…

Shaking the thought away, I release my sword. Fuck, you need sleep.

She's locked in an iron cage. Well guarded. She couldn't possibly escape.

I just need a couple of hours' peace from having to watch her godsdamned royal ass every second of the day.

Still… Guilt nags at me for what I've done—what I said.

The look she gave me when they'd dragged her away… *Betrayal*.

It's safe to say whatever temporary truce we struck on our way back from the river is dead, buried, and pushing up fucking daisies.

I work my jaw as I linger in the hallway, looking to the stairs that lead up to bed and then back to the corner up ahead. The corridor I know leads down to the dungeon cells.

I take one step, and then another—moving toward the shadowed corner, as if drawn by some invisible force.

I've got my eye on the corner, but I'm still completely unprepared when a certain princess comes tearing around it at full speed. She crashes into me with such force I almost lose my footing. Especially when I have to lunge to catch her before she hits the ground, losing her balance from both the impact and the slippery marble floor below.

My hand closes around her arm, hauling her back to her feet.

Rowan.

Her green eyes widen as she takes me in. And for half a second, I just stare back. Until my initial shock at seeing her fades, and rage flames in its place. I tighten my grip, dragging her closer to me as I zero in on the Sitari princess.

I expect her to resist, but her body goes rigid, and she becomes utterly still in my grasp. My brow furrows as I look down at her. She's not fighting me. *Rowan always fights.*

"You—"

The look I catch in those pine green eyes of hers stays my tongue.

A shout sounds from around the corner, pulling my attention up. Fingernails dig into my arms, gripping tighter, and my gaze drops immediately back to Rowan as a violent tremble rips through her.

Fear.

That's fear I see shining in her eyes.

Rowan's not afraid of me. To some degree—maybe… yes, and oh, how I wish she would fear me more. Life would be so much easier if she did. But yet, here she is, looking up at me, nearly white as a ghost, her fingers digging into me as if afraid I'll let go.

Is she afraid of being punished?

She was running.

I warned her. I told her what would happen if she tried to run away. Is that what's got her so terrified? I try studying her face, but the noise around the corner grows louder, footsteps approaching. Likely the guards from the dungeons catching up to her. How in the hells did she get past them in the first place?

"Did you really think you could run? What did I tell you would happen if you—"

"Please," she whispers, shaking now in my grip, only clinging tighter to me as the footsteps draw closer.

I look into her eyes, mine narrowing. I have to wonder if this is all just a new act of hers. She's smart—clever, really—and if she's trying to trick me, trying to get out of whatever punishment I'm about to dole out by playing on my emotions…

My mouth opens, but I don't have time to reply because, in the next second, Riggs bursts from the same corner Rowan just did.

I stiffen, and Rowan nearly catches me off guard, lunging forward, taking advantage of the distraction and trying desperately to break free of my grip. But my hold on her is firm. She's not going anywhere.

I yank her closer, tearing my gaze off her pale face to address my corporal's sudden appearance.

"Captain," Riggs wheezes, fighting to catch his breath, nearly doubling over with his efforts. "Thank the twelve moons, you've caught her." He waves his hand weakly in Rowan's direction, rage in his beady little eyes. "She—" *heave*, "escaped, and I was—" *heave*, "I was in pursuit." He clears his throat, attempting to straighten his shoulders. "I was just about to sound the alarm," he adds with a curt nod at me.

Is that nerves I sense in his tone?

I'm aware of Hayes' presence at my back, though he stays silent, surveying the scene.

As do I. I take in the sight of my corporal: red-faced and bleeding profusely from a fresh cut to his brow. He reaches out a hand, trying to grab hold of Rowan, but the princess cringes away from him, seeking safety in my chest.

"Allow me to take her off your hands, sir, so you may enjoy the rest of your evening in peace." Riggs' eyes darken as he glares at Rowan. "I'll see that she's properly restrained and punished." A dark gleam shines in his eyes, and my jaw tightens.

Rowan flinches. It's subtle. But I felt it. I'm sure I did.

She shifts in my grip, trying again to pull away—but this time from *him*. Not *me*.

My eyes flick between them, but it is the princess who holds my attention.

The dress Hari gave her back at the inn is gone. Torn in places, her corset and shift are all she wears, as if someone attempted to rip them off. Blood runs in streaks down her arm. Bright red smears her cheek as well, and her lower lip is split.

While Rowan is crafty and clever, there is no way she could have gotten out of that iron cell, unless... My gaze hardens as something dark coils in my chest. Unless *someone* had gone in there.

My grip on Rowan's arm tightens, and without warning, I haul her backward, shoving her behind me.

"Take her." I thrust the princess into Hayes' hold, reluctantly releasing her arm as I hand her over to my second.

"Put her in my room," I order, my voice cold and controlled. "And make sure she stays there." I don't look back, my gaze icing over as I keep it fixed on Riggs. "I'll deal with her later."

I hear them both moving down the hall, listening to the sounds of their footsteps disappearing up the stairwell before I take even a single step toward Riggs.

He swallows hard, taking a couple of steps away from me.

"You went into my cell," I say flatly. It's not a question.

Riggs' eyes dart around, searching for an exit before he answers. "Captain, she— I can explain—"

I hit him.

One second he's talking, and the next, my fist is slamming into him so hard his face snaps to the side. He stumbles, yet he stays on his feet.

"I thought we'd been over this," I say, closing in on him, my voice low and lethal. "You don't touch what's *mine*."

I hit him again.

Riggs takes the hit, spitting bloody saliva onto the marble floor, a sneer on his lips. "She's a faerie," he snarls, his eyes red. "Or have you forgotten—"

I hit him again.

This time he goes down, but I'm already after him, hitting him once more, then hauling him up by his leather armour and slamming him into the stone wall before glaring down at him.

The fucker *laughs*; blood coats his face.

"She's a prisoner, fae filth," he spits at me. "She deserves—"

His words cut off when my fist lands in his ribs. Once, twice, three times.

Riggs coughs hard, doubled over, still on his feet solely because of the grip I have on him.

Voices echo as men spill out into the hall upon hearing the commotion, but no one moves to stop me.

"I know what you were trying to do," I growl as my mind flashes to Rowan's torn dress, the blood on her lip, and the fear in her eyes.

Riggs recovers enough to straighten up to look at me, wiping blood from his mouth while studying my face—seeing the rage in my eyes—and yet he still smiles. "Are you really getting sentimental over a faerie? *You*, of all people? You remember what her brother did, right?" He eyes me with contempt, clicking his tongue. "And yet you protect the sister of the prince who put a blade through Ridge's heart?" His words land like a punch. "What would Theo think?"

Something in me goes cold. Darkness gathers at the edges of my vision as I seize Riggs' armour and drive him back against the wall.

"Theo gave her to me. She's *mine* to keep. *Mine* to question. And *mine* to do whatever the fuck I want with until I decide otherwise—to *fuck*, if I so choose. Her life belongs to *me*!"

The hall is quiet, and I turn my head slightly, raising my voice to address the lot of them. "The Sitari princess belongs *to me*. If anyone

touches a single hair on her head," my eyes darken, a lethal undertone in my voice, "they die."

I slam the back of Riggs' skull into the wall one more time to really drive home my point.

"Got it?"

But Riggs doesn't know when to quit.

"You greedy bastard, you just want her all to yourself," he spits venomously up at me.

Something snaps deep within, and I feel my eyes go entirely black.

I swing on him again, but this time… I don't hold back.

Riggs drops to the ground, knocked clean out.

"Yeah, I do," I growl, looking over his unconscious body. "And I'll bury anyone who thinks they can take her from me."

I leave him there, then stalk off through the gathered crowd of both his men and mine, tightening my fists to keep from circling back around to strangle him.

"Put him in a cell." I growl the order to Eli and Callum, knowing they're sober. "I'll deal with him later."

A curt nod from Eli assures me they'll take care of it.

I head upstairs. I'd gone too hard—too fast—on Riggs. He passed out before I'd gotten the chance to really question him about what he'd done. My questions still require answers, and like it or not, *Rowan's* going to give them to me.

"Step aside, Hayes." My tone comes out harsher than I intend. I force a slow breath, trying to cage the anger simmering just under my skin.

Hayes doesn't budge. His gaze catches on my face, a crease forming between his brows. "Captain..."

"Move."

His jaw tightens, and he remains where he is, studying my eyes. "Clear your head first."

I scrub a hand across my eyes, blinking hard until the darkness recedes from the edges of my vision. "I'm fine."

Hayes eyes me warily, hesitating for only a few more seconds, then dips his chin before vacating his post outside my door.

I give him a clear nod of dismissal, waiting to fully twist the knob until he disappears into his own room down the hall. I take a deep breath,

steadying my nerves, and further tamp down my temper before stepping into the room.

My accommodations are modest, yet I don't see Rowan immediately when I enter.

The bed sits untouched, the chair by the hearth—empty. My jaw clenches as I do a quick scan of the room, my eyes catching on the tiniest movement in the far corner.

Rowan pushes herself up from the floor where she'd been curled into herself, nearly hidden behind the chair.

One good look at her and all the rage and fire for answers drains out of me.

Her skin is ghost-white, the dim lighting accentuating the dark circles ringing her eyes. Bruises, fresh and purple, bloom along her jaw, while her eyes are rimmed red. There's a hollowness in that pine green I've never seen before. She's still wearing her ripped, damp clothes, and when she notices me staring, she hurriedly pulls up the torn shoulder of her shift, covering up the exposed skin.

The tremor running through her at the same time doesn't go unnoticed.

Still, she forces herself to her feet, rolling her shoulders back and lifting her chin until she's looking me square in the eye. Beneath a familiar spark of defiance, she buries the fear I just saw. Unexpectedly, the sight of it steadies something in me. But even her stubbornness can't disguise the bone-deep exhaustion etched across her face.

I release a breath, holding her gaze while running a hand through my hair, wondering what the fuck to do with her now.

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CHAPTER 54

ROWAN

I settle into the corner of the room, but there's no comfort in it. Restless energy hums beneath my skin, refusing to let me relax.

Though exhaustion drags at my limbs, I force myself to stay awake, curling into the corner of Ayer's room where I can see everything—most importantly, *the door.*

And I wait.

I don't even know if he's coming. Every passing minute leaves me wondering whether he'll walk through that door furious… or worse. I can still see him in the hallway, his eyes darkening as they locked onto mine, something dangerous flickering behind them that left my stomach in knots.

I wrap my arms around my knees, keeping myself there, my skin buzzing with nerves as my eyes keep flicking over to the door as if he might burst through it at any second.

My arm is bleeding, and my lip too. I can still taste the metallic bite of the blood on my tongue, but I can't bring myself to care. The death grip I have on my emotions is down to a single, breakable thread.

Ayer fills the doorway, every line of his body rigid with barely restrained fury as he scans the room. Something about him feels... wrong. Darker. And it's as if the room itself has dimmed with his presence, and I can sense the rage simmering under his skin.

Releasing a heavy breath, I push myself up, prepared to face whatever consequences he decides to hand down—whatever it is he wanted me in his

room for.

His eyes find me as soon as I move, his gaze heavy as I rise to my full height. They trail the length of me, lingering on every cut and every bruise, like he’s taking inventory. I hope he can't see how my entire body trembles beneath the weight of his gaze.

“Sit down,” he growls roughly, pointing at his bed.

I don’t move.

His eyes narrow. “SIT. ROWAN!” he barks so loudly, I just barely restrain my flinch.

One glance at those unsettling eyes of his stops me cold. They aren’t the familiar light gray I remember. They’re darker now—so dark they nearly swallow the light—almost black. My feet move before my mind catches up, and I stumble toward the bed.

The room is small, and I reach it quickly, staring down at the soft mattress, unable to move any further—unable to actually sit down on his bed.

Slowly, I turn back to face him, and I swallow hard at the look I see on his face.

I’ve spent days relentlessly trying to push him over the edge. Trying just about everything I can think of to get under his skin—to get him to snap that seemingly unshakable emotional control he seems to have over himself.

But seeing him now…

Untethered.

I’m glad I failed.

The molten rage simmering off him could set the whole village alight. Like the storm trapped inside him has finally broken through.

He steps closer. His eyes scan my body again, taking in my wretched appearance with a curl of disgust on his lips.

I’m filthy. Covered in dirt and worse from trekking through the forest with Ayer, and the struggle with Riggs on the dungeon floor. My skirt and corset are ripped in various places, and no matter how many times I pull it up, the torn shoulder of my shift keeps slipping down, revealing far more of my chest than I’m comfortable showing.

I shift uncomfortably under his gaze, giving up on the sleeve and crossing my arms across my chest.

Ayer moves closer, and this time, I can’t hide my flinch.

I hate that I do it—and worse, *I hate that he saw it.*

Ayer's gaze darkens as he closes in, and I have to look away—unable to hold his gaze.

What will happen first? Will he punish me for running from Riggs? Riggs told me Ayer gave me to him. I guess he's decided I'm something to be passed around. Or will Ayer follow through on whatever his original plans were when he asked me to be sent to him earlier? I don't know that I have anything left in me to fight *him* off too. I should make him work for every second he tries to take from me, but… I'm so tired.

"When she's brought to my chambers tonight."

I prepare myself for what's about to happen. In his mind, I belong to him. And if he *wants* me, he'll *have* me. I *can't hurt him.*

My emotions are running wild, and my exhaustion can't contain them. A single tear breaks loose, trailing slowly down my cheek, dripping off my chin just as he finally reaches me. His hand comes up, lifting my head with it.

But his grip is light.

"Look at me."

Ayer's voice is soft. Softer than I've ever heard it. I don't understand it—I don't understand him.

My legs shake beneath me. I'm so tired. *So damn tired.*

My vision blurs, but I force my eyes up.

"Don't think for one second that any of this is your fault."

I blink at him, unsure of what I see on his face. Pain, guilt… anguish, even? Seeing an emotion there—any emotion—cracks the crumbling iron wall holding back my own, and my lip quivers.

His attention drops to my arm. I let out a hiss when his fingers brush against the gash he finds there. Riggs' knife must have cut me in our struggle.

"I'm sorry."

I freeze, then our eyes meet.

"I'm sorry," he says again. "I never should have left you down there unprotected."

Sorry?

He's… *apologizing?*

To me?

I don’t have the words. He’s so close; the steady beat of his heart is almost calming, the heat from his body an odd comfort, and I have to fight the urge to lean into him. I wobble on my feet, my knees buckling beneath me. He reaches out to steady me, supporting my weight in his arms and pulling me toward him as he does.

He’s so warm. And that wall of hard muscle seems to soften just for me.

I can’t help it. I melt into him. My body is half-frozen—hungry for his warmth, and starved of comfort.

And Ayer just… *He just holds me.*

I squeeze my eyes shut, burying my face against his chest. My fingers knot in the fabric of his tunic, as though letting go would send me crashing back into everything I’d barely escaped.

I don’t understand it.

I don’t want to.

But somehow, impossibly, this is the safest I’ve felt since the day my world fell apart.

He lifts me up gently into his arms, carrying me around to the other side of his bed and carefully setting me down atop the soft, thick furs. But when he pulls away, his warmth disappears, and before I realize what I’m doing, I’m reaching for him.

The way he held me just now…

Gods, everything is such a mess. My head… *My head is a mess.*

Ayer freezes when he sees my outstretched hand before searching my eyes. There’s an intensity in them that softens at whatever he finds there.

But he doesn’t take my hand—doesn’t come back. Instead, he turns, disappearing into what I already know, from my earlier search of the room, is his private washroom. He reappears with what looks to be a bowl of water in his hands. The mattress dips under his weight as he takes a seat beside me. His hands are steady when he takes my arm, and I wince when he presses the warm cloth to my skin, which earns me an apologetic look as he cleans the wound.

It stings, but I keep still. Watching him. Watching the way his jaw tightens as he works. Neither of us speaks.

When he’s finished, he smears a mint-scented salve over the cut before wrapping it with a clean white cloth. He looks up at me before his hand

moves lower—to my thigh. To a second cut I hadn't even noticed was dripping blood down my leg.

"Lie back," he says. I only hesitate a moment before I comply, resting my head on the soft, pillowy furs on his bed while he cleans that wound too.

Ayer keeps his eyes on his task, and I keep my eyes on him. I know he won't hurt me. It makes little sense, but yet—I *know*. The fear that has been fueling my adrenaline finally gives way to exhaustion—or maybe it's the blood loss. My eyes feel heavy, and I blink a few times, trying to keep them open. My head is spinning, an aching pain from where Riggs smashed my skull into stone, pounding harder.

The room blurs in and out of focus, and I lose track of Ayer for a minute. Rising anxiety brings me back, and I find him gone. Quickly, I scan the little room until I feel the mattress dip again, this time behind me. I feel hands on the back of my head, turning it slowly, gentle fingers threading through my hair as he inspects the injury that's left dried blood there, and I freeze.

"I'm fine," I mutter softly, uncomfortable under his scrutiny. "You can take me back."

Back to the cell.

My body shivers involuntarily at the mere thought of going back down there, even though it was I who made the suggestion.

But I'm tired, so tired, and I need to sleep. And it's not like I'm going to do that here. I attempt to sit up. The movement takes considerably more effort than I anticipated. I roll onto my side, attempting to push myself up this time, but my palm lands against bare skin.

Ayer's chest.

When did he—

I hold my breath just as his hand grips my wrist, careful to avoid the healing wounds from the ropes while preventing me from rising further.

"You're freezing."

My fingers curl against his admittedly warm chest. He's not wrong; my hands are ice cold. I want to leave them where they lie. Stars, I want to inch my whole body closer and steal more of his warmth for myself, but I jerk my hand away instead.

He lets me.

“Just take me back,” I repeat. I need—I need out of here and away from him. Confusion floods my head.

“No,” he says, and my eyes snap to his. “You’re not going anywhere.” He reaches up, and I feel his fingers in my hair again, and my heart rate picks up. “You’re injured.” He looks me over pointedly. “And you’re exhausted. You need to sleep. And you’ll do that here,” his voice lowers, “where I can keep an eye on you.”

I shake my head, already opening my mouth to protest, but he cuts me off. “We can call a truce for just one night, can’t we, Princess? We’ve already done it once.” The corner of his mouth ticks up before quickly turning solemn again. “This fort is many things, but friendly to the fae, it is not.” He breaks our shared gaze, his eyes dropping to the mattress below. “I should never have left you alone.” He looks back up at me, his eyes searching mine. “But I give you my word, no one will harm you here. You’re safe with me—tonight.”

I stare at him.

Safe? With *Ayer?* The incongruity of that statement echoes through my mind.

Sensing my hesitation, he sighs, leaning in closer. “I’m not leaving you alone again.”

I feel something inside me clench at his words.

“So you can choose.”

I wait for him to elaborate, but he doesn’t.

“Choose?” I question, my voice coming out rough and scratchy.

His eyes flick to the mattress and then back to me. “You can either stay here, in my warm, *comfortable* bed—with *me*.”

My pulse quickens, and I swallow hard.

“Or—” he jerks his chin toward the door, “we go back down to the dungeons.” I stare at him. “*Together*.”

“You wouldn’t—” I start in surprise.

He nods firmly. “I *would*. I told you, Princess, I’m not leaving you again. Not here.”

When I fail to move or speak, he continues. “I *personally* would prefer the warm bed to cold stone, but of course, it’s your choice.” His eyes move to mine, refusing to look away this time.

Avoiding his penetrating stare, I pretend to survey the room. The crackle of the fire Ayer must have lit at some point, the thick fur blanket,

the bolt on the door. I know my answer. *And I already hate myself for it.*

I look up at him from beneath my lashes—studying his face—looking for any sign of deceit. The words he said earlier… I'm still hesitant to trust him, but my body holds no such qualms. The need to crawl closer to him, to sink into the warmth radiating from his body, is too strong to fight.

Releasing a slow breath, I give the *smallest* possible nod of my head.

He doesn't hesitate to take that as confirmation. He leans back, his arm snaking around my waist as he does, pulling me back down with him.

I stiffen immediately in his hold, my mind resisting every second, while the tension slowly bleeds from my body.

"You're freezing," he reminds me, and the last of my resolve melts away into that bloody heat of his.

I'm so cold.

So tired.

And so, against my better judgment, I give in.

And *sleep.*

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CHAPTER 55

ROWAN

A loud crash wakes me with a jolt, sending me scrambling backward while reaching down my thigh for my dagger.

My heart rate calms when my hand wraps around the familiar rose-carved hilt.

It takes another half a second for my eyes to adjust to the bright light pouring in from the hall, and I blink up in a dazed shock at the last person I expect to see standing in the open doorway.

Theo.

"Morning, sunshine!" The Kovari prince cocks his head to the side while giving me a wry smile. He leans one shoulder against the doorframe. "Well, well, well… isn't this a delightful surprise?"

I can only stare back at him—my mouth agape, dagger in hand, my brain still reeling from the abrupt wake-up. *I'm really not a morning person.*

"Get out, Theo." The deep, harsh growl of Ayer's voice vibrates through me and I stiffen, realizing that in my scramble to get away from Theo, I'd pushed myself right up against Ayer. He opens his eyes, dismissing Theo as a threat before shutting them again.

Theo's grin only widens, his eyes darting back and forth between his captain and me.

"He's never been much of a morning person," Theo muses, winking at me.

My cheeks burn scarlet, and I curse, vaulting my body away from Ayer and scrambling to get myself out of his bed.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, though my voice comes out more like a squeak as the cold air hits my body, making me painfully aware in the light of day just how indecently my dress is torn.

Theo raises a brow at the sight, though thankfully keeps his shadows-cursed mouth shut.

“It’s my bed,” Ayer grumbles, begrudgingly dragging himself out of sleep. “Just how hard did you hit your head last night?” He sits up, rubbing the sleep from his face.

I gape at him, memories from last night flooding back to me: the dungeon, Riggs, using Ayer’s hard chest as a pillow… My eyes drop lower at the thought; the blankets pool just over Ayer’s hips, revealing his chiseled chest and abs.

He notices me ogling him, and I spy the smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“Get out!” I half-shout, lifting my chin as I do.

His dark eyes, though still heavy with sleep despite Theo’s dramatic wake-up call, harden at my tone.

“*Again*, Princess, it’s *my* room.”

I sniff, my cheeks flaming bright beneath my skin. “*Fine*. Then I’ll go,” I huff, storming for the door.

“Stop her,” Ayer grumbles in annoyance, and Theo steps conveniently to the side, cutting off my exit with a wide smile on his face.

I glare at him, shoving a finger in his face. All of this—everything—is his fault. “Whatever it is you’re thinking, stop it,” I growl venomously before turning back to Ayer to glare at him too, crossing my arms across my chest.

He ignores me, finally climbing out of bed. His dark eyes, a little sharper than they were a moment ago, fall on Theo.

“As good as it is to see you, mate,” he drains a glass of water from beside his bed, “to what do I owe the pleasure of this exceptionally early wake-up call?”

Theo’s jolly mood takes a nosedive. An unfamiliar grim frown replaces his familiar jovial smile.

“Raiders.”

Ayer’s fully out of bed now. I flinch when I find him suddenly beside me. Gods, he can move lightning-fast when he wants to. I’m all too aware of how he’s only wearing his breeches.

“How many?”

Theo exhales. “Too many. They hit the outskirts of Lenox at dawn.”

Ayer’s moving again, throwing open a drawer and pulling out a dark tunic, yanking it on in one smooth motion. His leathers follow next, and he makes quick work of the straps.

“What’s happening?” I force out, my voice sounding stronger than I feel. Lenox is a Daekhari village close to the Sitara border.

Ayer’s mouth tightens, but he doesn’t look up from his task. “Fae raiders. If we don’t stop them, they’ll raze the village and take anyone left alive as slaves.”

I swallow hard. Last week, I wouldn’t have believed a word of it. But after the past few days, I’m having a hard time calling Ayer a liar.

He looks for his sword, hesitating after stepping forward, realizing I’m in the way. I take a slight step back, watching him swing the heavy blade across his back.

“I want to come.”

He freezes. Both Ayer and Theo’s gazes snap my way.

“I can help,” I add, lifting my chin a little higher.

“No.” Ayer’s answer is immediate. Final.

“I can have Hayes stay behind,” Theo offers.

Ayer doesn’t answer, studying me instead. Despite our brief moments of truce, I don’t trust him, and he sure as hell doesn’t trust me.

“You’re not leaving me behind,” I state flatly, looking him in the eye.

“I can’t keep my eye on you *and* fight off raiders.”

My jaw clenches. “Then find me some leathers. I’ll help you.” My voice drops. “Last night, you said you wouldn’t leave me again.”

Ayer’s jaw flexes, and he gives me a dark look.

“I’ll… be in the hall,” Theo murmurs, backing slowly out of the room and shutting the door behind him.

“I’m going.”

“You’re *not* going.” Ayer steps closer. So close, I have to tilt my head to keep his eye.

“Yes. I. Am.” I cross my arms across my chest. The fire in my blood is currently burning too hot for any fear of him to get in the way.

“The lives of innocent people hang in the balance. I can’t have you using this situation to your advantage for another one of your half-baked escape attempts.”

Something similar to hurt pricks at my chest, and I narrow my eyes.

“I’m not going to run,” I snap. “I can help. And like Theo said, you’re outnumbered.” I pause, wondering how far I can push him. “Give me a bow, and I promise, I’ll still be yours when the battle is over.”

Silence stretches, and my words hang between us. A muscle feathers in Ayer’s jaw, and there’s a new intensity in his eyes that I can’t quite decipher.

“Please.”

He stares down at me so hard I’m nearly certain he’s going to have me dragged back down to the cells, with Hayes posted outside, when he clears his throat.

“Theo?”

“Yeah?” the prince shouts back through the closed door.

“Have someone find the girl some leathers. We’ll meet you outside in ten.”

I blink. A slow, dangerous satisfaction spreads through me, and I work to keep it off my face.

“Don’t forget the bow,” I whisper, one hand half cupped around my mouth.

Ayer rolls his eyes before calling out again. “And a bow.” A look of annoyance flashes across his face before he sizes me up. “Princess sized,” he adds pointedly, and I consider flashing a fang at him.

Shaking his head, as if he already has regrets, he finishes strapping on his own leathers.

“Moons, save me. You had better behave, Rose Princess.”

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CHAPTER 56

ROWAN

The ride to the village is hard and fast.

I cling tightly to Dash's saddle between Ayer's arms as the stallion tears through the forest. My new bow slung across his back. Right beside his own.

I hear the screams before I even see the smoke.

Ayer pulls Dash up, signaling the group to stop just outside of the village, while we're still hidden beneath the cover of the trees. He slips so easily into command mode: calm, focused, decisive. Immediately taking charge and relaying the plan.

Half of the group will ride through the village entrance, drawing the raiders' attention and engaging the fae in battle. The other half will circle around to the back of the village to stage a second attack from the rear.

The goal: separate the raiders from the villagers as much as possible to minimize civilian casualties.

Ayer slides off Dash, helping me down after him. His hand lingers on my waist just long enough to make sure I'm steady on my feet. He hands my bow and quiver over, his gaze unreadable when I take them from him. Leaving the horses behind, we move swiftly and quietly through the woods.

Ayer, Theo, and I are part of the second group closing in from the rear. Hayes and Wyatt are leading the group attacking from the gate.

Staying true to my word, I stick close to Theo and Ayer. The screams coming from the village twist my stomach; they aren't just the screams of men, but of women and children too.

The sounds of laughter coming out of the village amongst the terrified screams sets me off. My magic flares, uncontrolled, a sudden burst of unrestrained rage. It lashes out wildly, only to crash hard against the rune's barrier. My wrist lights up with a sharp, biting pain. I let out a small hiss, earning a questioning look from Ayer. But we've just about cleared the tree line, and the village finally comes into view.

Nothing could have prepared me for what I see.

Heat sears my face. Two buildings nearby are fully engulfed in bright orange flames. Bodies lie scattered, motionless, across the ground.

The scent of death and smoke hangs heavy in the air

Ayer holds up his fist, halting the group at the tree line. The wait is agony, and my fingers twitch at my sides, wanting to rip an arrow from my quiver or throw the dagger at my thigh at the unsuspecting fae raiders. They're quite pleased with themselves, sadistic smiles on their faces as they light up another cottage—someone's home.

My heart clenches, hoping to the gods that no one was inside.

Several painful minutes pass while we wait for the first group to attack. We need them to draw attention.

Up ahead, I spy a small group of people huddled together. Surviving villagers. Raiders circle the group. I recognize their armour immediately.

They wear the same nondescript bronze armour as the ones who ambushed Ayer's company on the side of the road—and who hunted me by the river.

A few armed fae stand guard over the humans they've captured while the rest cycle in and out of the remaining buildings. They set more of them alight after taking out any perceived valuables.

A hulking fae male with a bald head appears out of the cottage closest to us. He drags out a young child by her blonde hair. She screams in pain, while her small hands claw at his wrist, trying to break free—or at least loosen his grip.

I grit my teeth, slowly pulling an arrow from my back and loading it into my bow.

She fights. Gods, she fights, but she's so little compared to him, and he yanks her so roughly her body eventually goes limp. With no care, he drags

her body into the square, tossing it with the others like he's thrown out a sack of trash.

"Stay inside the tree line." Ayer's voice is so close to my ear I nearly jump. I didn't realize he was so close. "You're an archer. Take them out from a distance."

I nod, my eyes still trained on the village—on the bald fae raider. My countless lessons with Riven and Fel are about to be put to the test. I might not hit the bullseye every time, but a fae skull is a far larger target.

I hold my breath as the first wave of Ayer's men attack.

Clad in black armour, Kovari soldiers burst through the village gates on horseback, immediately drawing the attention of the fae raiders who lift their swords and engage them, leaving a few behind to guard their little circle of captives.

Ayer and Theo exchange a look, and then they charge.

I inch forward, though I heed Ayer's order to remain inside the thick tree line, watching as they disappear into the fray.

The two of them move together with the familiarity of warriors who have fought countless battles side by side. Within seconds, each of them has dropped at least one raider, and is already on to the next.

I tear my gaze away.

Focus.

My eyes scan the small town before me. The air is thick with smoke, which significantly limits visibility .

The square is in chaos as the raiders struggle to regroup in order to fend off both attacks. The captured villagers scatter, some of them breaking containment and sprinting for the forest. A girl—about my age—breaks free, tearing toward the tree line. A raider is in pursuit. I recognize him immediately, the same bald brute from earlier.

She screams out when he catches her by the hair, his sword out, glistening red in the moonlight as he raises it high—

I loose.

My arrow strikes true without him ever even seeing me.

He drops, and I'm already reaching for another arrow when I spot Theo in trouble to my right. He and a towering, red-faced fae fight each other at a furious pace. Theo's sword strikes are swift and smart, proving he's more than just a pretty face.

I point the tip of my arrow, waiting for a clear shot.

Theo ducks an incoming blow, and I seize the opportunity. My arrow whizzes through the air, just missing the top of his blonde hair to catch his adversary square in the forehead. The male drops at Theo's feet.

The prince twists, glancing back with a wide grin that has no place on the brutal battlefield.

My next arrow is already nocked, and I loose again, taking out the raider engaged in tight hand-to-hand combat with Hayes.

Hayes actually bows to me.

I roll my eyes, though the corner of my mouth ticks up slightly.

I scan the village again, but the battle has pressed closer to the center of town, and I've lost my vantage point. The rest of the raiders are too far out of range. Cautiously, I take a step out of the forest.

I had lost sight of Ayer in the fray, but once I reach the edge of the square, he's hard to miss.

My breath stills as I watch him fight; blood streaks his leathers, and his sword cuts through the air and bodies with lethal precision. The surrounding air appears to darken as he fights; the shadows—or maybe it's smoke from the fires—cling to him, shifting conveniently with his movements. The raider he's fighting can barely keep up. It takes everything he has just to block Ayer's relentless attacks, conceding step after step as the Kovari captain mercilessly drives him further back into the shadows.

Backed into a corner, the raider panics, taking a chance and lunging for him. Ayer pivots, dodging the strike effortlessly before driving his own sword through the male's chest without blinking. The raider's sword clatters to the ground, and Ayer rips his own free, already turning to the next.

There's no hesitation, no mercy, just death incarnate.

I can't look away.

Two more raiders rush in to help, and Ayer's suddenly facing off against all three.

He's unfazed, his blade moving impossibly fast, blocking two more strikes before he drives his foot into the third raider's chest, sending him flying backward several feet.

I have a clear shot.

The glint of silver in my periphery is my only warning before something crashes hard into my left side.

The force of the hit sends both my bow and my knife flying. My hands fly forward, just barely catching myself from eating a mouthful of dirt when

I hit the ground.

Movement catches the corner of my eye, and I throw myself sideways just as a sword slams into the ground where my head had been.

I look up to find a dark-haired fae towering over me, a smug grin stretching across his face. It vanishes the instant he realizes he missed. With a furious shout, he wrenches his blade free of the earth, but I'm already moving. I spin across the ground, hooking my right leg around his ankle and yanking hard. He stumbles, just long enough for me to drive my left heel into his chest.

He goes down hard, sprawled out on the ground beside me. I scramble for my bow, lying just a few inches away. But his hand clamps down around my ankle, dragging me back. I kick wildly at him, and he releases my ankle with a curse. I jump to my feet, and he's quick to follow before we square off.

He's got his sword; I've got—nothing.

The male is huge, towering over me by at least a foot; his body rippled with the muscles of a seasoned warrior. He takes my measure, smiling a wide, feral grin at his assessment. I hold up my hands, my bow still too far away to be of any help, sidestepping carefully as we circle each other.

He lunges.

I dodge the bite of his blade, striking fast—landing quick blows on his head, arm, and leg—but I'm just not strong enough to knock the sword from his hand.

My heart races. I need a weapon.

Anger and frustration propel him forward, and again, I avoid his blade—but not his fist.

Pain explodes across my skull when he makes contact, and I go down, seeing stars.

When my vision clears, I find my gaze locked with Ayer's. He's watching me from across the square as he drives his blade through the last of the three raiders he was fighting.

A fourth raider emerges from the trees behind the Kovari captain. The tip of his blade pointed as he rushes Ayer, who doesn't see him coming because his eyes *are still on mine…*

The other raider is on me instantly, holding me down with his weight before pinning my wrists to the dirt to stop me from clawing for his eyes.

I fight, twisting and straining against his grip, trying everything I can think of to buck him off of me. But he sits heavily, his menacing smile widening as he takes control, enjoying my struggle—so much so that he drops his sword, letting go of one of my wrists to close his hand around my throat instead.

Strangling me.

My eyes fall to Ayer again, he rips his blade free from his opponent, taking a step toward me, still not seeing that raider at his back.

My breath cuts off and I claw at the raider's face with my free hand. I dig my nails deep, tearing raw streaks of red down his face before going for his eyes. The male screeches in agony, releasing my throat when I pierce one of his eyes with my thumbnail.

I suck in air— "Look out!" I scream at Ayer, but it's too late.

The charging raider buries his blade deep within the gap in Ayer's dark leathers and armour. The steel tip slices clean through to his front, and Ayer stumbles forward.

Ice floods my veins.

Even from where I'm standing—hundreds of yards away—I know.

It's a fatal strike.

"No…"

Ayer stays on his feet, gripping tight to his sword as he advances on the last remaining raider of the four he was fighting. The male scrambles backward, desperately searching for help—for anything that can help him fend off the furious war captain.

Ayer raises his blade, and metal meets metal with a sickening crash as the fight spills into the forest, disappearing from sight.

"Rowan!"

My gaze snaps to the right just in time to see Theo throw something. It lands right beside me.

A knife.

I don't hesitate, snatching up the knife and driving the blade with little mercy into my attacker's throat. His eyes go wide, gaping at me in surprise. Blood pours from the wound—his mouth—and he chokes, spluttering and drowning in his own blood. I watch, my own eyes icing over. It only takes a few seconds before his eyes roll back and he collapses down on top of me.

Before I even have a chance to panic, his weight is gone. Both Theo and Hayes appear above me, hauling the dead raider off me. I scramble out from

under the body, and they drop him back down in a heap on the ground. Both men stare at the body, at the knife still sticking out of the male's throat, and then at me.

Theo lets loose a low whistle. "Damn, girl, remind me never to piss you off."

I narrow my eyes at him, but when he extends his hand to me, I take it and allow him to pull me to my feet.

Hayes goes to retrieve my bow, and I rip Theo's knife from the raider's body before handing it back to the prince.

"Thanks," I say as our eyes meet.

"Keep it." He winks, his blue eyes sparkling.

Hayes thrusts my bow into my hands, and the two take off, running back toward town—toward the battle. *They didn't see what happened to Ayer.*

My hands are covered in the raider's blood, but I try not to think about it.

Taking a step to follow Theo and Hayes, I pause, my head turning back to the dark thicket on the edge of the forest where I last saw Ayer disappear.

With that fatal wound.

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CHAPTER 57

ROWAN

The sounds of the battle fade away the further I walk into the dark forest.

It's *quiet*.

There's no trace of Ayer, nor the soldier he was fighting the last time I saw him.

Chewing my lip, I look down, searching the ground for tracks when a bright splash of crimson catches my eye. Tiny, sprinkled droplets of blood decorate the dead leaves below that crunch under my feet as I lean down for closer inspection.

The droplets continue every few feet, trailing deeper into the forest.

I glance back at the village. It's still in chaos. Ayer's men are busy subduing the remaining raiders and checking on the state of the surviving villagers while fires still burn all around.

No one is looking for him.

I swallow hard, surveying my surroundings before reluctantly following the trail of blood. The sudden oppressive quiet of the woods has me more anxious than the battle at my back.

I grip Theo's knife tight in my palm.

Knowing what's at stake, I move quickly but carefully. The forest only grows darker the deeper I go into it, the shadows thickening, pressing in around me as if they have a life of their own.

My skin prickles and the hair on the back of my arms stands up as a dark feeling slides down my spine.

I should go back.

I should get Theo or Hayes to hunt down Ayer. He might already be dead. It's possible—with that wound he suffered.

Though if he were dead…

I reach for my magic. The warmth of it brings comfort as it rises to meet me—until it slams hard against that impenetrable wall of ink. Pain lances through the inside of my wrist, the mark glowing subtly in the dark woods. I pull back my sleeve, watching the rune smolder as it absorbs my magical blow. Most runes tie back to the life of their creator. If it remains, then Ayer still lives. *Probably.*

The shadows continue to grow thicker, and I slow my steps, every instinct screaming at me to turn back. I almost listen. My foot shifts back a half step, hesitantly.

Crack.

I freeze. The sound didn't come from behind me but rather from somewhere up ahead.

My pulse is pounding loudly enough to drown out my thoughts. I take a deep breath, steadying myself before taking another step toward the sound.

My knees hit the dirt hard, my foot catching on something. I twist, looking over my shoulder, and realize *I tripped over a body.*

I scramble away from him, moving backward along the forest floor. I recognize the body as belonging to the fae raider Ayer pursued into the woods. My eyes drop to the pool of blood soaking the earth beneath him.

He's dead. My breath catches. Because if he's here…

Ayer.

He's only a few feet away on the ground, propped up rather uncomfortably against a half-rotted log.

Slowly, I push myself to my feet, keeping my eyes locked on the Kovari captain. He holds his sword in one hand while the other is pressed into his side. Though it's doing little to stop the dark blood that continues to spill out between his fingers.

The blade did indeed run him through, just like I thought it did.

His normally tanned skin is now ghostly white, his breaths shallow. And it grows increasingly labored the longer I stand here.

He's *dying*.

Ayer knows it too.

My heart thumps faster.

I'm alone.

Ayer's men, including Theo and Hayes, are still preoccupied with the dwindling battle just beyond the trees. I'm armed. I have the bow Ayer gave me and Theo's knife. Not to mention Ayer's bow, his sword, and his bag all lay strewn around him, ripe for the taking.

My fist tightens on Theo's knife.

I *can't* kill him. Not with his rune still carved into my arm, but I *can* run. I might even reach the border of the Iron Kingdom before any of them even realize I'm gone, and quietly disappear in the chaos.

I could just leave Ayer to *die*.

And when he does, the rune will break, and I will be *free*.

A cool breeze stirs my hair, blowing in from the east, as if beckoning me toward the mountains. I look up, peering through the thick shadows to the sunlight peeking overhead.

I can marry Kane and fulfill my duty to Sitara. Skye will send troops to aid my father and brothers to end this war and future border skirmishes.

It's all within my grasp.

I don't even need to kill him myself… All I have to do is *walk away.*

And do it now before any of Ayer's men come looking.

For some reason, my feet won't move. My gaze drops back to Ayer, watching his chest rise and fall. *He's close.* His breathing has become more labored in the time I've been standing here. His eyes remain closed. I'm not even sure he's conscious.

I eye the bag by his side, inching closer until I'm close enough to grab it with shaky hands. Ayer's nostrils flare, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips.

"Rose Princess," he murmurs so low I barely hear him.

I freeze, refusing to breathe as I stare down at him. His eyes flicker open. He says nothing, and neither do I, as he reads the intent in my eyes. Blood continues to pour from his wound, but yet here he is, smirking at me.

"Run, sunshine," he says, his eyes never leaving mine. "Run fast."

His eyes fall closed, his breathing more labored than ever. The rune on my wrist burns so hot I gasp, yanking up my sleeve to stare at it. It glows bright and hot for another few beats before it starts to—*fade*.

My eyes shoot up, going back to Ayer.

Leave, Rowan. Walk away.

I can't. I can't move. I just stare at him.

He destroyed my home, took me prisoner, plans to use me as bait or revenge against my brothers—I still don't know which. And yet, despite everything, he himself has never hurt me.

And when Riggs…

He protected me.

He pulled me out of that river after killing those men.

And when he left to come here, to save a village from unimaginable horrors, he let me come with them. Gave me a bow. Trusted me to keep my word and… help.

My word.

I promised him I wouldn't run. At least not until the battle was over.

My heart twists in my chest as an inner war wages. I might not be able to hurt him, but if I walk away right now, I'll be the one who killed him.

Because I'm the only one who can save him.

I stare at his face—his closed eyes, willing them to open. I want to see those steel-gray eyes one more time. Mocking me. Challenging me…

My gaze drops back to his wound and then to the growing pool of blood at his side.

Light, I've healed nothing like this before.

I don't know if I can…

The rune still burns on my wrist, flaring in waves, pulsing like a dying star. My power only goes so far, and Ayers' injury is grave.

But I could still try.

True intentions still unknown, he's saved my life twice now.

I can't explain it. I should hate him—I *do* hate him, but yet… I don't think I can walk away, leave him to bleed out in the dirt alone while knowing I could've saved him.

I stare at his mark on my wrist and back to Ayer, my decision firming as I sheath Theo's knife before kneeling down next to him. I release a shaky breath, my palm hovering just over his side, hesitating before touching him.

He'll know.

I shake the thought from my head. I'll cross that bridge if we come to it. Whether my power will work is a big *if*.

I reach forward again, my fingers tracing gently along his side, marking the edges of the wound. Ayer shifts at my touch. Heat crawls up my neck as I feel his gaze settle on me, waiting until I finally lift my eyes to meet his.

“Hoping to get in the last hit, Princess?” he muses, though his voice is shaky. His skin is a terrifying shade of white.

“Something like that,” I whisper, pushing his shirt up to get a better look at his injury.

Light. The sword sliced clean between his ribs, leaving behind a two-inch gaping cut.

Ayer’s eyes roll back, his breaths turning shallow again beneath my palm.

It’s now or never.

Knowing I’ll probably live to regret this, I bury the thought, and pull anyway.

For several long seconds, nothing happens.

I close my eyes, focusing on my power, and pull again. I squeeze them tighter as I pull harder, drawing more of Ayer’s wound into myself. Fire rips through my flesh as muscle tears and bone protests, the injury settling into my body piece by agonizing piece. Warmth blooms from my ribs where my own blood spills out as I take the wound from him.

Ayer’s pain pours into me in one brutal rush, and I have to bite down hard on my lip to keep from screaming.

I can’t take it all—there’s no way—but if I can take enough… enough to chase off death… The pain is a good sign. *It’s working.* I can only hope it’s enough.

I pull and pull, the rune blazing as I wring every last drop of power from inside it. Ayer’s wound stitches itself together from the inside out, but the cost is more than I can bear. The lethal wound is just that—lethal. And I’m starting to doubt my ability to reverse that trajectory.

Pain sears and my vision tunnels. I’m on the cusp of burnout when something new swirls inside me.

My eyes fly open at the unfamiliar sensation. The power stretches through me, dark and vast, as though I’ve reached into a starless night. It’s magic—I’m certain—but nothing I’ve previously wielded has ever felt like *this*.

It should frighten me.

Instead, I want *more*.

I recoil, releasing it in a rush before the temptation can take root. Whatever that was…

It was powerful. Sweet—*intoxicating*, even...

I take a deep breath before reaching for it again, careful only to take what I need, letting it fill the nearly depleted stores of my own magic. I pull from the endless well inside me, drawing from it and feeling Ayer's wound heal completely while taking no more from my flesh.

Jerking back in shock, I stare at the shiny new silver scar under my palm.

That's not possible.

Panic takes over. *Did I go too far? Take too much?*

I shouldn't have been able to heal it entirely. Not with the amount of damage that had been inflicted on his body. *I'd be dead.*

My hand flies to my side.

The matching wound is there—but shallow. Not anywhere near as deep as his was.

Bloody? *Yes*

Painful? *Seriously*.

But not fatal.

The moment my fingers brush my wound, the adrenaline keeping me upright evaporates. The world tilts. Darkness tunnels the edges of my vision, and I pitch forward, barely catching myself before collapsing onto Ayer's chest.

A flash of steel gray.

I freeze.

Ayer's eyes are open; the familiar hard glare gone. Instead, he simply stares at me. We're only inches apart, his confusion laid bare for the first time.

"*Please*," I whisper. "*Don't tell anyone*."

My gaze searches his, desperate for a promise, for *anything*.

It's all I manage before darkness crashes over me, pulling me under.

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CHAPTER 58

AYER

She saved me.

Why?

The question plays over and over in my mind as I sit beside Rowan's bed, watching her sleep. Hours have passed since I carried her out of the woods, but she hasn't stirred. There's a tension in her face, still guarded even in her sleep.

I lean forward slowly, bracing my forearms against my knees, eyes fixed on the steady rise and fall of her chest as I try—but fail—to make any sense of it.

I took a sword to the ribs—*through* the ribs. A death wound.

It was over. I'd made my peace with it. And then the scent of wildflowers and honey filled my nose, and I found myself staring up into pools of evergreen.

Rowan.

I thought she was going to run. *Stones*, I could've sworn she would have. I even told her to. *So why didn't she?*

I passed out. The next thing I remember is the sharp, metallic scent of her blood as it soaked the leaves between us.

"Please don't tell anyone."

One second, I'd been on the gods' bridge, and the next—

My fingers find the tear in my tunic where the wound should be, but find only a thin, jagged little scar.

Impossible.

I know how deep that blade cut; it sliced straight through me. *The blood loss alone…*

I should be dead.

Gods, I'm certain I'd be dead if it weren't for her.

She was still staring into my eyes when she fell, but I caught her. Her face pale even in the dark of the shadows surrounding us, breaths coming slow and blood pouring steadily from her side.

A deep sword gash, located right between her ribs, on her left side…

Just like mine.

Ripping off a piece of my tunic, I applied pressure to the wound, shouting for help, but it was no use. We were too far into the woods for anyone to hear us.

Finding the strength, I pushed myself to my feet, scooping Rowan up and carrying her back to the village, doing my best to keep pressure on her wound.

Theo and Wyatt spotted us immediately.

"What happened?" Theo asked hastily, concern knitting his brows together as he surveyed the bloodied cloth I held tight to Rowan's side, and the way she lay limp in my arms.

Good question, I thought, but since I didn't have an answer to give him, I ignored it. "We need Hayes."

Wyatt nodded in agreement, taking off and returning only minutes later with Hayes in tow.

As gently as I could, I laid Rowan down on a clean patch of grass, stepping back to let Hayes and Wyatt get to work.

Her blood soaked my shirt, coating my arms.

The fear in her eyes still haunts my thoughts—the way she had looked at me.

"Please don't tell anyone."

What she did… it shouldn't be possible, but yet she'd done it. I can't tell you how. Even now, my eyes flicker to her bare wrist; the dark lines of my rune are still there—still etched into her skin. Unbroken.

She did the same with the baby, I realize—Josi. The princess had been *insistent* that she *hold* her. I remember how she stroked the child's cheek with her fingertips, humming softly. She collapsed not nearly a day later, sick to death, and burning with red fever.

I chalked it up to coincidence. Red fever is going around. I didn't think fae got sick, but supposing I was wrong, she could've contracted it weeks before I took her. The symptoms merely appearing with poor timing.

But now I know. Somehow, she healed us both. Somehow, despite the power-blocking rune, she took the baby's sickness into herself—and she *stole* my fatal wound.

I reach forward, my eyes leaving her face to lift the blanket covering her, revealing the clean white bandage I know covers the jagged lines of a cut identical to the brand new scar on my side.

Kent was sure. That baby never should have survived.

And neither should I.

I drop the blanket, leaning back in my chair, arms crossed, as I try to work it out. The rune I put on her wrist works by blocking magic from coming out, but I guess I never thought to imagine she would try *to take something in.*

But the real question is: why?

The rune's magic wouldn't let her kill me herself, but she could have left—could have run. She could have even just stood there and watched me die. The rune couldn't force her to save me.

She would have been *free*.

The rune's power would have broken with my death…

"Did she try to run?"

Theo's voice pulls me from my thoughts, and I find him leaning up against the doorframe, watching me. Stones know how long he's been standing there.

"Please don't tell anyone."

I know my best friend has picked up on the intensity in my eyes—and the way I haven't left the princess' side…

"We saw her run into the woods…" I feel his gaze on the side of my face, and I hear the unspoken question in his words. Did I do this to her?

"Please don't tell anyone."

I shake my head slowly. "No," I confirm quietly, staring down at the little thorn in my side, remembering the look of desperation in her eyes before she passed out. It doesn't feel right to keep secrets from Theo, but… I won't tell him my suspicions. At least not until I've had a chance to speak to her about it. "She saved my life."

Theo straightens and I can see the question forming in his eyes, but I cut it off before he can ask.

“I don’t know how,” I confess, my voice low. “But whatever she did, she saved me.”

Theo studies me for a long moment before his eyes shift to the princess, his eyes falling to the rune at her wrist.

“She kept her promise,” I say, glancing down at Rowan. “She didn’t run. She came back for me.”

Theo nods just as Hayes brushes past him, coming to check on his patient. Although Kent is our medic, he hates Rowan, so I don’t trust him anywhere near her.

I watch as Hayes removes the dressing from the wound, my eyes dropping to the jagged little cut he stitched up so perfectly. He did a fine job given the circumstances, but it’ll still scar.

Hayes checks his needlework, cleaning the wound and applying more herbal salve before replacing the dressing with clean linen.

“Is she going to be okay?” I ask. It’s been over twenty-four hours, and while she’s breathing and there’s a little more color in her face today, she hasn’t woken up.

Hayes’ eyes lift to mine, exchanging a quick look with Theo behind me before he answers.

“Aye, unfortunately she’ll live to irritate you another day yet.”

A surge of relief ripples through me.

“She’s fae,” Hayes adds. “The rune you put on her won’t impede her innate fae healing.” My mouth tightens at his words. “But her body is spending a lot of energy in which to do so. She needs rest to recover fully, but she should wake soon.” He finishes packing up the rest of his supplies before taking his leave, Theo quietly exiting with him.

I stay, staring at her for a long moment before reaching forward and brushing a loose strand of dark hair away from her face, letting my fingers linger against the soft skin of her cheek.

“Why?” I ask quietly, knowing she can’t answer, but still needing to know.

The ever-present tension in her face fades away at my touch. My chest tightens violently, and I jerk my hand away, shoving back in my chair and gripping tight the armrest to keep from touching her again. As if she hasn’t already complicated things enough.

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CHAPTER 59

ROWAN

I wake to a familiar scent: a thick musk of leather and citrus.

The memories flood in.

The forest. Ayer dying. Healing him. The dark, intoxicating rush of power. A starless night. Gray eyes seeing everything… seeing *me*.

I bolt upright, my breath catching in a sharp gasp when pain sears at my side, protesting the sudden movement. I whimper softly, my fingers finding my bandaged ribs. *Light*, how long have I been out? The last thing I remember, I was in the forest.

I scan the room, panic threatening to rise when all I find is darkness. Then I spot the candle burning in the corner, its tiny flame keeping the shadows at bay. My lungs remember how to breathe as my eyes slowly adjust.

As the room sharpens into focus, the relief is short-lived. I go utterly still, dread tightening in my chest when I see him.

Ayer sits across the room, silent and still—as still as fae. With his elbows braced on his knees, he fixes his gaze on me. When our eyes meet, he leans slightly forward. His usual cold, hard expression is missing; instead, it's replaced by something else—something unfamiliar.

Is that concern I see in his eyes?

We stare at each other in silence for a few more long beats before I clear my throat, working up the nerve to speak.

"Where are my clothes?"

The clothes I'm wearing aren't mine. Beneath the blankets, my bare legs brush against the sheets; the only thing covering me is a long, dark tunic that hangs to the middle of my thighs. The scent of leather and citrus clings to the fabric. *Ayer's*, I'm certain.

I throw the blanket aside and force myself upright, unable to hide the wince that flashes across my face. Pain protests as I twist toward the edge of the bed. I need to get out of it. I hate lying here—vulnerable—while he's over there watching me in all his menacing glory.

I shift my weight toward the edge of the bed, ready to stand, but I hesitate. Exhaling a shaky breath, I lift the oversized shirt to inspect the clean white cloth wound snugly around my waist.

"Hayes stitched it up."

My eyes snap to his; the unexpected softness in his voice caught me off guard. His scent is everywhere—overwhelming me.

"Take it easy," he murmurs when I shift a little more weight to the floor, then he rises to his feet and steps closer. He's careful to keep his hands where I can see them.

My eyes drop instinctively to his side, to where his wound should be—the mirror of mine.

"I'm fine," he says, following my gaze and my thoughts.

It's only then that I realize I've been holding my breath. I nod, exhaling shakily while shifting uncomfortably on the bed and dropping my gaze.

"I shouldn't be." His eyes lift. "I should be dead."

I feel the intensity of his gaze on my cheek, though I refuse to meet his eyes. *He knows.* My stomach turns, and a wave of dizziness swims through my head at the revelation. My secret. I swallow hard, schooling my face before lifting my eyes to his.

"What a shame," I say lightly, looking up at him between my lashes, testing the waters, though my words land heavier than they should.

The corner of his mouth twitches. "I live to disappoint," he says as he steps closer, and my heartbeat quickens, my breath catching as he lightly grazes a finger along the thick bandage at my waist, tilting his head to the side as he peers down at me. "Unfortunately, it looks like I'm stuck with you too."

His touch is featherlight, but every muscle tenses beneath it. He pulls them away too soon. A small smile tugs at my lips despite myself, and we stare at each other for far too long.

Clearing my throat, I break our shared gaze to scan the room again, not recognizing it. “Where are we?”

“Still in the village.” Ayer drags a tired hand through his hair. My gaze travels over him, taking in the dirt ground into his skin and the dried blood still marking his clothes. “My men are tending to the wounded and helping the remaining villagers with whatever else they need.”

His men. Not him. I take in his strong scent. It fills the room, lingering on my skin and hair. He hasn’t left this room.

“A few raiders escaped into the woods; I sent some men out to hunt them down. I want to make sure the village is safe before we pull out,” he continues, oblivious to how I’m only half listening.

“How long was I out?” I rub my eyes, fighting the overwhelming urge to lie back down and sleep for days.

“About a day.” Ayer studies me, noticing the way I waver slightly where I sit. “You should get some more sleep.”

Tempting, but I shake my head, inching further to the edge of the bed while bracing myself for the pain I know getting up is going to earn me. “No, I want to help.”

Ayer places a hand on my shoulder before I can stand. Gentle—but firm. “It’s the middle of the night. There’s nothing you can do right now except rest.”

Irritation flames through me, and the urge to fight him rises for half a beat before exhaustion shoots it back down. I release a heavy sigh before sinking back into the bed.

“Fine.”

Ayer nods once, satisfied, before turning back toward the door.

Panic whirls. “Are you leaving?” The words spill out before I can stop them.

He freezes, looking back over his shoulder at me. “I thought you might like some privacy…” He trails off, gesturing with a hand toward the door.

I look around the little room again. The dark shadows in the corners seem to grow darker, looming ominously. “You can’t…” I don’t even know what I’m asking him. “I…” I drop my gaze. “I don’t want to be *alone*,” I whisper. My cheeks burn hot with embarrassment.

Ayer stands frozen, silent as stone. My heart sinks as he moves toward the door. For one horrible second, I think he’s leaving anyway, but he

doesn’t. He stops in front of the door instead. The lock clicks as he slowly slides it into place.

Ayer undoes the leather strap of his sword belt, removing the weapon from his body and leaning it carefully against the wall.

I just sit there, watching in rapt silence as he strips off his leathers piece by piece, laying everything neatly across the table.

When he’s down to only his blood-soaked tunic, he pauses. His fingers curl around the hem, hesitating for the briefest moment before he pulls it over his head, leaving him in nothing but his breeches.

My breath stutters, and something deep within me twists.

His tanned skin is golden in the dim candlelight. The dark ink of his rune tattoos ripple over the defined muscles of his arm and chest, and my fingers twitch with the sudden urge to trace them.

I don’t dare breathe as he comes back toward me, moving to the other side of the bed, carefully pulling back the blankets before slipping in beside me. I lie back, keeping my eyes firmly on the ceiling when the mattress dips with his weight as he makes himself comfortable beside me.

When he’s finally still, I exhale slowly, releasing the breath I’ve been holding until I’ve mustered up enough courage to glance beside me, finding Ayer on his side. He’s got one arm slung over his head, eyes closed.

I roll slowly to my side, giving him my back and a few more inches of space. My eyes stay open, my throat tight, and I’m far too aware of every breath we both take as I try to lie as still as possible.

Several minutes pass with neither of us moving.

A deep sigh, laced with frustration, is my only warning before the bed shifts and Ayer’s arm snakes around my middle, carefully avoiding the bandaged area, before dragging me backward against his chest.

I gasp, attempting to scoot away, only for him to pull me right back. My body fits perfectly against his, and I feel him curl protectively around me. His arm relaxes, draping over me casually while keeping me pressed firmly against him. Warm breath brushes lightly against my ear, and I think I stop breathing entirely when he whispers, “Stay, Rowan.”

The way he says my name, in that deep, lilting accent of his, is dangerous. Something heats low in my abdomen. Ayer’s hand moves to mine, his fingers tracing over my knuckles far more gently than I would have ever thought him capable.

I have half a mind to shove him away, but instead of pushing his hand off mine, I curl my fingers around it instead.

His body is warm and familiar, and I feel safe—*protected*. The dark room with its shadowy corners is barely a thought with his arm holding me.

Sleep beckons, and I concede, giving into it, giving into… him. And somewhere between one breath and the next, I fall asleep.

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CHAPTER 60

AYER

The little Rose Princess is curled against my chest. Long, dark hair cascades down her back in tangled waves. I watch the slow rise and fall of her chest. My gaze trails up, lingering on those delicately pointed ears of hers while a muscle ticks in my jaw.

I shouldn't be doing this—shouldn't have taken her into my bed last night, a faerie. A *Sitari* faerie of all things.

It was my intention to leave last night, to leave the little Rose Princess to lick her wounds in peace—*the wounds she has because of me*—but the fear in her voice when she asked me not to go...

Carefully, I shift, trying to ease out from underneath her without waking her. But just as soon as I'm free from her touch, her eyes fly open.

Rowan twists under the blanket in a panic, scrambling across the bed—away from me—her eyes darting everywhere.

I frown, staying still so as not to spook her further. "Do you always wake up like that?"

She sits up fully in the bed, blinking at me until her eyes soften with recognition. Panic eases into guarded wariness within those forest green eyes of hers.

"No," she snaps, her tone defensive while she looks away.

Slipping out of bed, I cross the room to grab one of my saddlebags I left on the table last night. I feel Rowan's gaze tracking me as I do.

I rummage around inside the bag before tossing an extra pair of leathers into her lap. Grateful I remembered to pack them before we left for the fort, knowing the fight was bound to get a little dirty and we might be stuck out here for a few days.

“Get dressed,” I order when she just stares at the bundle.

Her eyes narrow immediately, and it’s work to keep my lip from twitching up at the flare of fire I see in her eyes. She doesn’t like being told what to do. Her rebellious attitude should be something I punish, not something I crave. Yet every time she pushes back, I want to see what else I can draw from her.

“I can’t very well do that with you in here, can I?” she snaps, folding her arms pointedly across her chest. A *mistake*. One that draws my attention to exactly what she intended to hide. My gaze drops before I can stop it. The tunic I gave her swallows her small frame, but does little to hide the curves beneath it. Seeing her in my clothes… *is dangerous*, and I feel something dark and possessive awaken inside me.

I want to remind her how she asked for quite the opposite last night—practically begging me not to leave her, but I lock my jaw. The fear in her eyes last night… It was real, and it doesn’t sit right to tease her about it. Attitude or not. So I say nothing, just offering her a lazy shrug of my shoulder before setting about getting dressed myself so I can get the fuck out of this room.

A knock at the door sends Rowan jumping into the heavens, but I just roll my eyes.

“Go away, Theo.”

“Come on,” Theo whines from the other side of the door. “How’d you know it was me?”

“Wyatt and Hayes know better.”

I pull my tunic on over my head before quickly strapping on my leathers, as the door handle rattles violently to my left.

“You locked me out?” Theo complains, shoving harder against the locked door. “Let me in!”

“No,” I reply simply while dropping my gaze meaningfully from Rowan’s eyes to the leathers still sitting untouched in her lap.

“Why not?” the bastard groans louder.

I can’t help the smirk on my face when I reply, “Because the princess is getting dressed.”

The door stops shaking just as Rowan’s cheeks flame a pretty rose pink. She glares at me, though finally moving her ass on those leathers.

“Good morning, Rowan!” Theo calls through the door.

Rowan’s own annoyance can’t stand up against Theo’s bright tone bubbling through the locked door, and I watch her frown lighten. “Hi, Theo,” she says while still shooting me a dark look that doesn’t match her tone.

I can practically hear the prince beaming on the other side of the door.

“When you two are decent, there’s breakfast downstairs,” Theo informs us, his voice fading as he retreats down the hall.

Rowan’s cheeks blush red at the implication, and her mouth falls open before she snaps it shut again.

I finish strapping on the last of my leathers and weapons, unlocking the door before half slipping through it.

“I’ll be out here,” I tell her, leaving the door just slightly cracked after I step through it.

So she’s not alone.

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CHAPTER 61

ROWAN

The new leathers fit snug against my hips.

Black this time. The same colors Ayer and his command wear. Different from the navy and silver that the rest of the Kovarian army and Theo wear.

I don't know why yet. My leading theory is that Ayer just wanted to be different; it sets him apart, and the darker color certainly plays into his whole intimidation gambit.

Oooh… look at me in my black leathers. I'm so spooky and scary, a total menace to society. I'm not like the other soldiers…

I roll my eyes, letting loose a small laugh at Ayer's expense.

Perhaps I can get Wyatt to tell me. Or Theo… I did save his life the other day after all.

I run my hands down the fitted material; it molds to my body in a way that feels both protective and freeing. It's surprisingly light, and it's so nice not to be weighed down by heavy or sodden skirts. The leather is flexible, and it moves with my body instead of trying to control it the way a corset would.

Alita would have a fit if she saw me right now. I'm not even allowed to wear trousers! Only pretty gown after pretty gown, lest I ever forget who I was born to be.

Cinching the last strap, I do my best to finger-comb the tangled mess that is my hair before braiding the length of it down my back to keep it out

of my face.

Hair done, I pull on my boots and slide for the door. I hesitate before tugging it open, unsure of what awaits me outside. It feels like everything has changed overnight, but… *what if it didn't?*

I fought alongside Kovari soldiers—saved a couple of them, too. And in return, they saved my ass once or twice, but I'm still a prisoner. I'm still *their* prisoner.

My hand comes away from the door handle, pushing up my sleeve to expose Ayer's rune on my wrist. A reminder, in black, swirling ink, of who I am and who Ayer is too.

He's still the captain who let loose a demon on my home. The man who ordered the slaughter of the entire castle guard without even a hint of remorse. Twelve hells, he would have killed me too if Theo didn't have other plans.

Stupid girl. Keeping you alive is his job. That's the only reason he keeps saving your ass. And you just had to go and return the favor. Like an idiot.

But the hand of the man who promised me death is the same hand that was wrapped around my body last night. The same hand that so carefully avoided my injury when he dragged my body up against his, holding me there until I finally relented and relaxed into his warmth.

I blow out a breath, tilting my head back to look at the ceiling. My feelings on this are… complicated, to say the least. I shake my head, clearing away the messy thoughts before rolling my shoulders back and lifting my chin. I march over to the door with confidence, pulling it open and step out into the hall.

Ayer is leaning against the wall, his attention fixed on a small wooden carving in his hand and the knife he's using to carve it with. It's the same wood carving I saw him clutching back at the river. He's been working on it since he took me.

His eyes lift to meet mine, and for a moment, neither of us says anything as I watch him take in the new leathers on my body.

His throat clears. "The leathers fit."

"Mhm," I agree, unsure of what else to say.

"Hungry?" he asks, not waiting for my answer before pushing off the wall and turning down the narrow hall. The wooden floorboards creak under his weight.

I follow him silently.

The low din of voices grows louder as we descend the stairs, and soon I find myself in front of a small but packed dining hall.

I freeze on the bottom step, my fight-or-flight kicking in.

The room is full of men. Most of whom I recognize from Ayer's command. They're spread out along several long tables. It's only the sweet scent of actual food that keeps me from running right back upstairs. *A girl can only survive on jerky and wild berries for so long.*

"Rowan!"

My head turns at the sound of my name, finding Theo beaming at me from one of the crowded tables, enthusiastically waving me over.

Wyatt and Hayes sit across from him, but the rest of his bench is empty. Ayer disappeared somewhere into the crowd, so I step quickly toward Theo. My eyes dart about the busy dining hall, anxious amid so many Kovari soldiers and men from the village.

But as anxious as I feel, nobody stares—or whispers, or glares. The few I make eye contact with nod politely in greeting before returning to their conversations, as if my being here—among them—without my hands bound in rope is suddenly normal.

I reach the table without incident, slowly sinking down into the seat beside the Kovari prince. Before I'm even fully settled, someone places a plate piled high with steaming hot eggs, sausage, and roasted potatoes in front of me. Another half second later, Ayer drops unceremoniously into the empty seat to my left, his arm brushing mine.

When he notices my incredulous gaze, he gestures toward my untouched plate with his fork. "Eat, Rowan."

He doesn't have to tell me twice, though irritation prickles through me at the thought of obeying an order from him without argument. But the delectable scent of honey bacon fills my nose, and all thoughts of the moody captain go out the window. I can't even remember the last time I had something to eat.

Gods, the bacon tastes every bit as delicious as it smells. Smoky, salty, and perfectly crisp. It melts on my tongue, and I nearly moan out loud.

I devour a few more bites before reaching for the glass of water someone's placed in front of me, taking a deep drink.

"So, Rowan," Theo says brightly.

I glance up with the glass still at my lips.

"Now that you and Ayer have slept together—"

I choke instantly. Water pours down the wrong way, burning my throat as my lungs violently reject it.

"*Theo…*" Ayer says, his voice dropping into a dark warning.

Theo blinks those blue eyes at the two of us like he's nothing but an innocent angel of light. "What? Did you and the princess *not* sleep in the same bed last night?"

"No—I mean, yes, but—" I jump to clarify in between repeated coughs, but I'm still half choking on inhaled water.

"She's injured," Ayer growls, stabbing a hot cake with his fork. His eyes flash with a hint of the violence I know he's capable of, darkening on the edges.

Theo pays his warning no mind, boldly leaning in before opening his mouth to continue.

Ayer sets down his fork.

Hayes clears his throat—loudly—before Theo can utter another word. "Princess," he interjects tactfully, "it appears you could teach Wyatt here a thing or two about archery." Ayer's second-in-command elbows the youngest of Rusic's crew, who rolls his eyes. "You certainly seem to know your way around a bow and arrow."

I'm immediately grateful for the subject change, though surprised he addressed me directly.

"I'm an *okay* shot," I answer carefully, suddenly aware that every pair of eyes at the table has turned toward me. "But I can never quite hit the bullseye. My shots always drift just a little to the left."

Theo waves his hand dismissively at my self-criticism. "Nonsense! You nailed that raider who was about to gut me square in the forehead! You're bloody lethal, Princess."

I feel the weight of Ayer's gaze fall upon my cheek, but I keep my eyes fixed on my plate. A small smile threatens my lips at the prince's praise. I quickly shove another bite of eggs into my mouth in order to hide it.

They gave me a weapon. Trusted me to fight beside them.

Until now, only Riven and Fel knew of my skills. Kovari enemies or not, it's admittedly a bit of a relief to have it out in the open; to have someone see the *real* me for once.

"I can barely hit the target at all," Wyatt admits, rather sheepishly. "What you did yesterday was incredible." I look up, finding a look of genuine awe on his face before his brow furrows. "I didn't think the fae

trained their women in combat?" His gaze slides to Ayer, who remains quiet. "Where did you learn to shoot?"

My fork freezes at the question, and I stare down at my plate for half a beat before looking intentionally at Wyatt. "My brothers taught me." A rueful smile pulls at my lips before I can stop it. I miss them so much. "And I wasn't exactly *allowed*; they had to train me in secret," I admit, speaking carefully—far too well aware of how everyone at this table feels about my brothers. "But they felt it was important that I learned how to defend myself."

My eyes flick briefly to Ayer. He's watching me silently. An unreadable expression on his face.

The table's fallen uncharacteristically quiet, and I straighten in my chair, washing away the look of sadness I know has fallen across my face. My eyes find Wyatt's again. "I'd be happy to give you some pointers anytime."

The young soldier smiles, his eyes sparkling with excitement as he nods enthusiastically back at me.

From there, the table falls back into easy conversation, and it's not long until I find myself relaxing amid the close-knit crew of enemy soldiers.

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CHAPTER 62

AYER

"And the rune is still there?"

I nod without bothering to look at Theo. My eyes stay fixed on the female fae across the village square instead.

I'd stuck Rowan with Wyatt for the day. I need space to think, and I'm sure she wouldn't mind a little space from me too.

Their task is to keep the children occupied while the rest of us work on clearing the village of the remaining bodies and debris.

"How do you reckon she got around it?" Theo asks, moving to stand beside me as I study the Sitari princess.

I shake my head, my jaw tightening. "I'm not convinced she did."

"How so?"

"The rune is still intact. I checked it myself. That rune… It's old magic—impenetrable."

"Then how do you explain *this*?" Theo waves a hand over my ribs.

I glance down at the scar hidden beneath my shirt before gripping the shovel in my hands tighter.

"I can't. But I know I felt it." I flex my fingers, remembering the strange warmth that had spread through me. "Whatever she did, it healed me. There's no other explanation."

Theo is quiet for a moment, and his gaze drifts across the square to the princess. "Did you ask her?"

“We didn’t talk about it.” I stab the shovel into the dirt again, continuing the grave we’ve been digging.

“*Ayer*,” Theo chastises.

I ignore him, shoveling more dirt out from the hole. Stab, scoop, dump. Stab, scoop, dump.

Theo sighs so heavily I’m surprised the trees don’t bend with it. “You realize conversations require actual words?”

“I’m aware.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

I let the silence stretch between us.

“Wow, I can’t believe I was right,” he muses openly.

“Right about what?” I grumble, working to focus on my task.

“You and her.”

That catches my attention and my gaze lifts, eyes narrowing. “You’re going to have to be a little more specific.”

He just stares down at me, that impish smile of his widening the longer I glare at him.

“There’s nothing going on between us.”

“*I* never said there was.” Theo smiles victoriously back at me.

My frown deepens. “*You* ordered me to keep her alive.”

“And you are doing a fine job,” Theo says, his blue eyes lighting up. “It’s funny though,” he continues when I stay silent. “I don’t remember you ever taking an order quite so seriously.”

I bristle at his words but keep my mouth shut, refusing to take the bait.

“We could interrogate it out of her—how she saved you...” Theo floats, revisiting our earlier topic of conversation.

“No.” I drive the shovel into the dirt hard enough to make Theo raise a brow. His eyes sparkle with satisfaction, and I clench my jaw harder.

“Since when do you defend fae?”

“I’m not— I…” My words trail off as my gaze drifts up—back across the square.

Rowan sits in the middle of a semicircle of children. She has them completely enthralled with some dramatic story she’s telling. Her hands fly wildly as she talks, her expression animated enough that I can almost picture whatever tale she’s busy spinning. Until suddenly, she freezes. Her expression grows ominous, and she stays completely still for a moment

before snatching up the little boy closest to her and tickling him while he laughs and laughs, kicking wildly in her lap.

"She's just not what I expected," I mutter.

Rowan's not weak. Not spoiled. Not helpless. Every time I think I've figured her out, she goes and does something else that tears apart the picture I've painted of her.

I feel Theo's eyes on me, following my gaze across the square. Neither of us says anything for several long minutes, watching Rowan incite a rebellion within the small group of kids, leading them in a surprise attack against Wyatt, who pretends to fight them off using sticks as swords.

"Say it," I sigh, unable to endure Theo's pointed silence any longer.

Light still dances in Theo's eyes, but all amusement has faded away from his face, leaving only a somber expression behind. "Maybe you should tell her the truth?"

The weight of his words sinks in. The fact that we're even having this discussion is absolute insanity. This conversation. Rowan. All of it. She's the Princess of Sitara. King Harland's pride and joy, not to mention Fel's bloody sister. The key to my revenge. I attacked her home, slaughtered her guards. I took her… dragging her for days through rough terrain, starving her, letting her freeze, threatening her—her brothers, all of Sitara—and still… *she saved me.*

She's fae. I want to believe it was just another one of their tricks.

But I looked into her eyes as she did it. Green, ringed with molten gold around her pupils; they were wide with fear and uncertainty. Yet beneath both lay something I never expected to find directed at me.

Worry.

She took my wound—a wound that should have killed me—and drew it into herself instead. The pain alone must have been unbearable.

But tell her the truth?

"Maybe…" I murmur after several long minutes.

Theo and I both know how important Rowan is.

The two of us return to digging, but my attention keeps drifting back to her. Taking in her smile—her laugh. She's distracting, and I let out a growl when I slam my shovel into the dirt harder than is necessary, reminding myself once more to focus.

Stop looking at her.

"Are you really going to be able to use her as a pawn against Fel?"

My grip tightens around the shovel's handle at the sound of the fae princeling's name.

"Fel deserves everything that's coming to him," I say coldly. "He's the reason Ridge is dead." The reason one of the three of us never made it home.

My gaze settles on the little Rose Princess again. She resembles her brother enough to make my stomach turn sometimes, but I've started to notice the differences too. Her hair is darker than his or Riven's. And while her eyes are green, they're threaded with gold—a burst of sunlight breaking through a forest of dark pine.

"But does *Rowan* deserve what's coming for her?"

Theo's question makes my jaw tick. Rowan's brother killed my brother. Her father ended almost my entire bloodline. She owes a debt that can only be paid one way.

Revenge has never made me hesitate before.

So why does the image of Rowan bleeding leave a twisted feeling in my chest?

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CHAPTER 63

ROWAN

Despite the victory, the overall mood amongst the Kovari soldiers is somber. There had been so much death and destruction, not to mention a few of the fae raiders had managed to evade them and currently walk free.

But even given the mood, after breakfast this morning, something shifted.

I find myself now included in conversations, and even jokes, amongst the men throughout the day. Wyatt or Ayer are never too far off, one of them always watching, but I've been allowed to move about the village as I pleased.

I met the villagers, listened to their stories, and *stars*, it was difficult to hear.

The raid. The bloodshed. The worst part might be how they spoke of it as though it's not anything out of the ordinary. And apparently, it's not. The fae raid their villages relentlessly. So many lives have been lost—or taken—whole communities destroyed. Between the raiders and the Sitaran army, these border villages live in constant fear of the fae.

Wyatt and I take a break for lunch, sitting on the edge of the village, near the forest, looking over a group of children playing nearby with an old ball they'd found. We're nearly half done before I work up the nerve to ask Wyatt the one question that's been nagging me from the start.

"Why?" I ask, softly.

Wyatt stiffens beside me, knowing what I'm asking him without needing me to elaborate.

He studies me for a moment, as if he's deciding whether or not I can handle the *real* answer. He reminds me quite a bit of Theo. Similar build, the same sharp features, but Wyatt's hair is longer and darker, a rich brown instead of gold. Bright, sapphire blue eyes stare back at me.

"Because they can," Wyatt finally says with a shrug, going right back to his bread and cheese.

I release a breath, looking back over the village, debating if it's wise to continue.

My gaze catches on something lying in the dirt, not too far away. Upon closer inspection, I find it's a singed stuffed bear. It rests atop the remains of what must have been someone's bed. Fire had burned most of the house around it away.

"How often?" I ask him, remembering the way the villagers spoke of raids like these as if they were an inevitability.

"Too often," he says and my jaw tightens. "The raids have only gotten worse over the last few years. Every couple of weeks now, along the border towns. Sometimes more." He frowns. "Many of the villages have since been abandoned—or destroyed." His jaw clenches as he looks around at what's left of the village in front of us.

I shake my head slowly, trying to process what I'm hearing and everything I've seen these last twenty-four hours. "I don't understand. Sitara should have stepped in to protect—"

"Sitara is the reason for it." The venom in Wyatt's voice startles me.

His face softens when he takes in the shocked look on my face. "Sorry. I shouldn't have—"

"No." I stop him, shifting to look him in the eye. "No. Tell me what you were going to say."

There's a grim expression on his face, but he nods, continuing. "Well, Sitara—Sitara *looks the other way.* They allow raiders to move freely through fae territory, to their ports." His eyes flick to me, watching my face cautiously. "Sitara buys most of the slaves the raiders bring in."

"No," I gasp—in shock? Surprise? I'm not sure. My first instinct is to slap him—to deny it. There are no slaves in Sitara… But the look on Wyatt's face… He's too young to carry this kind of bitterness—*this grief*—for it to be a lie.

Wyatt just nods in silent confirmation, and my mind goes to the fall of Rosecliff.

Ayer—Kovaria—slaughtered the fae guards but spared all the human servants…

Most of the servants came into service at Rosecliff after losing their homes and families to raids along the borders… I look around at the burned village surrounding me, and a sinking feeling settles in my chest.

After a long while, Wyatt motions for us to wrap up our lunch. Around us, Ayer's command has begun readying their horses for our ride back to the fort today. My stomach tightens at the thought of returning to that gods-awful fort, but I rise and follow him back to the village silently, my mind desperately searching for a way to make sense of all of this.

We've nearly reached the village when my question spills out. "But the attacks—the humans—Kovaria. They attack the fae too?" I recall all the talk of Kovarian raids along the fae border within the court.

Confusion crosses Wyatt's face, and his head tilts slightly to the side as he stops to think about what I've asked. "What attacks?"

"Like the one on Rosecliff," I insist, my words coming quickly, needing justification for my kingdom's actions. "The humans…" My eyes meet Wyatt's. "You guys…" I correct. "You attack the fae border villages all the time too… Don't you?" My voice fades out on the question.

Wyatt lets out a long breath before resting a hand lightly on my shoulder.

"Princess," he says, his voice gentle as he waves an arm back to the village at his back. "Look around. These villages barely have two broomsticks and an axe to cobble together for their own *defense*. What makes you think they're out here carrying out raids on fae lands?

His words ring true. Even the destruction couldn't mask the overall state the village had been in before the raiders attacked. The villagers are thin, their homes and buildings patched together; these people hardly had anything to begin with.

And now they have even less.

The ride back to the fort is nothing like the chaotic adrenaline rush the ride to the village was.

A tense silence settles between Ayer and me almost as soon as we set out.

The Kovari soldiers leave a few men behind for protection since a few of the raiders managed to slip away. They leave food and weapons, along with a promise to send more once we return to the fort.

By the time we ride away, my entire understanding of the world feels fractured.

I've seen so little of it myself—so little of Sitara, even, if I'm being honest. Between the palace in the capital and Rosecliff, I'd hardly been anywhere else. Instead, I had relied upon reports from trusted advisors and my own father, and of course the never-ending supply of court gossip.

And given what I know about court gossip…

Stars, could the court stories about the raiders be just as ludicrous as all the other stories? I feel dumb having to even question it.

Come to think of it, Fel hadn't mentioned much about raids from Daekhar or Kovaria. I'd barely seen him since he'd been called up to his unit, but he seemed different since he left. Distant—haunted even. I hadn't paid too much attention, admittedly too preoccupied trying to escape my own fate.

At the time, I never questioned it.

I never questioned any of it.

I ride in the saddle with Ayer, though the captain says very little, as if sensing I need the quiet to untangle the web of lies inside my head.

Hours pass before the fort finally comes into view, and we both stiffen at the sight of it.

Immediately, my senses sharpen.

The fort is busier than when we'd left it.

There are more men in black armour—the same as what Ayer's men wear—moving about the courtyard. But I don't recognize the soldiers, and I thought we didn't leave any behind. Their posture is stiffer, I notice as we pass them, more rigid than Ayer's men.

Ayer squeezes his legs around Dash's middle, urging him forward until we catch up to Theo's bay. The two exchange a grim look as I watch on silently.

Something is happening.

The moment we reach the stairs, one of the unfamiliar soldiers approaches.

“My Lord. Captain.” He gives them each a clipped nod before his gaze slides over me.

Ayer dismounts the horse first before helping me down. The second my boots hit the ground, he shifts me subtly behind him before facing the soldier fully.

“Charlton,” Theo greets smoothly.

The change in the prince’s demeanor is immediate. I almost don’t recognize the stoic and solemn man standing beside us; even the tone of his voice is different. There’s an air of authority in it, one I haven’t heard him use with Ayer, or even any of his own men.

“What can we do for you?”

Charlton’s eyes linger on me briefly before returning to Theo.

“The queen wishes to have a word with both you and the captain.”

I notice how his tone sticks on Ayer’s title.

“Of course,” Ayer replies calmly, though I’m sensing anything but calm rolling off the two of them right now. “Give us a few hours to freshen up from the road, and we would be glad to join her for dinner.”

Charlton clears his throat. “She’ll speak with you now. You have half an hour before she comes to call for you in your chambers, Captain.”

A flicker of irritation crosses Ayer’s face so quickly I almost miss it. Still, he nods sharply. “As the queen wishes.” He steps forward, grabbing my arm to bring me with him as he brushes by Charlton, moving with purpose.

Once we’re inside and out of sight, he quickens his pace further. Theo keeps up with us as we move quickly down the hall.

“What’s going on?” I demand, seeing as he’s about to wrench my arm out of its socket. His legs are so much longer than mine, I’m having to run to keep up with him.

“Not here,” Ayer mutters, his eyes scanning the corridor as if he expects danger to leap out of every shadow.

We reach his chambers, finding Ana, Ayer’s chambermaid, waiting outside, anxiously wringing her hands. Ayer pushes me inside before speaking rapidly to Ana. She nods, scurrying back down the hall.

Ayer mutters out a few select curses, then checks the hall once more before he shuts the door.

Theo moves to lean against the wall near the door, one hand resting on his sword while he and Ayer exchange a long gaze. A silent communication echoes between them, my anger flaring at being kept in the dark about whatever is happening.

"Is someone going to tell me what is going on?" I snap. My words bite harder than intended, but my irritation is barely a mask for the growing anxiety at what could have both Theo and Ayer on edge like this.

Ayer looks at me, finally, and there's an odd expression on his face I don't recognize. Calculation? Tension? Something like reluctance? But before he can reply, Ana barges back through the door. She thrusts a small bundle into Ayer's hands, which he takes from her with a quiet nod. Ana gives a quick bow, her eyes lingering on me for a minute before she once again takes her leave.

The moment she exits, he turns toward me fully.

"The queen is here."

I frown, confused about their reaction to the news. "Who?" I look over at Theo. "His mother?"

"No." Ayer's mouth tightens as he exchanges a look with his friend. "The Queen of Daekhar."

I freeze, and ice slides through my veins. *No. No, that's impossible…* Carefully, I search Ayer's face for any sign that this is the moment he decided to develop a sense of humor, and this is all just a cruel joke.

But Ayer only watches me with sharp concentration, already likely thinking ten steps ahead.

My throat goes dry.

"The—the *Demon* Queen? What? Why?" The words stumble out, as I fight through the rising fear seizing hold of my mind, every muscle in my body going rigid.

Theo shifts beside me. "My father married her."

I can only stare at him.

Married her?

My brain works hard to process what I'm hearing. The King of Kovaria —*Theo's father*—has taken the Demon Queen of Daekhar as his *wife?* Which makes her…

I look up at Theo. "Your—" I take a deep breath. "Your stepmother?"

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CHAPTER 64

ROWAN

Something flickers in Ayer's dark eyes at my realization, but it's gone too quickly for me to analyze, and he just nods solemnly in confirmation.

"Technically," Theo mutters.

The Demon Queen. The woman who married the last King of Daekhar. The same one who poisoned his mind and corrupted his court, before destroying his entire kingdom from the inside out.

My thoughts spiral so deeply that I barely realize Ayer is speaking, until my name on his lips cuts through the haze.

"Please, Rowan." His words are urgent and low, as if the queen can hear them from wherever she is within the fort. "If there's ever been a time for you to listen to me, let it be now." His eyes lock onto mine, intense and searching. "She *cannot* know who you are."

Fear. My eyes widen at the realization that the look in his eyes—that emotion I couldn't quite label—is fear.

"As far as the queen is concerned, you're just a slave. Taken from some random village along our path." His eyes sharpen. "If she finds out who you really are…"

He doesn't need to finish what I already know. Whatever I've gone through with Ayer, or whatever they have planned for me, I know it pales in comparison to what the queen might do.

There's no love lost between the Queen of Daekhar and Sitara.

When her dark magic consumed the Highlands, killing her husband and son and taking out most of the Daekhari Court alongside them, my father rode in with his armies and allies to take her down.

With the Daekhari Kingdom in disarray, she had been ill-prepared to fend off such a strong outside attack and was quickly defeated. However, instead of facing her defeat, she chose to flee.

She had to. With the king and his heir dead, she had no way to claim the throne. The tethering prevented her from inheriting the kingdom's power, and she was left with no choice, and Daekhar fell to ruin.

Now, the highlands are little more than ruins and clans of raiders.

But, even I know enough not to underestimate a demon powerful enough to destroy an entire kingdom.

Slowly, I nod. "Okay."

Ayer studies my reaction, as if he was expecting more of an argument. I know my life means little to him, but he still needs me alive for whatever he and Theo have planned. So I'm confident that at the very least, their plans don't include the Demon Queen ripping out my heart to feast on tonight.

Ayer's lips part as if he wants to say something else, but Theo steps forward. His eyebrows are bunched together in concern, his skin a little pale, and he's missing his usual easy smile.

"She's on her way," Theo reminds us. I barely recognize the seriousness in his tone.

Ayer swears, pushing the bundle of cloth Ana just gave him into my hands. "Put this on."

I hold up the fabric, taking a closer look, when horror washes over me. It's a dress, though the sheer lack of fabric might disagree.

"You want me to wear—this?" I stare up at him. "Absolutely not."

I try shoving it back into his hands, but he just pushes me—and the dress—into the washroom instead.

"She has to believe you're only a slave," he says tightly. "Trust me, Rowan, you do not want the consequences if she learns otherwise."

I'm shaking my head when I hear my name again. Softly. Pleading.

"Rowan."

I glance up at Ayer—truly looking at him this time. His use of my name does something to me I can't quite explain.

"You have no reason to," he starts, his eyes fixed on mine. "But, I need you to trust me."

I chew my lip, searching his eyes. The urgency grows by the second before I finally concede, dropping my gaze to give a quick nod of my head, and then I back up slowly into the washroom.

Closing the door behind me, I release a shaky breath and start stripping off my leathers to trade it for—

The dress' fabric is thin and utterly see-through. The silky fabric dips low, revealing most of my chest, and silk straps crisscross my stomach, leaving most of my skin exposed. The skirt is hardly any better—slits cut nearly to the waistline, and shift as I walk, leaving only a few inches of cloth to cover my front.

It leaves me vulnerable. Giving easy access to my body from all directions.

My stomach twists, and I forcefully swallow the bile that rises in my throat as I remember Riggs' hand when he found that tear in my skirt.

I shove the memory away, walling it off inside a fortress in my mind.

The mirror offers me a reflection I barely recognize.

The dress leaves my arms bare. The dark curling rune contrasts sharply with my pale skin. The bandage covering my wound stands out at my exposed side. I rip it off.

The wound I'd taken from Ayer has already started to heal, but the cut is still raw and angry and sits conveniently between two of the straps. I leave it uncovered. Proof of violence, which I'm sure the Demon Queen will enjoy.

I stare at it until my expression turns blank, and then with a deep breath, I walk back into the room.

Despite his solemn demeanor, the prince lets out a low whistle as he takes me in, and I feel a blush creep across my cheeks.

Ayer shoots him a glare sharp enough to kill.

Theo smirks back at him before dropping lazily into one of the chairs by the hearth with a full glass of whiskey.

Unsure what's expected of me, I linger awkwardly in the doorway to the washroom until Ayer steps toward me. His eyes immediately drop to the angry red scar between my ribs before they take a sharp turn toward the ceiling.

He looks irritated—maybe furious. Without a word to me, he catches my wrist and pulls me behind him as he stalks toward his desk. Taking a seat, he pulls me down with him.

My ass has barely grazed his lap when I jump back out of it in surprise. “What are you doing?”

“Sit on my lap.”

My eyes widen. “What? No!” I take a step back, though his grip on my wrist prevents any further retreat. I try pulling away, but his grip only tightens.

Theo makes no move to intervene, lounging on his chair as if it were a throne, his shoulders slouched back with his feet propped up on the table. He throws back another shot of his whiskey as he watches our exchange, all while casting wary glances toward the hall door.

Ayer tugs me closer, his strength winning out against mine. “There’s no time,” he says quietly. “You need to play the part.” His silver eyes flash, and I see his fear reflected in them again.

Reluctantly, I allow him to pull me back into his lap. I sit perched atop one of his thighs, his leg resting between both of my own. My split skirt falls away to each side, leaving almost my entire leg exposed.

I’m shaking.

Ayer’s rough hand slides slowly up my exposed thigh in an effort to settle me, but it has the opposite effect. The unexpected contact sends wicked jolts of electricity running from his fingers through my skin, with a direct line deep into the core of my abdomen.

My breath catches, and it takes everything in me not to jump when I feel the heat of his breath brush my ear.

“Keep your eyes down,” he whispers. “Whatever happens... play along.”

My heart beats hard in my chest, and I hear his voice again, softer this time. “I’m sorry.”

I twist around until I can see his face—his eyes. The darkness in them holds a deep sadness, and perhaps even a tinge of regret, and then he wrenches his gaze away, sharply directing his attention forward.

The door opens and soldiers pour in, sweeping the room with their eyes while keeping a casual hand on the hilt of their swords. They’re wearing the same black armour as Ayer and his men. I feel their eyes linger when they get to me—see their gazes drop to my exposed thigh, the one on which Ayer’s currently tracing small, soft circles into my skin.

I’m aware of every breath, every movement either of us makes.

The queen enters, and there's no mistaking her. Even with the power-blocking rune on my wrist, I can sense the power thrumming off of her. The feel of it sends a shiver down my spine. Dark and dangerous, just like that of the Raven.

She wears an elegant—yet simple—dark gown. Traditionally formal. Her dark hair is a stark contrast to the paleness of her skin. Equally dark eyes find me immediately, and I'm struck by their intensity. Remembering Ayer's words, I break our stare, dropping my eyes to the ground.

She's one of the last half-demons we know of. Powerful. Once formidable enough that the fae hunted her kind nearly to extinction.

I peek back up through my lashes for another look. The queen's eyes seem devoid of life. Cold and cruel, they scan the room slowly. A look of disdain appears on her face as she takes in Theo, who lounges lazily across from her in his chair. Irritation sparks in those otherwise dead eyes at his apparent lack of respect.

Then her attention shifts toward Ayer.

And me.

The captain's body goes rigid beneath mine.

"*Well*," the queen drawls. "Don't rise on my account."

"Why? You're still queen of nothing. My allegiance is to the king."

I stiffen at his dismissive words, and silence floods the room. A heavy, *deadly* silence.

Did he really just speak to the demon queen like that?

Ayer's chin finally lifts to meet the queen's cold glare. His expression is equal to hers, cold and impassive, as he adds, "Your Highness," as if it's an afterthought.

The queen's lips curl, but she says nothing.

"Would you like a drink, Your Majesty?" Theo holds up his already half-empty glass of whiskey, making an attempt to break the simmering tension between her and his captain. "Ayer and I were just enjoying a lovely nightcap."

The queen doesn't even look at him.

"No. I won't be long." The way her eyes slither back over to Ayer reminds me of a viper right before it strikes. "I just wanted to congratulate you on your victory at Rosecliff. A grand success."

I tense, and Ayer's hand tightens on my thigh, silently warning me to stay still and quiet.

“Yes,” he replies smoothly, lifting his own glass of dark liquid toward Theo. “The first of many, we hope.”

The queen’s eyes drift over me again.

“And you’ve found yourself a new pet?” She comes closer, inspecting me as if I were a piece of livestock, one eyebrow raised. “She is *fae*?” she asks, her tone marked with surprise as she looks at Ayer for confirmation, as if my ears aren’t evidence enough.

I feel Ayer’s fingers in my hair before his fist curls around a lock of it, roughly tugging my head to the side to expose my neck to the mercy of his mouth.

My pulse thumps violently.

His eyes stay on the queen, a challenge in them I don’t quite understand, as his mouth brushes lightly against my neck. All while his other hand disappears beneath the thin fabric of my skirt.

“An even greater victory,” he murmurs before biting down on my throat.

A soft whimper escapes me before I can stop it. The queen visibly recoils in disgust.

“Well,” she says stiffly, “I’m surprised you haven’t killed it yet.” Her eyes lock on mine deliberately, cruel amusement dancing in them.

I attempt to shift away from Ayer, but his grip on my hair and thigh tighten, dragging me in closer. He is—for better or worse—in complete control of my body right now.

And I’m allowing it.

“No promises.” The ice in Ayer’s voice sends a shiver down my spine. Possessive, controlling… The voice of a ruthless shadows-cursed war captain.

The queen looks down her nose at us in disgust. “I need to be on my way, but before I go,” her eyes sharpen, narrowing in on Ayer behind me, “what is the status of the *Raven?*”

This time, I feel Ayer tense for real. His fingers momentarily tighten in my hair before he releases me entirely.

The Raven.

My body stiffens as I await what he has to say about the creature: the dark demon hellspawn Kovaria summoned to help them win this war. I had seen neither hide nor hair of the creature since our departure from the rest of the Kovarian army, and I was happy about it.

Ayer hesitates for a long moment, and when he speaks, his words are careful. “The Raven remains with the army. His well of power has recovered.”

I perk up at the bite of intel.

Recovered?

Meaning it can *weaken*. As devastating as the Raven’s power is, apparently using it drains him. I file the knowledge away with a flicker of hope that I might be able to share it with my brothers.

The queen’s smile is thin. “Excellent. Daekhar moves against the rest of Sitara soon.” Her gaze sharpens. “Tell the Raven we will require him at full strength.”

I chance a glance at Ayer behind me. His jaw is tight, and his eyes hard as he gives the queen a stark military nod. “I will see to it.”

Satisfied, the queen finally turns toward the door.

“I’ll see you soon.” She levels a warning gaze on both Theo and Ayer before she disappears into the hall with her soldiers trailing out behind her.

The second she leaves, the room feels lighter, like I can breathe again.

Ayer loosens his tight grip on my waist but I don’t move—not yet.

If what the queen says is true, Daekhar plans to attack Sitara soon. Apparently allied with Kovaria, who, with the Raven’s help, were able to bring down Rosecliff in a matter of minutes. An army led by… Ayer.

I stare at him, searching his face, studying the hard line of his jaw and the tension locked through his shoulders, trying to decipher if the tension in them comes from loyalty to the queen… or resentment toward her.

I can’t explain it. Over the last week, things have changed between us. A tentative truce? I don’t know what to call it, but it’s something I’m sure we’ve both felt, but haven’t discussed.

There’s conflict in his eyes, and something else I can’t quite read. He’s a question I suddenly don’t have an answer to. I hate that some part of me wants him to say that what he told the queen is a lie. That he won’t touch Sitara again. That he won’t hurt my brothers.

If he does still plan on taking down my kingdom, my family—which, if I’m being honest, of course he does—*can I convince him otherwise?*

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CHAPTER 65

AYER

Screams.

I jolt awake. My hand is already on the dagger tucked underneath my pillow before I'm fully conscious.

The screaming intensifies as Rowan thrashes violently beside me.

Moonlight spills across the bed in pale silver streaks, catching on sweat-dampened skin and tangled dark hair.

"Rowan."

She doesn't hear me.

Her breathing comes in sharp, panicked gasps as she fights something I can't see. Her hands twist desperately in the blankets as though she's trying to escape invisible restraints.

Another broken sound tears from her throat. The sound travels straight through to my chest, cutting deep.

"Rowan," I try again, grabbing her shoulders this time and shaking her.

Her eyes snap open. And for one terrible second, she looks terrified—*of me.* A few tears escape her green eyes, and I watch one trace her cheek.

Rowan doesn't cry.

Not when I burned her home to the ground.

Not when I burned a rune around her wrist.

And not when she nearly bled out saving my life.

But now, tears stream one after another down her cheek while she wipes frantically at them, desperately trying to pull herself together.

I freeze, hovering over her, not sure what to do.

"I'm sorry," she chokes out suddenly, still wiping furiously at her cheeks. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"Are you okay?" I ask softly, though she's clearly not.

Rowan blinks at my words, at the unfamiliar tenderness in my voice.

God, this whole thing is a disaster.

She's in my bed because I couldn't risk the queen finding her without me. And she's still wearing that godsdamned dress because I need the queen convinced Rowan is nothing more than a pet to warm my bed.

I've barely slept.

I can still feel her there. The weight of her on my thigh. The way she trembled every time my fingers brushed her skin. The sound she made when I bit her throat.

I drag a hand down my face, shifting away from her.

She's the Princess of Sitara.

Fae.

My enemy.

Why is it then lately, that every time I look at her—for a few dangerous seconds—I forget that?

Rowan pushes herself up so she's sitting, and as she wins the battle against her tears, an absent look enters her eyes as she goes somewhere else for a minute. A memory, maybe?

I should leave it alone.

"What did you dream about?" I find myself asking just nearly a second later.

Rowan's eyes snap to mine, a haunted expression in them now, her body going stiff at my mention of her dream.

Yup. Should have left it alone.

Another tear breaks free, slipping down her cheek before she can brush it away.

"I'm fine."

She's not.

"We can keep pretending if you want," I mutter, "But I think we both know that isn't true."

Her expression sharpens to a glare. "You're one to talk about *pretending*," she bites back.

Fair.

I don’t say anything.

“What are we doing, Ayer?” she demands when I remain silent. “Why am I here?”

My jaw tightens and I look away. Because to be honest, I don’t fucking know anymore. The answer should be easy: revenge. Revenge for my family, for my friends, for my *kingdom. She’s a means to an end.*

“It’s complicated,” I say finally.

“That’s not an answer.”

“I know,” I mumble, avoiding her gaze as I get out of bed, distracting myself with dressing for the day.

Frustrated, she throws back the blankets and climbs out of bed.

My eyes betray me immediately.

That dress.

And just like that, the memory of how she tasted last night when I bit down—

“Are we training today?”

“What?” My eyes snap up, catching the growing smirk on Rowan’s face after she caught me staring at her.

“Training? You mentioned training on the ride back here yesterday.” Her arms fold across her chest, pushing it up, just as she shifts her weight onto one hip, looking at me expectantly. That, combined with that godsdamned dress, her messy hair falling down her back, and her cheeks flushed from crying...

Gods.

My eyes dart away.

Training? I remember mentioning it. It’s not a bad idea. I’m restless. I need to move—I need to do *something*. *Something that* isn’t *my enemy princess…*

Rowan’s already pacing, anxious energy running through her. She’s still not okay. Whatever she dreamed about—whatever woke her—it *scared* her.

“If you would like—” I shrug as if I don’t care either way.

“I would *like*,” she says, a hint of violence in her tone.

“Now get out so I can get dressed.”

I freeze. “What? We’re training now?” I steal a glance out the window at the still dark sky. “It’s *barely* dawn.”

“Yes, now,” she confirms, not looking at me while searching around for her leathers.

I watch her for a long moment. Rowan isn’t asking to train, she’s asking to fight. And after waking to the sound of her scream, I think we both know what she’s trying to outrun.

The princess finally glances up, catching me staring.

“Out,” she growls.

I huff a quiet laugh, playfully tugging on her shirt before heading for the door.

“Yes, Your Highness.”

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CHAPTER 66

AYER

Lethal.

The Rose Princess is positively lethal.

I stand at the edge of the training ring with my arms folded across my chest, watching Rowan circle Theo the way a wolf would its prey.

She had already wiped the floor with Wyatt before she'd even had breakfast. He's young, still learning. But Hayes was a surprise.

Rowan might look tiny and delicate, but what she lacks in brute strength, she makes up tenfold in speed and agility.

And she's smart. Always three or four moves ahead of her opponent at all times, anticipating every attack and counterattack; her ability to read even the slightest hint of body language is a skill even I can admire.

She plays with my best fighters like a cat with a mouse. And gods help the poor bastard standing across from her once she decides to stop playing nice.

"I think she enjoys this too much," Wyatt mutters beside me, rubbing at his jaw. Rowan landed a wicked kick to it earlier, knocking him out cold.

"You say that like you weren't the one running your mouth a couple hours ago," Hayes smirks next to me.

Wyatt scowls. "I thought she was bluffing."

The corner of my mouth ticks up as I keep my eyes on the Sitari princess in the ring in front of me. Her skin is flushed, sweat dampening the loose strands of hair that usually fall into her face.

She’s been at it for hours. Starting with a workout and warm-ups with me before begrudgingly stopping for breakfast, where she challenged Wyatt one-on-one.

Poor guy didn’t know what he was getting into.

She catches my gaze, her mouth twitching up into an unassuming smirk. Not a friendly smirk. I’ve learned to fear the expression she’s currently wearing.

Trouble is what it is.

Across the ring, Theo grins like he’s been handed an early Solstice gift.

“Oh, this should be fun.” I can hear the grin on Hayes’ face.

“It’ll be something,” I mutter, regretting not working Theo’s blood into my rune spell. Unlike me, Rowan can hurt *him*. And judging by that look on her pretty face, she’s *going* to hurt him.

After seeing her take down man after man in my command, I have to ask myself if it’s wise to unleash the little menace on my best friend. But the way Theo’s swaggering around the ring with all the confidence of a prince of his position… with that cocky-as-hell smile on his face… I can’t say he’s not asking for it.

The fading sunlight above glints off of his golden hair while he rolls his shoulders back lazily, nonchalantly sizing up his opponent.

“Careful, Princess. I’d hate to bruise that royal ego of yours.”

Rowan arches a brow. “I’d hate to bruise *yours*,” she says sweetly—too sweetly. Her head tilts to the side as she lets her eyes roam over him. “It seems fragile.”

Wyatt snorts loudly.

Theo presses a hand to his chest in mock offense. “Princess, you wound me. Ayer, you hear this disrespect?”

Rowan just shrugs casually, her stance relaxed, playing into Theo’s attempts to disarm her. Though when her eyes flick to mine, I see the mischief there. Theo may finally have met his match. The corner of my lip ticks higher.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

I shouldn’t be worried. Theo and I trained together; I know what he’s capable of—yet still I find myself shifting on my feet, my attention sharpening despite myself.

Theo makes the first move, of course.

Rowan dodges him easily, going on the defensive.

Theo attacks again, but pulls his punch.

First mistake.

Rowan's eyes sharpen. She saw it too.

I sigh, having just watched Wyatt and Hayes do the same.

Rowan continues on the defensive, allowing Theo to have control of the fight, even letting him land a few hits on her.

Theo grins, pressing harder, thinking he has her on the edge, not realizing she was only toying with him.

Her eyes find mine just before she flips the switch and goes on the offensive. She moves fast and efficiently. Her strikes don't carry the same brute force as ours, but she knows exactly *where* to hit. Ribs. Knees. Throat. Pressure points. And never the same place twice.

Soon, Theo's scrambling to stay on his feet.

Wyatt and Hayes cheer the princess on from the sidelines, happy to watch Theo get served for once. Moons know his ego needed the check.

Rowan's relentless; once she went on the offensive, she didn't yield. No hesitation. No mercy. Moving fast and hard, she doesn't even allow Theo to get in a full breath.

The prince's cheeks burn red with exertion, frustration dancing in his blue eyes. Having been his sparring partner for years, I already know what his next move is. But then again, so does Rowan.

Theo launches himself at her, wrapping his arms around her middle and heaving her off the ground, with every intention of slamming her back onto it.

But instead of fighting his hold, she leaps into it.

Clever.

She twists around his body before he can lock down the hold properly, using his own weight against him. A second later, Theo's eating dirt.

I fold my arms tighter to hide the smile threatening to break free.

Wyatt's already laughing.

"I thought you said you were good?" Rowan laughs, holding out a hand to her latest victim.

"And here I thought you were a proper princess." Theo laughs, taking her hand and letting her haul him up.

She grins, letting her head fall back with her laugh.

That smile.

“Admire the rose,” she says lightly, her gaze trailing to meet mine, “but beware the thorns.”

This time, Rowan turns toward me instead. “Well?” she asks. “What about you, *Captain*?”

The entire training yard goes quiet.

I stare at her.

Rowan just shifts on her hips, crossing her arms like she didn’t just challenge me in front of everyone. The rune on her wrist glints in the fading light.

She can’t hurt me.

But suddenly, I’m not entirely convinced she wouldn’t find a way around it out of pure spite.

“You want to spar with me?” I ask slowly.

She nods just as slowly. “I do.”

I step into the ring. She straightens, and while the guys joke and laugh at my back, her attention is wholly focused on me.

“Careful, Princess,” I murmur as I circle her slowly. “Don’t go getting cocky now.”

“Stop hesitating.”

I lunge.

She dodges me easily, twisting sideways before dropping down, trying to hook my leg.

She’s quick—but not quick enough.

I catch her wrist, yanking her flush against me.

She hisses.

“Don’t go easy on me now,” I mutter near her ear.

“Maybe I just wanted you close.”

Wait, what?

My head jerks right to look at her, my grip loosening for a half a second as I pull back.

Mistake.

Rowan stomps down hard on my boot.

The rune burns hot across her wrist, just under my palm, and I release her. It’s more irritation than punishment. Not enough to stop her, just enough to warn her.

Rowan’s eyes widen in surprise. “Oh,” she says with a hint of delight. “So minor violence is acceptable.”

“You can do that?” Wyatt asks, sounding just as shocked as I feel.

Rowan grins wickedly back at me. “Apparently.”

We circle again.

This time she makes the first move, going on the attack now that she knows she can *hit* me so long as she’s not trying to *kill* me. I easily block her attacks.

Her fist flies toward my ribs.

I block easily.

She pivots immediately, driving a kick toward my knee.

Blocked again.

Another strike.

Another.

Again.

Again.

Each attack comes faster than the last.

She’s testing the rune.

Testing me.

And gods, she’s good.

The rune allows her to hit me now, at least while sparring, but I feel the hesitation in some of her harder blows. Tiny flickers where the magic pulls against her intent.

Still, Rowan adapts.

She aims low suddenly, and I block that too.

A growl of frustration slips from her throat.

“There it is,” I hum, a smirk playing on my lips.

“There *what* is?” she snaps, her eyes narrowing.

“That temper.”

Her green eyes flash molten gold at the edges.

She attacks hard, managing to drive me back two steps before I redirect her momentum, nearly sending her to the ground, but she recovers at the last second.

“You’re holding back,” she accuses, her breaths coming hard.

“So are you.”

She huffs a laugh. “I’m trying not to violate your precious rune.”

“And what a good girl you are for that.”

She makes her first mistake, lunging for me, but I’m ready.

I catch her, shoving her back against the wall. She doesn’t have a chance to recover before I’m on her, trapping both wrists this time and forcing them over her head, pinning them there.

She struggles in my hold and I smile, caging her in with my body.

“Yield,” I order as she continues to fight.

Rowan goes completely still, her eyes darting up to meet mine. “Or what?”

I tighten my grip instinctively as her gaze drops from my eyes to my mouth, and heat coils low in my stomach as a few ideas come to mind.

“Ayer,” she breathes, slowly lifting up on her toes, leaning in closer, “you’re forgetting one thing.”

“What’s that?” I ask, my eyes dropping to her mouth.

“I wanted you close.”

I see the smile, but it’s too late. Rowan drives her knee upward with brutal efficiency, right into my crotch.

I curse, staggering backward, allowing Rowan to slip free. Theo cackles at my back as she breezes by.

I straighten slowly, glaring murder at her while the pain slowly ebbs away. “You fight dirty.”

“I did tell you…” She grins when I narrow my eyes. “Watch out for the thorns.”

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CHAPTER 67

ROWAN

Ayer doesn't get the chance to respond, his dark eyes locked on mine when chaos erupts.

"Raiders!" The shouts cut through the courtyard like a knife.

Men race across the battlements overhead, some already feverishly loosing arrows into the dark beyond the gates.

Wood splinters and metal crashes right before the gates break.

Ayer's by my side in an instant, catching the blade Theo tosses at him. Wyatt and Hayes at our back.

The sound of steel on steel rings out as the raiders meet the fort's guard. Seems like the two fae raiders who escaped the village are back for revenge—and they've brought friends.

"Theo and Hayes, you're with me. Wyatt, take Rowan up to my room."

"No—"

Ayer cuts me off with a hard look. "Rowan, go with Wyatt. That's an order."

Wyatt attempts to grab hold of my arm, tugging me back toward the barracks, but I dig my heels in, ripping my arm out of his grasp.

"I'm not hiding in your room while everyone else fights."

Ayer turns toward me so fast I almost flinch.

Almost.

He stops, his face mere inches from mine.

“You’ve been training for hours,” he snaps. “And you’re still wounded.” He jabs a thumb into my ribs to prove his point, forcing me to cry out. “Go. Now.”

His words sting, but not as much as his lack of faith in me. *Didn’t I just prove myself in the training circle?*

I open my mouth to argue, but Ayer suddenly pivots as the battle spills out across the training yard. He blocks an incoming blow with his sword.

“GET HER OUT OF HERE!” he roars.

Wyatt grabs me again before I can fight him off, practically hauling me toward the stairs.

“Let me go,” I hiss. I like Wyatt. I don’t want to hurt him, but I’m not about to let Ayer toss me on the sidelines after everything we’ve been through. I won’t wait up in a tower like some weak princess who can’t protect herself.

“Rowan,” Wyatt huffs. “You don’t even have a weapon…” he hedges, and the reminder gives me pause. *He has a point.…*

My bow. My arrows. My blades.

They’re all upstairs.

In Ayer’s room.

Wyatt heaves in relief when I finally stop resisting and follow him willingly into the barracks. I’m not going because Ayer ordered it, but because I need weapons if I’m going to shove his stupid captain’s ego down his throat.

Wyatt and I race through the fort while the sounds of clanging metal, shouts, and screams echo from below.

We reach Ayer’s room just in time to hear a clatter ring out at the bottom of the stairwell below. Raiders have breached the barracks.

Nearly breathless, Wyatt shoves me into Ayer’s room.

“Stay here. For the love of the gods, stay here.” His blue eyes plead with me before he slams the door shut.

Sorry, but no.

I’m already racing across the room, grabbing my quiver and slinging it across my back. My bow follows it a second later.

An old sword of Ayer’s rests on the mantle, dusty from disuse. I snatch that too, though the weight of it is a shock. Taking one last glance about the room, I do a cursory check of my leathers before stalking for the door.

I’ve already done the math.

There were so many raiders.

Too many raiders.

Not enough soldiers.

Even with Ayer and Theo's skills…

No. They need help.

I wrench open the door, bringing me face to face with one of the fae, his sword dripping with fresh blood.

My heart is in my throat. *Wyatt?*

I don't see him anywhere.

The raider starts toward me. I barely get Ayer's sword up to block the first strike. The impact of his blade on mine rattles through my arms. It's too heavy for me.

He attacks again, his grin widening as he pushes me further down the hallway. It's too narrow to maneuver properly, and Ayer's blade is too heavy anyway. Every hit drives me back until my spine hits the wall.

The raider strikes again, this time hitting hard enough to knock my sword from my hands.

My eyes widen as they lift to his.

Think, Rowan. Think.

The male lifts his blade… and my hand flies over my shoulder, ripping an arrow free from my quiver and jamming it up through the male's throat.

Warm liquid splatters my cheek.

The raider chokes violently, dropping his blade to claw at his throat, trying—and failing—to remove the arrow until he collapses, blood pouring from the wound—and his mouth now too.

I jump over him, trading the sword for my bow, and sprint for the stairs.

The second my hand grips the railing, more shouts and screams erupt from the courtyard below.

Screams of terror.

I freeze, retreating back upstairs toward the nearest window, one overlooking the square.

The bow drops to my feet with a clatter, my hands shaking uncontrollably at what I see below.

Dark shadows twist and spiral around the courtyard, lifting screaming raiders before hurling them against stone. Others sputter and choke as black shadows coil around their throats, stealing the light from their eyes.

The Raven.

As the dark power wreaks havoc on the raiders, Theo, Hayes, and the rest of Ayer's command drive the remaining raiders back.

But I'm not looking at them anymore.

I'm searching. Searching… until I find *him*.

Ayer stands in the center of the courtyard swallowed by darkness. I didn't see him at first, because he's wrapped in an impenetrable wall of darkness, but the shadows part just enough… Just enough for me to see his face.

Black veins crawl beneath his skin.

And his—his eyes. *Gods.* His eyes are completely black.

Ayer lifts his arms, and the dark, twisting shadows rush toward him. Horror lances through me, and I sob out a gasp before clasping a hand over my mouth to hold in my scream.

But when Ayer brings his arms down, the darkness he's gathered explodes out, tossing aside raiders like they're ragdolls.

It's him.

He *commands* the darkness.

The shadows bend to *his* will.

Ayer is the Raven.

My knees give out underneath me, and I hit the floor.

"No." The word tears out of me, half-strangled in both disbelief and terror at what I've just seen.

Ayer.

Dark shadows leak off of him in wisps and waves, his power lashing out at the remaining raiders, dragging them toward him, their screams dying as the darkness envelops them whole.

I tremble where I sit on the floor, drawing my knees to my chest.

The Raven.

Ayer is the Raven.

My brain struggles to reconcile what I already know is true. The Raven is a demon. A weapon. Something summoned—and controlled. *Not him*… Not the man I— No.

I shake my head, trying to clear my thoughts of the fear that threatens to overtake me.

Run.

The thought no sooner crosses my mind before I put it into motion.

I pick up my bow on my way, checking the dagger on my thigh as I sprint down the stairs.

Outside, the sounds of battle ebb away, a dark silence taking over.

The Raven makes quick work of its enemies.

Time to go.

Now.

Slipping into the main hall, I move fast, my head snapping in every direction. But it seems as though everyone is preoccupied with the fight outside. Nearing the end of the hall, I freeze at the sound of male voices, though I haven't laid eyes on them yet.

Up ahead, I can see a way out: the opening of the covered walkway just ahead. Throwing caution to the wind, I run for it in a dead sprint.

I reach the opening. Gripping hold of the wooden frame, I use my momentum to launch myself out, landing hard on the roof. Pain sears at my elbow from the impact. I curse, but ignore it, near certain someone would have heard that landing.

Pushing myself to my feet, I tiptoe across the small cap that runs down the peak of the slanted roof. All while praying I don't trip and send myself careening to the ground.

I don't dare look down, fully exposed right now as I am in the open. Picking up speed as I near the end of the roof, I take the leap. My hands barely catch the top of the stone wall. Hoisting myself up and over, I climb down the outside as fast as I can manage.

The second my boots hit the ground, I run.

The dark leather of my armour helps me blend into the night as I run as fast as I can across the open field that sits between the fort and the forest.

I don't look back and I don't stop until I'm through the trees.

I circle the fort wide, putting some distance between myself and the Raven at my back, while attempting to throw off the soldiers I know will follow me.

I escaped the fort on its northeast side. They'll expect me to continue in that direction, especially given the border with Skye is *right there.* They're correct in that assumption. Skye is my only chance, but the border stretches wide across the east, and if I adjust my direction now, maybe I can buy myself enough time to reach it.

When I've completed my half circle, I veer sharply southeast, tearing through the bush, ignoring the branches that catch my hands, my face...

I keep going.

I don’t think about *him*.

I just keep running.

I just need to make it to the ravine. The Skyen army is right there. I heard it myself. All I have to do is make it across.

Ayer is the Raven.

The wild thought hits me, rushing through my head as I fly blindly through the woods.

I’ve been with him for days. Alone.

Gods, I saved him.

I want to throw up. All that time, he’d been demonborn, and I’d been—

Stupid. I’ve been so stupid.

I thought I saw something good in him. But now, I can’t help but wonder if he was just manipulating me. To keep me compliant. Well, it worked. I’d stopped fighting.

There’s no time for this. I force the thoughts away and keep running. My lungs burn and my legs shake, but I keep going.

I have a head start. There’s no telling how long it will take them to realize I’m gone, but when they do…

Ayer is fast.

“I’ll find you.” His words—*his threat*—from that first night haunt me.

And with all that power at his disposal…

I shiver, nearly tripping over myself.

The moon overhead disappears into the clouds, and deep shadows grow in the forest. My heart races, not only to keep up with my pace, but for fear that Ayer might suddenly appear out of them. I don’t even know the extent of what a Raven is capable of. I’ve seen his power, and what I saw was devastating, but something tells me there’s more.

My body hurts, and adrenaline begins to give way to fatigue, but I can’t stop. I can only hope I’m going in the right direction. In my panic, I have no idea how far I’ve run, or even how long I’ve been in the woods, but I push forward.

Run.

Run.

Run.

Until my knees finally give way, buckling under me. I hit the ground hard, drawing ragged breaths while digging my fingers into the dirt.

Okay, okay—a quick rest. Let me catch my breath and then—

My head jerks up at the snap of a twig.

I'm still as stone, my heart pounding hard enough it can probably be heard for miles.

I listen.

And *listen*.

There's only wind, insects, and the familiar night sounds of the forest surrounding me.

I release a breath, my shoulders sagging in exhaustion. I stay there as long as I dare before forcing myself back up with a groan. Pain slices through my side, darkening the edges of my vision for a second. My hand trails over my ribs, warm blood slick between my fingers.

"Shit," I breathe out.

The wound I took from Ayer breaking open as I run from him? It's almost poetic.

I let myself have one more minute before I push back through the trees, one hand pressed to my side.

I have to keep moving.

My eyes never stop scanning the trees. Stopping to rest—even for that brief minute—feels like a mistake. Sitting allowed all my remaining adrenaline to seep out of me, and with it gone, so came a renewed sense of aches, pain, and depletion.

I can't run anymore.

Only managing to walk, unsteadily through the thick brush, I stumble over roots and vines that lie along the forest floor.

Keep moving.

It's not long before paranoia takes over, and I start to question every shadow, every shift of the light.

Keep going.

Don't stop.

Don't you dare stop.

The surrounding trees begin to thin just as the warm light of dawn rises from beyond the horizon. I breathe a heavy sigh of relief when I catch sight of the gaping mouth of the ravine stretched out before me.

The great expanse marks the edge of Daekhar territory, with Skye just on the other side.

So close.

I’m so bloody close.

Elation quickly turns to dread as I take in the true expanse of the ravine—a jagged split in the earth that goes as far as the eye can see in either direction.

Too wide to jump, and—void, take me—so godsdamned deep.

Bridge. There—there’s a bridge—a crossing. I turn my head sharply, scanning each direction.

But which way?

Aethir’s Cross, I remember from Alita’s lessons. The white oak bridge would be to my north—the main passage between Daekhar and Skye.

I take a hesitant step north before I stop.

The main bridge will be watched—guarded. It has to be.

So instead, I go south.

There are more bridges—more places to cross. Or perhaps a narrowing where I can jump across. *There has to be.*

I set off, following the edge but keeping my distance from the jagged cliff line. A quick peek over the edge has my skin going pale, finding only punishing rocks at the bottom. The edge of the ravine leaves me exposed, so I keep to the tree line as best I can. The sun is fully awake now, streaming down on me.

They have to know I’m gone.

Ayer will already be hunting…

I quicken my steps.

If I can cross the ravine, if I can find Kane… I can fulfill my duty and unite Sitara and Skye. With the threat of Kovaria—and the Raven—hanging over us…

It’s the best protection I can give my kingdom.

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CHAPTER 68

ROWAN

He's close.

I can feel it.

Some instinct screams at me from deep within my bones.

He's out there.

Hunting me.

Wind whistles through the steep cliffs, blowing the hair out of my face as I frown at what lies ahead.

Going south may have been a mistake.

Hours of walking and not a bridge in sight. The ravine is still too wide to even think about trying…

Up ahead, it appears to narrow as I approach a bend. But with my growing exhaustion and lack of food and water, I'm not quite sure I trust my perception of the distance.

I stop for a second, catching my breath and letting the warm sun hit my cheek, and I momentarily panic over my decision to go south. Perhaps it's not too late to—

Stealing a quick glance back over my shoulder, I freeze. A figure stands atop a rock cropping far to the north.

His silhouette dark against the setting sun, Ayer sits tall atop Dash with his sword and bow strapped across his back. He looks every bit the demonborn monster he is.

My heart stutters when I feel his gaze fall on me.

He shouts something, urging Dash abruptly forward into a gallop, and I'm already running. Hearing nothing but the sound of my own heartbeat in my ears.

Turning around, I run, blindly sprinting for the narrowing of the ravine that I maybe—*maybe*— can make it across. My boots skid across loose stone, sending the rocks skittering into the deep ravine below.

I don't look back. Too busy measuring the distance of the gap as I get closer to the bend. From here, it looks to be at least eight feet across, if not more.

Too far.

But I'm out of options.

The forest thickens again beside the ravine, swallowing me from view for a few precious seconds. I risk a glance back.

Nothing.

Somehow that's worse.

Tearing out of the trees, I sprint across the grassy plain that runs to the end of the bend, checking behind me once more.

Ayer explodes out from the trees right behind me, his bow in hand. On foot now. The thick vegetation would have only slowed Dash down.

Shit.

He calls my name, but I ignore it, ignore him, throwing everything I have into reaching the cliff first. There's a chance—the smallest of chances—*I can make it.*

If he catches me— No.

I propel myself forward, hitting the cliff's edge at full speed, and leap. But the second my feet leave the cliff, I know.

It's too far.

Terror rips through me—at the rocky cliffside just out of reach, at the empty air stretching beneath me for hundreds of feet, and at the jagged rocks waiting for me at the bottom.

No, no, no—

I'm not going to make it.

I start to fall, my body twisting desperately in the air, hands reaching out like I can somehow reach the other side—

Something tears violently free from my back. Pain explodes between my shoulder blades, and I scream as something buried deep beneath my

skin finally forces itself out. Heat floods my spine, wind catching beneath me instead of around me, and for one disorienting second, my fall slows.

Dark wings burst open behind me. Massive. Spreading wide on instinct. The force of them jerks me upward, and I choke on the breath caught in my throat.

My wings.

I'm yanked into the air as they catch hold of an updraft, panic breaking through the shock.

The muscles in them feel foreign—weak, unpracticed. I have no control over the sudden stretch of them as they catch upon the rushing wind, swinging me sharply right. One wing dips abruptly, and I scream as I plummet straight down again before instinct forces another frantic beat of them.

It's clumsy and graceless, but it's enough.

The rising cliffside rushes toward me too fast to stop. I hit the ground hard, slamming shoulder-first into the rocky edge before tumbling violently across the dirt and grass. A cry of pain escapes me when my knee slams hard against a small boulder, and I finally collapse down onto my stomach.

Pain explodes—everywhere. My shoulder, my ribs, my knee…

I'm teetering on the edge.

My hands claw furiously at the ground, dragging myself further to safety, my body shaking after everything…

Alive.

Holy shit, I'm alive.

A sharp gust of wind rustles through the feathers at my back, and I tremble from the unfamiliar sensation, one I had all but forgotten.

My wings.

Oh, gods.

Pushing myself up on shaking arms, I steal a glance back at the dark feathers, ruffled and uneven from the crash. They twitch weakly behind me as I just stare at them in horror.

No-no-no. Not here. Not now. Not in front of *him*.

My gaze jerks up—across the ravine.

I find Ayer standing on the ledge I just leapt from. Staring at me. And even from this distance, I can feel his shock. His dark silhouette is motionless as his gaze locks onto the massive black wings trembling behind me.

Void, take me. He saw.

He knows.

Terror unlike anything I've ever felt before claws up my throat.

Only heirs bear wings.

It's the oldest law among the fae kingdoms.

And Fel is the heir to Sitara.

Not me.

My mother knew. From the moment they first appeared when I was little, she taught me how to hide them. Swore my brothers to silence.

No one can know.

No one can *ever* know.

The fear in her eyes when she said those words... I'll never forget it.

No one.

Not my father.

Not my friends.

No one.

But now *he* knows.

Panic pulses through me as I try and force them away. I don't know how to control them. I haven't let them free in years—not fully. Not since I was a child, sneaking into hidden corners of the castle just to stretch them out—to take in their glory in secret before hiding them away again.

They scared my mother.

They scare me.

Ayer hasn't moved. He's just standing on the edge of the cliff, staring down at me like a dark shadow.

My chest heaves as I meet his eye.

Shock… confusion… *realization*.

My stomach drops when he reaches for the bow at his back.

Move. MOVE!

A tear leaks out as I force myself upright, ignoring the agony screaming between my knee and my shoulder.

My wings flare out behind me, throwing me off balance before a burning pain erupts between my shoulders. And just as soon as they appeared, they're gone.

Gone—as though they never existed.

My shock costs me several seconds, and by the time I look up, Ayer's already got an arrow nocked. He draws the bowstring back, his dark eyes

locked on me.

I dive forward.

The black arrow whizzes past, right where my head had been only seconds earlier.

Ayer's already reaching for another arrow, and I don't dare look back as I haul myself up, stumbling as my knee gives out in blinding pain as I half-sprint, half-limp for the cover of the tree line.

I've nearly made it.

I flinch when a sharp pain rips my ear, the arrow splitting the oak to my left.

He missed.

Darkness swallows me as I disappear into the tree line, collapsing only seconds later.

And though I realize he could still pursue me, perhaps those shadowy powers of his could carry him across the ravine. I don't move. Shaking violently where I landed at the base of a tree.

Ayer missed.

I sit in stunned silence, until my own heartbeat, from inside my knee, drags me back to the present.

I don't know how long it's been, but Ayer hasn't followed.

Night has fully fallen now, and I prop myself up better, resting my back against the nearest tree before rolling up my pant leg to inspect the injury.

My knee is already swollen; deep purple and blue bloom already from where it hit.

Perfect.

But not life threatening.

I let my head fall back against the tree trunk. And with no one around to see, I let the tears fall. Hot, messy—draining. They continue to soak my cheeks and the dirt when I curl up on the ground below, falling until there's nothing left inside me except cold and exhaustion.

Sleep comes, but it's no mercy.

Nightmares of the Raven plague every precious second. Watching the way his shadows stream out, swallowing soldiers, destroying my home. And when I look into the monster's face—

I see Ayer staring back at me.

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CHAPTER 69

ROWAN

Everything hurts.

Every. Single. Inch.

My ribs ache with every breath, my knee throbbing and my shoulder stiff from where I slammed hard into the cliff.

For a few minutes—maybe longer—I just lay there, staring blankly overhead at the way the sun peeks through the treetops. How the light shifts and fights with shadow.

He didn't follow me.

If he did, I'd already be dead.

It's little comfort as I push myself up, immediately regretting the decision and hissing when I attempt to bear weight on my knee.

Ayer didn't pursue me over the ravine, but that doesn't mean he's not still hunting me. Even now, he could be seeking a bridge—another way across.

That thought alone has me swallowing the growing well of pain and stepping deeper into the Skyen forest, but not before finding that oak.

And his arrow.

I rip it from the bark, studying it for a second before breaking off the wood and pocketing the tip.

It's a better weapon than nothing. I still have my dagger, but somewhere in my flight to evade Ayer, I lost my bow and quiver.

It's a slow trek. Tired and injured, it's all I can manage.

A cold front has moved in, and the scent of rain in the air has me wrapping my arms tighter around myself.

Perfect. Just perfect.

I stumble through the forest in a daze for most of the morning, heading north as best I can. I'm cautious; every snap of a twig, every shifting shadow, spikes my heart rate.

By midday, exhaustion drags at every step, but still I freeze when I hear it: shouts—the sound of male voices drifting in on the wind.

My heartbeat quickens and I move forward slowly, trying not to get my hopes up at the familiar clanging of steel on steel.

Keeping low, I circle the area, until I find brush thick enough to peek from a safe distance.

The sight of the Skye colors flying high over the bustling war camp nearly sends me to my knees.

Still, I stay hidden at the top of the hill for most of the afternoon. Studying the comings and goings of the camp. Disappointment grows when I see no sign of the Sitara colors or flags. The little hope I had of reuniting with my brothers flames out.

The sight of Kane moving through the camp has me sitting a little straighter. His charcoal-colored armour glints in the late afternoon sun as he strides confidently through camp, disappearing into a large white tent near its center.

I sigh. *It's now or never.*

Slowly, I pick my way down the rocky hillside toward the camp. I don't even make it halfway before Skyen archers find me.

"Halt."

I freeze, raising my hands so they can see them.

A moment later, a small group of Skyen soldiers approaches quickly. A tall male with fire-red hair at their center. His light green eyes pass over me with a look of bored suspicion. He gives a nod to his men, and they close rank around me, cutting off any hope of retreat into the woods.

Despite the pain, I draw myself up, lifting my chin to look the red-haired soldier in the eye, reminding myself that someday soon I am to be their queen.

After all, that's why I'm here, isn't it?

I skip the pleasantries, leaving the Skyen captain with a small smile. "I must speak with Prince Kane."

“Is that right?” The fae male’s tone drips with arrogance as his eyes sweep over the black leather armour I wear, lingering on the dried blood staining the leather.

“Yes,” I nod patiently. “It’s a rather urgent matter,” I prod when none of them move, their weapons still raised.

The Skyen captain doesn’t answer, continuing to study me.

I lift my chin a little higher. “And I would appreciate it if your soldiers stopped aiming arrows at my face.”

The male’s eyes narrow, but instead of issuing the order to lower their weapons, he unsheathes his own sword. I blink back at him in shock when he points it at me.

“On your knees. Show some respect for the captain of the Third Battlement.

He cannot be serious. I bite back my temper to keep my words even. “Sir,” I start carefully. “I must speak with your prince. If you could please send—”

He takes a menacing step toward me, and my mouth snaps shut. His face is growing redder by the minute. *I wonder if it will soon match his hair.* He holds up his sword, the blade now only inches from my face.

“You will kneel.”

Unease snakes through my gut, but I don’t move.

“You will kneel!” he shouts, waving his sword at me. “You will kneel and allow my men to detain you for questioning.”

The corner of my mouth ticks up in a slow smile, and I drop my head to the side, studying him.

“No.”

I feel the attention of every one of his soldiers on me.

Captain Red over here blinks at me like he’s never been denied a day in his life.

I look past him, making eye contact with his men instead. “Perhaps one of you has better sense than your captain here.” I look disdainfully at the Skyen captain, whose face has nearly reached the same shade of red as his hair. “Would one of you please fetch Prince Kane and inform him that he has a visitor?” My gaze sweeps across every soldier surrounding me before settling back on the captain. “And when you do,” I add sweetly, my smile only growing, “tell him Rowena Valrose is here to speak with him.”

It takes effort not to laugh at the look on the captain’s face.

Weapons waver slightly in the air, and whispers rise up, as the men cast nervous glances toward their captain.

The captain's previously red face has gone positively ashen.

"The princess… is dead," he says stiffly.

I sigh, dropping my hands onto my hips. "I assure you, I am not."

The male's expression is murderous, but he doesn't get a chance to respond, as another group approaches quickly across the valley.

The captain blanches when he looks back, but he's blocking my view.

I lean around him, locking eyes with… *Kane*. Relief crashes through me.

"Rowena?" His voice is pure disbelief before he's at my side, quickly urging the surrounding soldiers to lower their weapons.

"I can't believe it," he says, looking me over like he's seen a ghost. "We thought— We heard Rosecliff was attacked and that you—" He shakes his head, his relief at finding me very much *not dead* apparent on his face.

"I escaped," I explain, not wanting to get into the details in front of so many people.

Kane must read the weariness on my face. "Come, come, you must be exhausted."

I let him pull me along, using his arm to support my weight, and give his captain a narrowed look as I pass by. "You have no idea."

Kane glances down at me, his eyes widening at the sight of the cut on my ear. Sliced by Ayer's arrow. The dried blood still on my neck. "Gods, what happened here?" he asks, before calling for his medic. My ear stings as he brushes his fingers against it.

I open my mouth to answer just as my throat tightens.

Ayer's arrow.

My mind takes me back to the ravine, the wind whipping across my face, my wings, Ayer's arrow.

He missed.

He doesn't miss.

Not ever.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book has been a challenge from the start.

I started writing it five years ago when I didn't know what the hell I was doing (I'm still winging it) but I got the idea, the characters, the story… injected into my head at 30,000 feet and wrote 12 chapters in a single weekend while at my husband's best friend's wedding. (Shout out to John!)

After that, the story took off, and I was finding time between work, kids, and sports to get it down.

But then, I got stuck. I hit a wall I couldn't get past, pacing behind it for months like a lion at the zoo. "It's not good enough." "The magic system isn't working." "Your world-building is weak." No matter what I did, I just couldn't move forward.

So I walked away. I put the book down and took a break. I decided to write something just for me—something *fun* that ended up becoming *No Promises No Lies.*

While writing *No Promises No Lies*, which would later become my debut novel, I watched Tiktoks, Youtube, and listened to podcasts of other writers, authors, editors trying to learn as much as I could about story structure, character development and world building as I could. I learned about "Save the Cat" from Alex Aster, listened to "Fiction writing made easy with Savannah Gilbo, and got loads of tips from "The Writer's Routine" by Dan Simpson. I owe a huge thank you to all these countless creators and authors who put their favorite writing tips and tricks on the internet for free.

Ravenrose stayed in the back of my mind, and it was always my plan to go back. And so after I finished *Dare Me to Stay*, that's exactly what I did. This time I applied everything I'd learned while re-writing the entire manuscript from a third-person past perspective to a first-person present. (Yes, I hate myself).

I thought it would be quick. I thought it would be easy. I couldn't have been more wrong. This summer has been one of the hardest seasons of my life. First, I lost my fourteen-year-old border collie Bruin, and not long after, I lost my dad.

My dad was one of my biggest supporters. He always believed in me, encouraging me to follow this dream even when I was unsure. He was so interested in this alternative path I chose to take and would listen to me talk about it for hours. My dad was so excited to read this book. He asked about it all the time, wanting regular updates, and I promised him an early copy.

He never got to read it.

After losing him… and my dog… I was struggling. And life didn't get easier; my other dog needed emergency surgery, and we came terrifyingly close to losing her too. We almost said goodbye to my cat, too. Finishing this book—the book that was ALREADY hard, felt impossible.

I was convinced the book wasn't good—that it was still very much a mess, and I was strongly considering walking away from it again… But before making that decision, I sent the manuscript out to my team of alpha readers to get some feedback on what I had.

I swear that feedback from both my alpha team and later my beta team got us here—to release—to this book being in your hands right now. Was the book a mess? Yes. Yes, it was. There was still A LOT of work to be done. But hearing how much my team loved the characters, the story, the slow burn… I cannot tell you just how close I came to lighting this entire book/series on fire. So a HUGE thank you to my incredible alpha and beta readers who looked past the mess, varying kingdom names, plot holes, Theo/Flynn, and where the fuck Rowan's knife was at any given moment to see the potential and encourage me to do the same.

And of course, I have to thank my editor and best friend, Nicole. I genuinely don't know what I would do without you. You are absolutely incredible at what you do, and your passion for the stories you work on makes you an absolute treasure to authors. No detail escapes you. Not a single one. And your never-ending support means everything to me. From sending internet memes and videos back and forth, to texting you plot ideas at 2am, Sunday night movie nights, and having your light to guide me through some of my darkest days, I am forever grateful.

I couldn't have finished this book, let alone *survived* this summer without the support of my friends and family. To my mom, my grandma,

my sisters, Joe, Tracy, Lisa and Kim, Michaela and Jess, thank you for coming together and surrounding me with so much love and support when I needed it most. I'm so grateful for you and knowing that as hard as this summer has been—how heavy. I don't have to carry everything alone. So thankful for all of you.

And of course, I have to thank my friends—Kayla, Amanda, Kristina, Cody for always being a safe place to vent, cry, scream, spiral, jump for joy, celebrate wins, and for always being there when I need you.

And last but certainly not least; I have to thank my husband and two boys. Especially my husband for his unwavering support and encouragement through everything: my grief, my career, for living out of laundry baskets and surviving on pizza and Chinese takeout because "Mom's got a deadline." You guys are the best and I'm so grateful for you.

When I picked *Ravenrose* back up, I had just finished writing *Dare Me to Stay* and I was feeling intimidated by my own success. My dark mafia romance series had taken off in a way I never could have anticipated. Readers LOVED it, and *Dare Me to Stay* was a book I was so incredibly proud of, and I realized I had *no idea* how I would follow it. Let alone jump genres.

I remember confessing to my dad that I had already peaked. Nothing could ever top *Dare Me to Stay*—in quality or complexity. And I got in my head… hitting another writer's block on *Ravenrose*. Maybe I was done.

My dad, however, was having absolutely none of it. He told me, "You're far from done. You are limitless."

This book took five years, blood, sweat, and so many fucking tears, but I finished it. I finished it. And I'm so excited to see where this story goes and where all my other stories go because my dad was right.

I'm not done.

I'm just getting started.

This one's for you, dad.

🖤

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JOIN THE WILDING STREET TEAM!

Did you love Ravenrose?
Consider joining “Aj Wilding’s Street Team and ARC Readers”: A private group on Facebook

https://www.facebook.com/share/g/182Cjtrjvx/

This is our cozy little corner to connect, share, and gush about all things books (and maybe a little behind-the-scenes magic).

As a member of this group, you’re not just helping me get the word out about my stories—you’re part of the journey. I’ll be sharing:

📚 **Exclusive sneak peeks** and bonus chapters.
🖋️ Behind-the-scenes look into my writing process.
🎁 Fun challenges, giveaways, and rewards for your support.
📖 Advanced Reader Copies (ARCs) of my upcoming releases!

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Also by AJ Wilding

Devils & Darlings Series

No Promises No Lies - A dark mafia hockey romance

Dare Me to Stay - A dark second chance stalker romance with secret baby

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