




CURSED ROYALS BOOK ONE

A HUNT SO WICKED

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
BRITT ANDREWS

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Aunt Hap,

This book is for you. My first one since you had to leave. Thank you for always believing in me and for your timeless advice. My favorite piece of wisdom from you was when I was dealing with bullying in high school and you said, "Just kick them right in the crotch."

No bully's crotch will ever be safe from my foot so long as I walk this earth.

I'll miss you and love you always.



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A Hunt So Wicked is a slow burn fantasy romance series that will eventually have sexual scenes. In this book you can expect the following themes that may be triggering:

PTSD/panic

Attack/trauma

Forced marriage

Forced proximity

Classism

Involuntary participation

Grief

Animal attacks

Violence

Drugging someone against their will

Death

Profanity

Mental health/self-harm

Snakes

Blood/gore



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Thank you!

About Author

Also By

Stalk me



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CHAPTER ONE

“And then I’ll be Queen Sophie. The most beautiful and powerful woman in the realm!”

“Wrong. I’ll be queen and you can marry Evander!”

If I had to hear anything else about Prince Torin or any of the other available princes and noblemen who would be choosing a wife over the coming weeks, I was going to scream.

“Girls!” I interrupted, causing my entire class to quit their whispered discussions and give their attention to me.

“Sorry, Miss Evie,” Sophie and Sarah said at the same time. Their embarrassment at being called out showed quickly as their faces flushed red.

I held up a hand and shook my head. “It’s okay. I know everyone is excited for the month break from lessons and for the celebrations.” I had been battling the class all week, and each day we got closer to break, the harder it got. “There’s just one more thing we need to go over before the end of the day.”

I turned and grabbed my remaining piece of chalk. My last, tiny, pathetic piece of chalk. I cursed our king for not getting more supplies to us. The leaky roof, the broken window, and the general condition of everything in this one-room schoolhouse was utterly unacceptable. Swallowing a growl of frustration, I started writing on the board.

The Recurrence.

Several echoes of ‘yay’ and ‘yes’ rang out behind me, and I grinned. If I couldn’t keep their focus with regular lessons, at least this would count as a history lesson, and it tied in perfectly with why not one child in my class could focus.

“Now,” I turned around to face the twelve children who spent more time with me than anyone else in their lives. “Who can tell me what The Recurrence is and why we celebrate it?”

Every hand in the room shot up.

“Nikolas,” I said, nodding at the blond, curly-haired boy who never raised his hand. His shyness often got the best of him, so if he was willing to volunteer, I would absolutely call on him. He straightened in his seat and cleared his throat. “The Recurrence is a month-long celebration across the whole realm that happens every ten years!”

I nodded, and Nikolas beamed a big smile back at me. “Correct. And Luke, can you tell me why we celebrate it?”

The boy sitting next to Nikolas nodded eagerly. “We celebrate it to honor the alliance between the four kingdoms of our realm.”

“*Five* kingdoms,” Nikolas corrected.

“But there aren’t five. Not anymore!” Sarah shouted.

I held up my hand. “Alright, alright! When The Recurrence began centuries ago, it was because the five kingdoms in the realm signed a peace

agreement. One that ensured no more needless fighting between the kingdoms. Each kingdom would rule over its own lands, but agreements were put in place that everyone would work together to build a better realm for all of us. But Sarah is right—there are no longer five kingdoms.”

Sarah stuck her tongue out at the boys and quickly put it back in her mouth when she saw my brow lift.

“So, who can tell me who the fifth kingdom was?” At this point, Sophie was practically dancing in her chair, so I called on her next.

“They were the Sova family!”

“Very good and—” My sentence was cut off when Sophie decided to continue talking.

“But it’s just so tragic! I can’t bear to think of—”

I held up a hand. “Thank you, Sophie.”

“Sophie’s right! It was a tragedy!” Sarah piped in.

“It was a horrible, terrible loss to our realm. This will be the second celebration since the loss of The Sovas, but now we honor and remember them during this time, too.”

“And Miss Evie, don’t forget! Don’t forget about The Hunt and The Choosing Ceremony!” Sophie was practically vibrating out of her chair with excitement.

I sighed. “Yes. Every Recurrence kicks off with a special event. Maidens around the entire realm are randomly chosen to travel to The Roaring Isle, where they will meet all of the eligible royal bachelors. A hunt takes place where we give thanks for a bountiful year, and following that, some of the maidens will be offered a proposal from one of the men.”

Every eye was on me now. There was something about The Hunt that fascinated people. It gave everyone something to focus on that wasn’t how

much food we had left or how much work needed to be done in our fields. I thought the entire thing was ridiculous. How was anyone supposed to make a life-long commitment in a situation like that?

“And the weddings, don’t forget about the weddings!”

I chuckled. “How could I forget? None of you were born when the last one happened, but as we live in the Faolan Kingdom, there were three royal weddings held publicly at the castle!”

“My mama went! She said she’d never seen anything so beautiful...” Sarah trailed off, a dreamy look on her young face.

“Did you go, Miss Evie?” Nikolas asked.

“No, I didn’t make it,” I replied. I hadn’t gone because I didn’t want to, and my father would’ve never allowed it.

“I heard they’re going to be collecting the girls soon! My brother said they send out a whole escort of royal guards!”

The entire classroom exploded in whispers and excited chatter. I ran a hand down my face. I would give them a few minutes to get it all out of their systems, and then I would get them back on track for the fiftieth time today. The Sova family tree would be a good thing to teach them, and then maybe some of the other royal families. I picked up my chalk to do just that, but the damn thing was now the size of a small pebble and slipped between my fingers, causing my nail to scrape on the chalkboard. Goosebumps erupted across my body at the sensation and sound.

Fuck this.

“Alright, that’s it! Class dismissed! Enjoy your Recurrence celebrations, and I’ll see you in a month!”

Twelve shocked faces and open mouths stared back at me like this was a joke. But it wasn’t. I was tired. I was pissed about the chalk. Now what was

I supposed to write with, my blood? I was done for today, and so were the kids. Dismissing an hour early wouldn't be the worst thing in the world.

“Unless you guys want to stay the last hour of the day?”

It was comical the way their chairs skidded across the wooden floor and how they moved faster than I'd seen in a long time. Laughing, I called out above the ruckus, “That's what I thought!”

“Hey, Miss Evie, maybe you'll get selected for The Hunt!” Hanna shouted, and I had to work harder than usual to hide my grimace. When you fake a smile enough, strangely a smile and a frown can look the exact same.

“Yeah, wouldn't that be something, Hanna?” I replied as I began packing up my things.

“Can you imagine?” Sophie shrieked, having apparently just realized I was actually eligible to be chosen. Not that it would happen, and it certainly wasn't something I had any interest in. *Pompous, selfish royals*. I wanted nothing to do with any royalty who was comfortable sitting in their lavish lifestyles while their countryside villages rot.

Rebecca gasped. “Oh. My. Goddess! You could be the next queen!”

I snorted and rounded up the remaining lovestruck girls, escorting them to the door. “I could never be queen. Not when you ladies are going to be eligible for the next Hunt.”

The sounds of their excited giggles and laughter lingered in the air long after they disappeared over the hill to return to their homes. My own laughter slipped out when I thought about me in *The Hunt*. A tradition that started with the original treaty between the kingdoms as a way to bring together the different monarchies and people from all stations. Ever since the downfall of the Sova line twenty years ago, things had changed. Instead of every year, the hunt only happened every ten years. We still paid respects

to the lost family but on a much smaller scale. Now The Recurrence had turned into a month-long excuse to cancel work and school.

With there being so many eligible royal bachelors this time, the chatter throughout every village and city was at an all time high. Families hoped their daughters would be lucky enough to be chosen to attend. The men and selected women would then travel to The Roaring Isle, just off of the east coast.

I was convinced it was just another opportunity for boys to act like boys and boost their egos by hunting stag, bear, boar, and whatever other poor creatures crossed their paths. Names were pulled blindly and then royal decrees were written, summoning the ones selected to travel to the Isle to essentially spectate and look pretty. The incentive for the women was that by the end of The Recurrence, all of the royal men participating would choose a wife from the selected maidens. The chances of being selected were slim to none since there was no shortage of women available.

Not that I thought I'd be picked, but if I were to be, there was no way in hell I would leave my village. The children needed this school, and they needed a teacher. History proved that kids who didn't get basic schooling, which is what I taught, would never make anything of themselves. They would likely end up living a life of thievery, field work, or be forced to do things for money in order to survive. Knowing how to read and write was crucial in offering services and goods in any business setting, and I made damn sure every child who showed up learned at least those two things.

The Recurrence and the royals had taken up enough of my brain space over the last few weeks. Anticipation was building, and with it, the entire town was buzzing with excitement. I couldn't get away from it. Everybody

knew someone who might get selected, and the delay was driving people mad.

I'd be glad when the celebrations were well underway and some of the anxiety eased. People couldn't handle the stagnancy of waiting. I was looking forward to the time off. I needed to get some vegetable planting done around the house, and my father was needing more and more help with his exercises. In his sixties, his body was feeling the effects of farm life, and it had always just been the two of us, plus the cows weren't going to milk themselves. Now that it was my break, I would have time to make him more tinctures and powders that eased his aches.

Dad and I lived in a modest-sized, two-bedroom wood cabin that he built when I was a baby, and as luck would have it, it was right behind the school. I was never more thankful for the closeness than I was today, though. The unmistakable sound of horses tearing up the dirt road met my ears as I was putting the last of my things into my bag. Was someone in trouble? I threw the strap over my head and headed for the door. I barely had a chance to lock it before the sounds of anger reached me.

"-CAN'T HAVE HER!" I caught the end of my father yelling, and my brow furrowed. Curious now, and a little anxious, I ran around the back of the school building and froze. Ten or more horses with riders that wore gray and silver, the colors of the Faolan Kingdom, stood tall and menacing in a half circle at the front of my house, my dad in the middle of them.

"Becket," one of the guards spoke. "It has been decreed. Don't make this harder than it has to be."

My father leaned heavily against his cane as he rose to his true height of 6'6". "The only thing that's been decreed is that your mother is a who—"

My eyes nearly popped out. *Oh shit.* “Father!” I shouted, interrupting his insult before he could get it all the way out. There were only a handful of times in my life I could remember him getting aggressive. He was always such a gentle and loving man, so my guard was up immediately.

My father’s blue eyes landed on me and widened like he was desperately trying to tell me something that I couldn’t understand. If he thought I would leave him to take on these bullies on his own, he didn’t know me one bit. I marched through the grass with my chin held high while my black hair blew around my face, courtesy of a much needed breeze.

“Evie, go back to the school,” Father ordered.

The guards ignored him, turning their full attention to me now. “Evelyn Quinn?” the head guard questioned, and I nodded, crossing my arms. He smiled. “By Royal Decree, you are to join us as we escort you to The Roaring Isle as you’ve been selected for this Recurrence. You are to be amongst the pool of eligible women for our brave and strong royals to select a wife from.”

The words cycled through my head on repeat. *Selected. Roaring Isle. Recurrence. Royals. Wife.*

All eyes were on me as I lost my blessed mind. I laughed so hard that I had to bend at the hips and rest my palms on my knees. Tears built in my eyes because, oh Goddess, what kind of prank was this? I bet some of my students were behind it, especially after the comments made less than half an hour ago.

“Miss, are you alright?” another guard asked, dismounting from his horse.

I straightened and fanned my cheeks. “Oh yes, I’m fine. That was highly entertaining.” I glanced around, looking for signs of Sophie or Sarah but

came up empty.

“Evie,” my father said sternly, earning my attention. The look on his face was anything but jovial. I glanced quickly at the guards and noticed they were all stone-faced, not even a hint of a smile on a single one of their faces. My stomach began to roll as reality set in. My eyes locked back on my father’s and that’s when I realized, this wasn’t a prank.

“No,” I whispered.

One of the guards scoffed. “Did she just say no? To being *selected*?”

“Has that ever happened before?” another asked as they looked at each other in utter disbelief.

My head felt like it might explode from the way my thoughts were firing rapidly, twisting in circles like a cyclone. “I can’t leave. I take care of my father and I’m the only teach—”

“Declining the invitation isn’t permitted. You will be joining us in the morning at first light. It’s a day and a half ride to the Pale Shores, and being late won’t be tolerated,” the head guard barked, making my own temper flare.

I stepped toward him, but my father’s hand encircled my wrist. “Did you not hear what I just told you? I’m not going. I cannot leave for some silly, egotistical social event!”

The guards ignored me completely. “We’ll be spending the night in the schoolhouse. You will be out here, ready to leave in the morning, or I will come inside and get you. Your choice.”

I attempted to wiggle out of my father’s grip but he tightened his hold. “Let’s discuss this inside, Evie,” he whispered.

“There’s nothing to discuss!” I shouted and yanked my arm free of his hold. The guards were already halfway to the school. My anger quickly

faded into concern when my father sucked in a sharp breath, and I turned back to look just as he stumbled. Moving quickly, I slid under his shoulder and wrapped my arm around his back, helping support his weight. He hated when I did things like this, but he was my dad and I would always be here for him, no matter what.

“I’m fine, Evie,” he muttered and attempted to shoo me away.

“You pushed yourself too far. I’ve never heard you so angry,” I panted out as we crossed the threshold of our cabin.

He escaped me and hobbled over to our well-used kitchen table, sinking down onto an equally well-worn wooden chair. All of our furnishings were handmade, either by him or me. As I grew, I wanted him to teach me how to build things. With no siblings, I wanted to do everything he did and just as well, too. I sighed and followed him, my feet silent on the hard dirt floor. I had woven a few rugs, but those were in our bedrooms, and any time I had brought up making one for under the table, he told me not to waste time or resources on something that would just get dirty and be impossible to keep clean. Our home wasn’t perfect, but it was ours, and I loved it.

I glanced at him, finding his face was pinched in pain, a look I was all too familiar with seeing lately. I got to work stoking the wood in the stove and putting on a kettle of water for tea. Some medicine would do him some good, but unfortunately, it wasn’t ever enough.

“Evie,” he spoke, clearly wanting to discuss the royal assholes who were in my school at that very moment doing Goddess knows what. Oh, food would be good for him. I could whip up some cheese sandwiches and—

A loud thump had me jumping and spinning to look at my father. His fist was curled on the tabletop, and it was the first time I noticed he had a piece of paper. I assumed it held all of the information regarding The Hunt.

“Father, you need to calm down. I’m making your tea,” I said calmly, feeling unnerved by his drastic personality change.

“Fuck the tea!” he roared, and I stepped back suddenly, bumping into the counter. Embarrassingly, tears welled in my eyes. He had never, not once, raised his voice at me. When he lifted his gaze and saw how my hand was covering my mouth and the way my eyes glistened with unshed tears, his face fell, and his shoulders slumped.

“Oh, sweet girl. Forgive me. I’m sorry I raised my voice, but Evie,” he pleaded, and I rushed to him, taking my own seat and grabbing his hands. I frowned when I felt them shake.

“What are we going to do?” I breathed, my panic finally showing.

He inhaled deeply and exhaled even deeper. We didn’t have many windows, so we relied on oil lamps for light starting in the late afternoon. Once the sun began dipping behind the trees, it got dark inside quick. Shadows bounced around the house, courtesy of the lamps, and it was perhaps the first time I noticed how deep the lines of age were getting on his handsome face. My heart squeezed as I was once again reminded of the harsh reality of death.

“You need to leave here. Run away. Go south.”

My eyes widened. “Have you gone mad? I’m not going anywhere. I’m staying right here with you!”

“You don’t understand. Those guards won’t leave without you, and trust me, no promise of wedding a royal or quintarian gold is worth being sucked into their webs,” he spat, his distrust of anything royal coming through in spades.

My thoughts came to a halt. *Quintarian gold*? I slid the paper that was crunched up, courtesy of my father’s fist, toward me. He was ranting now

about politics and all of the flaws in the realm as I smoothed out the paper. My eyes scanned it quickly.

By Royal Decree of the four remaining kingdoms of Quintaria; Volos, Oberon, Ekpen, and Faolan, You, Evelyn Quinn, have been chosen to participate in this year's Recurrence celebration. This is an honor of the highest degree, as all chosen maidens will travel with a royal guard escort to the Roaring Isle to oversee The Hunt and meet the eligible royals in want of a wife.

Your presence will be required for up to the full month of celebration. While it cannot be guaranteed that you will secure a proposal, compensation in the sum of fifty thousand quintarian gold pieces will be allocated if you are not engaged by the final day of The Recurrence.

I didn't read the rest. Fifty thousand gold quint!? I could completely redo the school, expand it even. Supplies would be stocked for years with that kind of money. I would even be able to afford better medicines for Dad. I didn't want anything to do with those arrogant royals anyway. It would be like taking candy from a toddler. No royal would want anything to do with me when they realized how vile I found them. School was over for the next month, regardless. Aside from being here to help out and take care of Dad, I had no commitments.

"I'm going with them," I announced, cutting my dad's ranting off.

"What did you just say?" he asked in disbelief.

I squared my shoulders, my mind made up. "I said, I'm going. I'm going to the Isle."

"Absolutely not, Evie. You don't understand. There are so many things you don't understand about their world," he argued. I wasn't hearing anything except for fifty thousand quintarian gold pieces on repeat. That's

all that mattered. As a commoner, I'd never get an opportunity like this again, and I would certainly never come close to making that amount of money in my lifetime.

The kettle began screaming, and I stood, grabbing two mugs on my way to the stove. "The money, that's all I want. I can go there for the month of The Recurrence, sitting and putting up with their posturing and bullshit. Think of everything we could do with that money. For the good of the village! For us, Father. I can do this."

"I forbid it. You're not going anywhere except far from here, alone!" He was shouting again. I pinched my eyes closed and took a deep breath. He was the most stubborn man in the realm, no doubt about it.

I reached for my father's herbal tea, and at the last moment, I grabbed the medicated one that would put him to sleep as quickly and deeply as possible. I shoved all feelings of guilt aside as I prepared each of us a cup, double-checking to be sure that mine was my usual black tea and not the same stuff I was using on him.

When I returned to the table, the old man was standing again, and I sighed. "Sit down, Father. You need to rest."

He scoffed and I had to swallow the laugh that threatened to come out. I had just never seen him in such a state. Our neighbors, Jon and Beth Sharpe, would be able to take care of him for a month. They had been friends with Dad for as long as I could remember, so it wasn't like I'd be leaving him alone. Once he passed out, I would be able to prepare things for him as much as possible overnight to make things easier for everyone involved.

I carried our drinks to the table and sat back down, my focus locked on the steam rising from my mug. I loved mine piping hot but I always added

cooler water to Dad's. He hated waiting for it to cool. Impatient was his middle name. We sat in silence for a few minutes as he sipped his drink, his body relaxing with each swallow.

"It's not safe for a young woman to be on that island with all of those beasts."

I took a sip of my own tea. "Don't be ridiculous. We'll be in some castle the entire time. Knowing the royals, it will just be a huge display of showing off and them finding new ways to boost their egos. It will be perfectly safe."

"It's d-dangerous," he slurred, the medicine already taking effect. "What good is blood gold?"

"It spends the same and I'm out of chalk. *Chalk!* I requested supplies eight weeks ago and there has been no response. Not so much as a raven spotting in longer than that. I'm going to steal their gold and they won't even see it coming. I'll probably be the first woman in history to refuse the royal men." I smiled to myself at the thought of it. Their shocked faces. The fractured egos. Yeah, that sounded like the music of my soul.

He sloppily put his mug down on the table and pinned me with a stern look. "You don't know who you're getting involved with, Evelyn."

The use of my full name sent a shiver down my spine, reminding me of when I was a child and got caught doing things I shouldn't have been. Like the time I realized how we actually got to eat chicken for dinner and where it came from. My poor little six-year-old heart couldn't take it and I tried to hide all six of our chickens underneath my bed. We'd almost been in the clear but Chunky Cluck let out a rogue bawk and it was game over for them. "I know enough to know they're all heartless. Selfish and egotistical. If you're worried about the animals on the island—"

“I’ve never shielded you from my thoughts on the monarchy and their greed,” he said before yawning.

“Which is why I know how to get in and get out. I will come back here, Dad. That gold will change our village for the better, and I’d be able to afford a healer from Twisted Peaks to come and assess you.”

“I’m fine, I’m just getting older. But you have your whole life ahead of you. I’ll help you pack your things. You need to move fast and get out of here. Between myself, Jon, and Beth, we’ll be able to handle the school until you are able to safely return. Six months should do it,” he said, mostly to himself as he pushed himself up from his chair and promptly sat right back down, his eyes sliding suspiciously to his empty mug and then to my face. “What have you done?”

“What you taught me my entire life. I’m doing what I have to do to survive.” I stood then and helped my father stand. “Let’s get you to bed.”

“No. Evie,” he stammered, his words drawn out and slow, but he let me help him up. “D-don’t g-go there.”

We moved slowly through the cabin toward his room. “I have to do this. I know you’ll understand once you have time to think about it logically.”

The two of us collapsed onto his mattress, and I stood quickly to help maneuver him into bed while he still had some degree of consciousness. He fought the medicine with everything he had, the stubborn man. “I love you. I’ll miss you,” I whispered as his eyelids fluttered.

“N-not the animals,” he spoke so softly I almost didn’t hear him.

Leaning down closer, I asked, “What?”

“Not worried about animals,” he replied, and I smiled. He had taught me how to hunt and forage from the time I could walk. There wasn’t an animal in the forest that I was afraid of when I was properly armed. I held his

hands in mine as his eyes closed and I studied his face, committing it to memory. This would be the longest I'd ever been away from him.

Just as I was about to stand, his grip tightened and his eyes opened wide. "I'm not worried about animals," he repeated.

"I heard you, Father," I assured him.

"It's the beasts I'm worried about," he announced and then promptly closed his eyes and relaxed fully.

The beasts? Aren't they one in the same? Animals and beasts?

"Father?" I whispered, hating to keep him from sleeping, but there was something in his voice, the way he'd said it and his behavior since those guards showed up... it was off. He didn't so much as twitch a muscle in response to my voice. I was being paranoid. It was probably the effects of the medicine and a long, very eventful day.

I needed to push those thoughts away now, though, because I had a lot of things to do and not a lot of time to do them in.

That night, I didn't sleep. I worked throughout the night, preparing Father's medicines, leaving instructions for him and the neighbors on how to make them if needed and when to take each one. Packing was fast enough, considering I only owned two dresses and I was wearing one. I never put much stock in material items, mostly because we could never afford much, and honestly because the things that were important to me were the people in my life that I cared about. My students, my father, our neighbors, a few friends from childhood who had moved away and started families of their own.

I learned a long time ago that the number of people you care about doesn't matter, they just have to mean something to you. Keeping my circle small and close was how I liked it. A rooster's call broke me out of my

thoughts and I knew dawn would be breaking shortly. Sneaking back into my father's room as quietly as possible, I stared down at him for a moment before placing a letter on his nightstand along with a glass of water. He was always thirsty in the mornings and he might even feel groggy because of his medicine last night.

"I love you so much," I spoke softly. "Be safe and I'll see you in a month or so." I wiped a runaway tear from my cheek and let myself slip out of his room.

Be strong, Evie. You're doing this. You will do this.

I wrapped my shawl around my shoulders and scooped up my satchel. With my hand on the door, I inhaled my anxieties and worries deeply, and as I swung the door open and felt the first rays of the sunlight hit my face, I exhaled nothing but strength and determination.

It was a new day, and I was ready.



image-
placeholder

CHAPTER TWO

Not even the high winds and relentless rain could keep the smile from my face as we traveled toward The Isle. I had insisted on bringing my own horse. There was no way I would be riding two days on the back of one of these guards' saddles. We had stopped for a break since nobody could see more than arm's length in front of them, but the dense forest just off the road provided a bit of cover.

"We have half a day to go and if this cursed rain would let up, we could make it before nightfall," the guard I'd nicknamed Brow, announced as he wiped the rain from his eyebrow, which is what earned him his name. *Two became one*, I thought to myself and chuckled. Normally I wouldn't reduce myself to such petty behavior but honestly, all the man had done for nearly two days was complain.

He sneered at me. "You certainly changed your attitude since hearing the news of your selection."

I shrugged and pulled my cloak tighter around my body. "I simply cannot wait to meet the royals." The statement sounded convincing enough since I was about to get a big payout from this whole farce.

“I wouldn’t get your hopes up. Some of the most beautiful women in the realm have been selected in the past and, well—” His unkind gaze took in what he could of my body. “You’re just not one of them.”

Another guard, one I’d named Curly, thanks to his long, white blond curls, punched Brow in the shoulder. “Oi! We don’t speak to ladies that way, Eddie. The Captain would have yer ass for that!”

I let his words slide off of me, right along with the rain. Was I thin? That was laughable. But I was strong, capable, and happy. Not to mention, I quite liked my body the way it was. If Brow thought I was going to be affected by his assessment of my physical prowess, he would be waiting for an eternity. The two men were arguing more aggressively now, but I tuned them out, preferring to show my horse, Drifter, some love instead.

Just as my hand brushed his dark brown muzzle, he reared up with a loud whinny. “Whoa, boy. Whoaaa.” But he wasn’t having any of it, especially when the other horses started acting spooked two seconds later.

“What’s going—”

A loud, hair-raising noise broke through the rain and wind. I spun around, eyes wide, expecting to see something jump out of the fog.

“What in the Goddess’s name was that?”

“Sounded like a growl...”

“Horses are losing their heads over it, whatever it is!”

Nobody was paying attention to me as I stood frozen to the spot, trying to see through the trees. The low rumble started again, deeper this time, which seemed impossible. A large, dark shape flashed through the wall of rain, and that was sufficient for me. I’d seen enough.

“Need to go, NOW!” I shouted, waiting for Drifter to get into position for me to hop up into my saddle.

“What? Is the lady scared by a little bit of nature?” Brow spat at me, arms crossed.

I wasn't going to wait around. If these idiots didn't know the sound of wolves when they heard them, there was no hope. “Then stay here and meet the wolves that are encircling us at this very moment! Let's fly, Drifter!” I urged my horse to spring into action and he didn't disappoint me. The laughter that followed me as we fled quickly turned to screams of pain and horror. Howls pierced the air in an almost mocking symphony as the pack harmonized together.

“Fuck! Faster, Drift! Go, boy!” I urged, using my legs to relay the message. The last thing we needed would be for the wolves to follow us. Hopefully, the guards were keeping their attention. Drifter jumped with ease over a fallen tree, getting us back to the road. As terrified as I was, I chanced a glance behind me and sighed when I didn't see anything. It wasn't until I spun back around that I caught a glimpse of a dark shadow to my right, hidden just barely through the rain.

My eyes narrowed, desperate to find out what was chasing us, but it vanished. The rain suddenly let up enough to reveal the massive wolf standing in the middle of the road, crouched down and snarling. The speed with which we were moving wouldn't give us enough time to stop. We were going to run right into it.

Or, we would have if Drifter hadn't pulled up, sending both of us backward to the ground. All the air left my body as I lay on my back, trying to make sense of what had just happened. Still wheezing and attempting to get my lungs working again, I stumbled to my feet just in time to see the wolf moving right toward me.

I was so fucked. I didn't have any weapons on me and I could barely outrun the kids in my classroom. There was no way I'd be outrunning a damn wolf. Maybe a rock? If I could find one, I could smash its face...

"No, no, NO!" I screamed at the wolf, attempting to startle it. I swear its eyes gleamed brighter, and I watched in horror as saliva began to drip from its open maw. I was two seconds from death and I knew it. The wolf lowered its upper body to the ground, preparing to strike. Suddenly, the animal yelped and jerked to the left. It looked just as shocked as I did as we both looked around, confused by what had just happened. The wolf stumbled twice and abruptly dropped to the ground and was still.

I sank to my knees with my heart in my throat and my eyes locked on the lifeless form in front of me. It wasn't a moment later that I saw the glint of metal as the sun finally broke through the clouds. The handle of an axe. Someone had thrown that and saved my life. A twig snapped to my right, and I prepared to run to my horse, who was now happily grazing on some tall grass behind me.

"Miss Evie, thank the Goddess!" I squinted, trying to see who was speaking, when Curly stumbled out of the tree line.

"D-did you throw that?" I sputtered, still reeling from the adrenaline that coursed through my veins.

"Aye, I did. Just in time, too," he explained, only a little short of breath, as he walked over to the dead wolf. "I tried to catch up with you a ways back, but the rain was coming down too hard. Glad I got here when I did, though."

I grimaced as he bent and retrieved the axe with a hard tug, wiping the blood off across the animal's wet fur. He moved as though this was nothing out of the ordinary. As though he slung axes through the air daily and saved

women from wild wolves. “Where are the others?” I wasn’t sure why I was asking or looking around like I expected them to walk out of the treeline. I knew there weren’t any others. Not anymore.

Curly sighed and shook his head. “We’re in The Pale Forest. Wolf country. It’s on the insignia of this territory’s Goddess damned royal family. I bailed right after you did.” He approached me next, moving slow and steady. “May I assist you to your feet, my lady?”

I hadn’t even realized I was still on my knees. Warily I reached up to take Curly’s offered hand, but only because my legs were half asleep and hurting like hell. I still didn’t trust him or anyone who was in close connection with the royals, but I was grateful that he saved my life.

“Thank you,” I offered as I rose to my feet. “I’ve never seen a wolf that big.” Even in death, the beast looked as though it would return from the afterlife just to end me.

Curly shook his head. “Me neither.” A distant howl had both of us looking back in the direction we’d just fled. “Better move on before the rest of the pack comes looking. Stay vigilant because we’re getting closer and closer to bear country.”

“Fantastic,” I muttered and turned to retrieve my horse. Both horses had gotten their fill of grass, but having also heard that howl, they knew their well-earned break was done. I got lucky, and I didn’t believe things like that happened more than once.

I was no less suspicious of my lone guard now than I had been before the attack. I didn’t trust him or anyone else. He’d saved me, but that was his job. He was under orders to deliver me to the Isle, and that’s what he was going to do. I had questions though, and my mind ran wild with them for a

solid hour before we slowed our pace enough to actually have a conversation.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, and he glanced over his shoulder at me.

He raised a blond eyebrow. “For what?”

“Your, uh, friends back there.”

He huffed. “Not my friends, but thank you just the same.”

Now it was my turn to be confused. “Not your friends? Weren’t you together all the time?”

“Aye.” He slowed his horse to allow me to ride next to him so we could talk easier. “I joined their unit fresh out of training three years ago.”

We were quiet for a moment before Curly spoke again. “I’m sure you’re wondering how one could spend three years with a group of people and not feel some sort of connection to them?”

I chuckled and patted my horse’s neck. “You caught me.”

“I don’t agree with many things that happened while I was a part of their unit. Eddie was a brute and disgusting toward women. It got so bad at times that I started carrying purple shade seed powder, and I’d sprinkle that into his ale at the pubs before he could drag off some poor woman who had no idea what he was capable of.”

The mention of purple shade seed made me think of my father, and my heart clenched as guilt seized me.

“The commander knew everything that went on and did nothing to stop it.”

Anger simmered beneath my skin. I knew Brow was that type of asshole, so it wasn’t surprising to have it confirmed. “So why did you stick with them so long?”

“Because, Miss Evie, once you’re in the Royal Guard, you’re in for life. I’m not in any position to be making demands about where I’m assigned. Better the devil you know, and all that.”

It was only then I realized I didn’t know what his name was.

“I can hear you thinking from here,” he said with a grin.

“Well, I just realized I don’t know your name,” I admitted, a bit embarrassed.

He laughed loudly. An infectious kind of laughter that made me grin. “Not what I thought you’d be thinking about in a time like this, but, my name is Kael Warner. Eldest and only son of Thelor Warner of Nafi, a small village on the west of the Final Fields.”

My eyes widened at that. “I didn’t know people lived there!”

“Aye, there’s not many of us, but we’re there.”

The Final Fields were a place that I would never want to visit. Rumors were that the grasses grew over seven feet tall, and the animals that lived within had their own routes mapped out, like a labyrinth. People who ventured in never came back out.

“And you’ve been in the fields?”

Kael threw his head back and laughed deeply. “A time or two, sure.”

“But I heard that it’s incredibly dangerous and practically a death wish!”

He shrugged. “When you grow up somewhere like that, it’s normal to you. Think of it like the ones who live near the coasts or a lake. They teach their children how to swim from infancy.”

“Yeah, or the royals who all know how to play the game from birth,” I murmured and then clamped my mouth shut. *Fuck!* My eyes darted to my guard to see if he was drawing out that wicked looking axe he’d used on

that wolf. Plenty of people had met their death for less treasonous statements.

Kael wasn't even looking at me as he snapped his fingers. "Exactly like that."

My shoulders dropped as the fear of being harmed evaporated. Well, now that was interesting. Maybe I would be able to get more information out of him since he was being so open. We came to a small clearing in the forest that a trickling stream flowed through. "Thank the Goddess!" I shouted and dismounted. "I'm so thirsty." Kael joined me as we drank our fill of the cool water. The horses were happier than we were to see water. We laughed as they splashed around, cooling themselves down.

Kael dropped down into the soft grass and lay back. "We have to get out of the woods before nightfall, but we can give them fifteen minutes to rest and still make it."

A cold chill raced down my spine at the thought of being out here in the dark, and the echoes of howling wolves bounced around my head. He wouldn't get a fight from me about getting out of here as quickly as possible. I lowered myself to the ground with more grace than I knew myself capable of. "So, do you know anything about the Roaring Isle? Or The Hunt?"

"Just about as much as anyone else, I reckon. I was only twelve during the last Recurrence, so this will be my first one since joining the guard." He sat up and glanced over. "Are you worried about it?"

"Not worried, exactly. This is the farthest I've been from home before, and everything I know is what I was taught by my father or my teacher in school. Everything else is just town gossip, myths, legends... that sort of thing. It's hard to know what's real and what's made up. I don't want to

make a fool of myself.” I plucked a blade of grass and spun it between my fingers. Soon the weather would change and there wouldn’t be anything green left.

“Well, then I suppose we’ll find out together.”

Surprised, I dropped the grass and looked at him. “You’re going to the Isle, too?”

He smiled. “Of course. Not all, but many of the guards escorting the chosen women will travel with you for the entirety of the Recurrence. This detail is a special assignment for my unit to be stationed at the Keep on the Isle. It’s supposed to be a great honor.”

Goddess, forgive me, but I was even more thankful now for those wolves. A day and a half with those barbarians was more than enough. At least Kael was decent... for a royal guard. Clearly, I could’ve been much worse off.

“So, two more hours on the road?” I asked, sighing at his nod of affirmation. My ass was numb, and I wasn’t sure I’d be able to walk tomorrow at this point. Perhaps they would let me stay in bed, and I wouldn’t have to subject myself to the bullshit fanfare quite yet. A girl could wish.

Kael and I reluctantly left the softness of the mossy bank and traded it for the supple leather of our saddles. The closer we got to the port, the more I began to feel nauseous. My plan, which had seemed so brilliant within the safety of my father’s home, now felt riddled with uncertainty. The small port town had quaint cottages and a tall lighthouse made of large stones. I eyed them curiously, wondering how people were able to create such a thing. Some of those stones were bigger than my horse.

I opened my mouth to ask Kael if he knew anything about the building process when the marina came into view. It worked out well that my mouth was already open in awe because the ship was docked, waiting. I thought the lighthouse was a marvel, but it didn't come close to the sheer size and craftsmanship of this boat.

"Miss?" Kael asked, coming to a stop about five feet in front of where I'd unknowingly stopped my horse from moving further.

I was a teacher. Educated. We had boats in our village to use in the lakes for fishing. The beast I was looking at was a monstrosity.

"There's no way I'm going on that." His brows lifted at my statement. "Thank you, Kael Warner, for your assistance on this journey. I'll just see myself back home." I nudged my horse, but before we could get away from that unnaturally large sized boat that would surely decorate the bottom of the ocean in no time at all, Kael blocked our path.

"Miss Evie," he said, his face serious for only a moment before he burst with laughter. My cheeks grew hot as others passed us on the street. "Are you scared of the ship?"

"It's one thing to hear about large boats but another thing entirely to see it. I can't say drowning at sea has ever been at the top of my list of things to experience!" I whisper-shouted at him.

"Nobody will be drowning at sea. I've been on ships like this many times. It's perfectly safe, my lady. Look around."

I swallowed the lump in my throat and did as he asked. There were a lot of women my age. Most of them were escorted by a group of guards. "The other women for The Hunt?"

"Aye. Well, a good amount of them. Some others will be traveling from the north port. The kings would not let all the potential wives aboard a

death trap. They need you.”

I eyed Kael. Maybe he was right. Or, maybe the kings would let us float out into the choppy waters, and we’d learn of the shoddy craftsmanship when it was too late while he and the other royals would watch from The Roaring Isle with bellies full of ale and laughter in their throats. The money was the only driving force at this point. I had to win that damned money.

I crossed my arms. “Fine.”

He nodded and took hold of my reins.

“But Kael?” His brown eyes met mine. “When that ship sinks, I’ll be using your body as a life raft.”

“I’d expect nothing less, my lady,” he replied with a grin, leading us to the dock.

At some point over the last three days, all sense had abandoned my brain. Even now, there was a small voice urging me to run back home. But as I said, all sense was gone, so I ignored that voice, and I got on the floating death trap.



image-
placeholder

CHAPTER THREE

I wiped my mouth with Kael's handkerchief for the fifth time since we left the port.

"Well, if nothing else, we've learned that you should never pursue a pirate's life," Kael said and then laughed at his own joke. I scowled, but before I could bite back at him, I was leaning over the ship's edge once again and dry heaving with everything I had. There was nothing left in my stomach.

"Um, excuse me?" a feminine voice asked softly.

Slowly, I turned toward her and covered my mouth. The last thing I needed right now was to greet a new person with terrible puke breath. She was a dainty little thing with a deep purple gown that looked lovely against her golden brown skin and hair so dark it almost seemed blue.

"I couldn't help but notice your struggles with seasickness," she said with concern in her deep brown eyes.

I waved a hand, as if I wasn't currently dying and it was no big deal. "I'm fine." Kael shot me a doubtful look. "Eventually. Eventually, I'll be fine."

“Oh. Okay, well, I brought these with me.” I looked at her open palm and saw a small bag of mints and two long leather strings with a smooth ball affixed in the middle of each one. “Mints are the most recommended remedy, but my grandfather, who was from the Eastern Realm, swears by these bracelets.”

“What are they?” Kael asked, barging in before I could ask myself.

“Don’t mind him. He apparently lost his manners back on land,” I told my savior.

She smiled and shook her head. “May I?” She reached for my arm and I raised my wrist so she could secure the leather bracelet. Instead of fastening it so the bead would be on top, she placed it underneath my wrist. “The marble will apply pressure here and relieve your nausea.”

Kael and I glanced at each other as she secured them, the two of us clearly skeptical of her treatment, but my guard couldn’t keep his thoughts to himself. “Well, I can’t say I’ve ever heard of the wrist being connected to a stomach, but if it stops her from retching like a bird, those will be worth their weight in gold!”

She giggled and then passed me the bag of mints. “I would still use these. At least until we get the sickness under control.”

“Thank you...” I trailed off, and my new friend’s eyes widened.

“Oh, pardon me. I should have introduced myself straight away. I’m Isla Bishop.”

“I’m Evie, and my guard is Kael. Do you mind terribly if I sit down? You’re welcome to join me,” I offered, promptly and unceremoniously dropping my ass to the deck. Isla didn’t hesitate for a moment to follow suit. I shut my eyes and leaned my pounding head back against the ship.

“I don’t mean to be forward, but I am dying to know if you’re one of the selected women?” Isla asked me quietly, which my brain appreciated.

“Yes, one of the many.”

Isla exhaled like she’d been holding her breath as she waited for my answer. “Thank the Goddess. I can’t tell you how happy I am that we had the good fortune to meet before arriving on The Isle. I know you haven’t had a chance to get around much, but you’re definitely the most normal woman I’ve seen.”

My eyes remained closed as I popped a mint into my mouth and tried to sort through what she could possibly mean by that. If by normal she meant dressed like a peasant and smelling like a barnyard, then yeah, I was her girl. Isla’s and Kael’s laughter filled the air, and I cracked open an eye, wondering what I had missed.

My guard pointed at me. “I agree with the barnyard thing.”

“Ugh,” I groaned. “I didn’t mean to say that out loud, but you’ve been traveling with me for how many days now? If you think you smell any better, then you’re sorely mistaken.”

“The entire ship stinks like shit,” Isla said matter-of-factly, causing Kael and me to look at her in a bit of shock. I definitely thought she was too ladylike to use foul language. “What?” she asked innocently. “It does!”

“Lady Isla is not wrong. I certainly hope they let the lot of you freshen up before you meet your future husbands,” Kael said as he sat across from us, leaning against the bulwark. It didn’t look safe to me, not with the large openings at the base of the wall.

Isla clapped her hands together. “Speaking of that, Evie. Is there anyone you’re going after specifically?”

Anyone I’m going after?

“I personally think she’ll do well with Prince Torin, or maybe she’d prefer not to be a queen. Maybe just a Duchess? I hear all three of the Faolan sons will participate this year, and you’re already from their territory,” Kael babbled, speaking of the eligible bachelors for the first time.

“Absolutely *not* to any Faolan. They’re rumored to be a pack of brutes and womanizers. Relentless flirts with no sense of devotion!” Isla proclaimed, scandalized at Kael’s assessment.

He snorted. “Oh, and who would you be going after then, Miss Isla?”

“I would be interested in either of the Ekpen brothers. Mosi and Taji seem to be the kindest of the group, and have you seen them before?” She leaned in and whispered. “They’re so handsome.”

Kael nodded, and I blinked. “She’s right. They’re sex on legs, those two.”

Alright then. I peered at Isla from the corner of my eye to see if she would have an issue with what Kael had just slyly let us know. Relief settled in my bones when I saw the biggest smile on her face yet.

“And who would you go after then, Kael?”

He didn’t hesitate to answer me, and he appeared lighter, the tension in his shoulders finally relaxing. “The Faolan’s would typically have me weak in the knees with all that red hair, but have you ever seen the Oberon men? Built like trees and as fierce as the bears on their family crest.”

“And renowned for their stubbornness!” Isla added excitedly.

“The last thing I need is a stubborn man,” I grumbled. Truth be told, I’d never seen any of the men they were speaking about. The only way the people in my village got that opportunity was if they traveled in the bigger cities and happened to see someone by chance. Or by attending the celebrations and weddings for The Recurrence in the capital. Many people made the journey to get a chance to lay eyes on them, though.

My father held nothing but absolute hatred for the royals, but he loathed The Volos Kingdom the most. With a curling dragon on their family crest, he often told me how fitting it was that they belonged to a kingdom of serpents. I asked him multiple times what the turning point was for him, or at least what fueled that fire in him so strongly. The closest I ever got to an answer was that he'd been betrayed many years ago, and that cemented his feelings.

"Oh, I think a stubborn male would suit you quite well," Kael teased.

I dropped my mouth in mock scandal. "I believe one would suit you even better."

Isla laughed as Kael fanned his face before looking me over. "Hey, you're looking better. How are you feeling?"

I paused and gasped. "I feel fine!" Turning to Isla, I grabbed her hand. "You're a miracle worker. Thank you so much!"

"I'm just glad they helped. You looked so miserable." She squeezed my hand, and then it was her turn to gasp as her gaze swept out to the sea. "I can see the island!"

Kael and I shared a look, and then all three of us hopped up and moved to the railing. Rising out of the water was a massive island with trees as big around as a wagon. There were higher points, not quite mountains, though they would be one hell of a climb. But the thing that set me on edge was the imposing stone castle that was perched on the edge of a cliff. Like someone had built it there to send a message. Even close to the edge, with sharp rocks and perilous waters below, the royals wouldn't go down.

As we got closer, more and more people were coming out on the deck to get a look at the mysterious island. The way I understood it, this place was only used for The Hunt during The Recurrence, but there were people who

lived here year-round. Guards and servants to upkeep the grounds and maintain the day-to-day work that was required. Seemed like a waste to have such a beastly castle that was only used every ten years but then again, that was in line with all of the greed.

“Look at the statues,” Isla whispered to me, pointing to the shore. Four stone animals stood in a row, looking ferocious. A dragon towered over the other three statues in the front row, wings spread wide and teeth on display. To its right stood a huge wolf, ears pinned down and snarling. Beside that was a ten foot tall bear, maw open in a silent roar. And at the end, a tiger, claws prominent against the stone log it was perched upon.

“Well, they certainly know how to make a first impression,” I mumbled, and both Isla and Kael agreed with my statement. Little did they know I wasn’t impressed. No, seeing the display of riches was making my blood boil. That was probably good since I’d already befriended a royal guard—something I never dreamed of. I needed to remember the whole reason behind this adventure.

A man with gray hair and a twirly gray mustache walked past us, flanked by two more men in royal guard uniforms with the Volos colors—red and silver. We looked on as he approached the ship’s helm and turned to face everyone now on the deck.

“As you can see, we have arrived at The Roaring Isle!” he shouted, and several cheers of excitement rang out. “I know everyone is excited to get off of this ship and to get the festivities started. Ladies, if you could, please begin forming a line so we can exit in a timely and organized fashion. I have received word that the other group arrived a couple of hours prior, and are already settling into the castle.”

A woman standing just in front of me grumbled in annoyance. Judging from the finery of her gown and the perfect way her golden hair was styled, she likely wasn't used to having to wait her turn. She'd probably make a fine queen one day.

"I'm so nervous," Isla whispered. "What if nobody likes me?"

I looped my arm in hers. "That would be impossible."

Twenty minutes later, we were herded down the gangway like lambs to the slaughter. On the verge of murmuring the bleating cry of a sheep, I cut the thought off with a grimace at my own morbid thought.

I could've cried the moment my feet sank into the soft sand. All I needed to do now was get through this and then suffer one more ride on a ship so I could go home. I'd never have to get on another retched boat in my life.

"This way, dears!" the man shouted over the excited murmuring of the crowd. From what I could gather there were maybe fifteen women and a handful of guards. Kael was at my side the entire time, just as he vowed he would be.

"I certainly hope the accommodations are better than this... sand pit," the golden haired girl said with disgust.

I rolled my eyes as a few of the other girls chimed in with their complaints.

"Are there even servants here to help us get ready?"

"Will we have time to bathe before the royals see us?"

"I reckon you could shower and have a whole swath of servants, but it wouldn't do a damn thing for that whiny voice or the nose situation," another girl with a husky voice said as she walked past, blowing smoke from her lips directly into the girls' faces.

The group of them gasped. "How dare you?"

The smoker spun on the heel of her boot and flicked the cigar into the sand at their feet. Her flawless black skin shimmered under the sun, and two thick braids hung down her back. She was wearing pants and a black tunic. “There’s not much I won’t dare. So don’t push me.”

With insults being hurled under their breath, the group hustled away from her, which landed her attention on our threesome. “Ello there. You ready for this party?”

Kael, unsurprisingly, broke out in laughter. “I’d go anywhere with you. I suspect you make your own entertainment. What’s your name, my lady?”

“Rivka,” she replied, lifting her chin. “But so help me—if any of you ever call me that, I’ll be forced to retaliate. It’ll be bad enough hearing it from all the official bullshit we have to endure over the next month. Call me Riv.”

“Noted,” I said. “I’m Evie. This is Isla, and this is our guard, Kael.”

“Perfect. Now, I’ll be the first to tell you I’m not much of a people person, but—” Isla snorted, interrupting whatever Riv was about to say. Riv narrowed her eyes at Isla, who threw her hands up in surrender.

“What? I loved the entire thing! Can you teach me how to be just like you?”

Riv’s eyes twinkled with excitement, which was the only thing that gave away her true thoughts on Isla’s statement. For the rest, she just appeared bored and unimpressed. “As I was saying. Despite the fact that I hate people more than the aroma of pig shit, I reckon we’re gonna need some allies.”

“Allies for what?” Kael questioned as he scanned the beach suspiciously.

“There are probably thirty to fifty girls here for this meat market, and by my best guess, there are maybe twenty men who will choose a wife. It’s going to be absolutely villainous once we enter that castle. I say we stick

together. Watch each other's backs and shit like that." Riv threw her hands up suddenly. "Whatd'ya fuckin' say?"

"I'm so in," Isla proclaimed with a little hop.

"She's right. Having some kind of strategy probably isn't a bad thing. There's going to be a lot of competition and a whole lot of backstabbing," Kael said, rubbing his chin. "Where are you from?"

"Everywhere and nowhere. I spend a lot of time on the sea," she answered, rolling up her sleeves.

"I bet you've been on so many adventures!" Isla gushed, fascinated. "I always wanted to go on adventures, like in the books I read."

Riv eyed Isla curiously. "Ever been caught in the sea during a hurricane?"

Isla's jaw dropped. "You have?"

She glanced around at the three of us, all eagerly awaiting her reply. And then she snorted. "Fuck no. I haven't got a death wish."

All of us laughed at her joke, which felt nice for a change. What I'd seen of Riv so far, I was sold. She was brass, brazen, and unlike any other woman I had ever been around. I wondered if she was half manic, with the big grins and sudden movements, but for now, I loved her energy. Plus, she'd draw a lot of attention to herself, which would keep it off of me.

"Welcome to our little crew, Riv."

She grinned widely at me and shoved a closed fist into the air, pumping it a few times. "Yessss! Right then, let's get on with it, shall we? Ain't got all bloody day."

Riv turned and began stomping through the sand in the direction of the crowd. The three of us looked at each other and shrugged. Either we just

made the smartest decision of this game or the dumbest one... but one thing I was certain of? I wasn't going to be bored.



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placeholder

CHAPTER FOUR

Torin and I stood together on the balcony of The Roaring Keep as we stared down at the group of people making their way up to the gates.

I sighed, and he laughed. That was a fairly accurate depiction of our friendship. As crown prince of the largest territory, The Volos Kingdom, one would think he'd take things a bit more seriously. But that was never going to be him, and I accepted that years ago.

“All I’m saying is that this tradition is outdated and ridiculous. I have enough to worry about without adding in a damn wife,” I grumbled, running my large hand through my thick, dark curls.

Torin walked away and flopped onto a cushioned chair beside his younger brother, Evander. The two were clearly blood related, with their blond curls and dimples, but where Torin had icy pale blue eyes, Van’s were a light oak brown. Plus, his eighteenth birthday was just last week, so the younger Volos was lucky to have made the cutoff. “Dair, have you learned nothing? Having a wife won’t change a thing—for any of us. At least this way, it narrows the options down drastically. I, for one, am tired of the incessant flirting from the noble women in court.”

I crossed my arms and stared down at him. “Really? *You?* Sick of flirting?”

He smirked. “Okay, fine. Call me out all you want, but there is nothing we can do to stop this from happening, so just try to fucking enjoy yourself.”

“I’ll enjoy myself just fine as soon as we can shift.”

None of us had shifted before.

The people of our realm were in the dark about our abilities, which was why they shipped us out to this island to keep it quiet. Generations ago, the five kingdoms had allied together. The people of our realm thought it was due to political reasons, which was partly true. The main cause, though, was that without trust in each other, kingdoms would attack others in their animal forms. Armies of men didn’t stand a chance in that situation, so peace was brokered. All was well for many, many years. Celebration of The Recurrence started, traveling to The Roaring Isle each year to take part in The Hunt.

Thanks to a curse placed on the royal families, we were now only able to shift during The Recurrence—a month-long event that was celebrated every ten years. Part of the curse was to restrict the shift to royal males over the age of eighteen, but only during The Recurrence month.

“I don’t know why they insist on doing it on this island. There’s nothing out here except spiders as big as Dair’s ass,” my younger brother Alden teased as he joined us on the balcony. Torin barked a laugh, and I responded to him with a clear shot of my middle finger.

“You know why they make us do this out here,” I said.

Torin groaned. “Yeah, yeah, so that the commoners never find out what we really are.”

“And since it’s our first shift, we’ll be feral. Bloodthirsty beasts. It wouldn’t be safe for our people if we were anywhere near them, and you both know it.”

There were stories from before the curse. People being found horribly maimed and shredded into ribbons. At least now we were contained. Since the last Recurrence happened when I was ten, I was fucking ready to rip my skin off and let the animal out.

Another reason why our parents didn’t allow us to wed before our first Hunt—the shifting gene couldn’t be passed to our sons and daughters until after we’d completed our shift.

“Relax, Alasdair. You’re always so on edge. I pity the animal that you find first out there tomorrow,” King Ero said, striding onto the balcony, his light blond hair appearing nearly white in the sunlight.

“That’s what I tell him all the time,” Torin added, propping his legs on the table.

Ero scowled at his son. “There is a time and a place for relaxation. You’d do well to be more like your friend Alasdair when we’re back at court. And Evander?” He looked back at his younger son and paused, squinting his eyes. “Are you *sleeping*?” Ero picked up a pillow from another chair and hurled it at Evander, making him jump.

I hated when Ero made comments like that, and he did it often. Always comparing the two of us, and lately, the comments held more bite than ever. I glanced at my friend, who was boring holes into his father’s back with his light blue eyes. He’d been noticing it, too. Usually, he’d roll his eyes or make a lewd gesture behind his father’s back, but lately, it seemed like the comments were hitting their mark. Torin liked to joke around and live his

life with no regrets, but I knew when the time came, he would step up and be the ruler this realm needed.

“Are you lads ready for the kickoff tonight? The ball begins at six, and you’ll have til eleven thirty to make the rounds and meet the women.” He grinned so big that not even his well-kept beard could hide it, but then it disappeared and his features hardened. “Do not push it with time. You will need to be outside of the keep by midnight. The magic will begin building in your veins, and believe me when I tell you that fighting the shift will be impossible.”

“We’ll be back to normal after three days?” Alden asked.

Ero nodded. “Normal enough to be safe to have indoors. It may not last the full three days, that will depend on how successful your hunt is. I have to go make some final preparations for this evening. Make your impressions with the ladies tonight, but be careful not to make any promises. A lot can happen during our time here, and you’ll get to spend more time with them after The Hunt.”

My brother, Torin, and Evander stood so the four of us could bow to the king before he left us.

Alden exhaled hard. “I don’t care that I’ve known him my entire life, that man is scary as hell.”

“How do you think I feel? Half of my being is... him,” Torin said, his eyes still glued to the door his father had disappeared through. It was the first time I had ever heard him say something like that and I wasn’t sure how to respond. My friend stood there, almost in a trance, as Alden babbled about the women and what they’d be like.

“Can we start drinking yet?” Evander asked, staring longingly at the mini-bar cart that a servant had brought out here earlier.

As impossible as it was to believe, I think I had just witnessed the moment that the prince of The Volos Kingdom realized the weight of his responsibility. It wasn't like this was a new development, but it was certainly one that Torin had almost seemed to pretend didn't exist.

"You okay, Tor?" I said quietly so that our brothers wouldn't hear.

Slowly, his eyes moved from the empty doorway to mine. There was a flicker of something there. Anger maybe? Determination? I couldn't be sure because with the next breath my friend was there, cracking that signature smile and clapping me on the shoulder.

"I'm great, Dair," he replied. "Today's the first chapter in our own personal story that will be shared for centuries to come. Let's get ready for tonight."

I studied his face for a moment, finding nothing amiss. Torin was usually an open book with his emotions so I found myself reluctantly nodding. "I'm going to need a drink to get through this."

"Fucking finally." Evander practically ran to the liquor, with Alden right on his heels.

"What are brothers for?" Alden asked, turning around with a full bottle of whiskey in his hand, complete with a grin that promised trouble.

This was going to be a long evening.

My hair was tied back and my suit pressed so crisply I'd need to be careful not to cut an unsuspecting victim with the sharp lines. I fucking hated suits. All of us wore all black with our family crests embroidered on the lapel. The deep forest green of ours matched my eyes, but it was the golden face

of a bear mid-roar that I loved. I could practically feel the beast within me stir as I ran the tips of my fingers over the raised gold threads.

Tonight.

After twenty years of waiting, I would finally get to shed this form and let the repressed side of myself free. The material rubbed against my legs and arms uncomfortably as I strode through the hallways, making my way to the smoking room. Massive oil paintings of the four royal animals hung on the walls, their forms flickering as the oil lamps cast their shadows. The scent of roasted meat and herbs saturated the air as the kitchen staff worked hard to prepare the feast for the evening.

King Ero requested that all the royals participating in the hunt gather in the smoking room for a discussion and a toast. After that, we'd be expected to parade around like peacocks. I rounded the corner and collided with someone nearly as large as myself.

"Alasdair!" Mosi gasped, taking hold of my shoulders and grinning broadly. "It is great to see you, old friend."

"It's been too long, Mose. How was your journey here?"

Mosi Ekpen was the eldest son of Cairo and Desta, and it had been close to a year since we last saw one another. He stood around six feet tall, maybe an inch or two over, with deep umber skin. Being as tall as I was, I wasn't a good judge of height.

"It was fine. Long and boring, but here we are. Taji and my father are already in the smoking room," he said, gesturing with his arm down the hall. "Let's walk and talk?"

"Goddess forbid we show up late," I muttered but fell in step beside him.

"I can't wait to get through this evening and get this ridiculous fucking suit off," Mosi said as he fiddled with the buttons of his jacket.

I snorted. “I think the tiger crest on your jacket would object to being called ridiculous.”

Mose stopped walking and turned to me, his dark brown eyes flashing at the mention of his animal. The Ekpen crest was solid black with the face of an orange tiger, all of its sharp teeth on display. He stepped closer and lowered his voice. “It’s as though I can feel him within, just beneath the surface of my skin. Do you feel it, too?”

“Goddess, yes. Started about two days ago and the intensity has just increased by the hour. I’m not sure how we’re expected to get through this event without biting someone’s head off.”

“Ah, there you two are. Come on.” Mosi and I looked down the hall and spotted Taj, his younger brother. The two Ekpen sons looked so similar they could pass as twins if it weren’t for their different hairstyles. Where Mose liked to keep his hair cut short, Taj had a head full of locs that hung well past his shoulders. Right now, half of them were tied back, showing off his high cheekbones and sharp jawline that sported a short clipped beard.

Mosi entered the room first and I shared a quick hello with Taj as we followed him in.

“Alasdair, please close the doors behind you. I believe we’re all here now,” Ero called out to me from the fireplace at the front of the room.

I did as Ero asked and allowed myself time to scan the room as I made my way to my seat beside Alden and our father, King Aric. The room was wide enough that we were able to sit in a row, not making any one family sit behind another. Politics, all of it, down to the fucking seating arrangements.

“When did Faolan show up?” I asked my father. Whenever we discussed their royal family, we simply referred to the lot of them as Faolan. Mainly

because there was never just one of them, and there were so many it would take forever to name them.

“Not long ago. They’re being remarkably well-behaved,” he replied quietly.

“Oh?” That was the shocking part of it. The Faolan clan were notorious for breaking things, inciting riots, getting drunk, and causing general mayhem. I leaned forward and looked down to where they were sitting, immediately locking eyes with Ciar. He was sitting on the floor, legs kicked out in front of himself, like he wasn’t the prince of his territory. The grin I got was nothing but teeth. His deep auburn hair was absolutely wild. Had he even bothered to run a comb through it?

His brother, Desmond, noticed something had caught Ciar’s attention, and was the next to make eye contact. He lifted a hand, formed a claw, and mouthed the word ‘rawr’ as he sliced his hand downward.

“For the love of all things royal!” King Ero’s voice boomed, silencing the room and drawing every pair of eyes in the room. “Someone get the Faolan men some brushes for their hair. We are animals in our souls, gentlemen. We don’t need to fucking look like them. You’re going out there to meet your future wives. This is not a game!”

I swear I heard some low growls coming from the side of the room Clan Faolan were on, but when combs and brushes were handed over, they didn’t hesitate to do what they were told. Their family always had the biggest numbers because they bred like, well, wolves. Ciar and Desmond had four younger brothers that would be ready for the next Recurrence. Not only that, they had seven sisters.

Women weren’t able to shift, but they could pass the gene to their children—which explained the rest of Clan Faolan that were in attendance.

By my last calculations, there would be five other Faolan cousins along with the seven cousins split among the other families in the hunt with us tonight, bringing the number to twenty men.

Torin was standing beside his father at the front of the room, looking the part of a crown prince. Not a hair out of place as the dragon on his family crest demanded perfection at all times.

“Gentlemen,” Ero greeted the room. “Welcome to the Roaring Keep. It is a great honor to be standing amongst each of you this evening as we prepare for your first shifts. I have watched each of you grow from infants to the men you are today, and I’m confident you all will do great things when your time comes to lead your kingdoms.”

“Any ruler knows that in order to continue moving forward, sometimes you must look back. Right now, I would like to propose a toast to the lost family, Sova.”

A heavy weight settled over the room, one filled with grief, sadness, and respect. Glasses were passed out as every person in the room rose to their feet.

Ero cleared his throat and lifted his glass. “To the Sova family! We will never forget!”

“We will never forget!” the entire room answered as we waited for Ero to take his drink.

“I miss you, old friend,” he said somberly, speaking as though King Sova could hear him, before taking a deep pull of scotch from the crystal glass that was etched with the Volos crest.

I followed suit, relishing in the way the alcohol both burned and warmed my throat. My brother clapped his hand on our father’s shoulder as they both downed their glasses. That was the thing about growing up the way we

all did—we were all friends. Our fathers were the same. Despite the fact that it had been over twenty years since the fall of the Sova family, our fathers were all still very affected by the loss.

“Now I’d like those partaking in The Hunt to pay close attention to what I’m about to say. There are some simple guidelines for the event and also how the choosing order will be determined afterward.”

I looked at my best friend to see if he was paying attention and was taken aback when I found him staring at me with a very serious expression. His jaw was clenched hard enough to crack a tooth. I lifted a dark brow at him in question. *Are you good?* He seemed to break away from his thoughts and remember where we were because his expression morphed and a small dimple popped on the right side of his face as he fought his smirk.

“This hunt will be observed by ravens. Participation and performance will count toward your overall score at the end. A raven will be assigned to each man to keep track of the prey you bring down. This hunt is not only about killing. It’s also about how you conduct yourself and every decision you make could either help or hinder you.”

There was a shift in mood in the room. It was becoming full of excitement and anticipation. With our animals being so close to finally being set free, mentioning killing, prey, or hunting was like striking a match in a hay loft.

“The entire purpose of this event is to ensure our bloodlines continue, and in order for that to happen you must shift and kill. Then, you must also choose a wife to breed. Choose wisely. Trust your animals to guide you to the right choice. It won’t be guaranteed that you’ll get your top pick, but anything could happen.”

The testosterone in the room was at a boiling point without adding women to the mix. I watched Torin roll his shoulders, and every male in the room could see the gleam in his eyes. Beside me, my brother was incessantly itching his arms and my right eye twitched as an image popped into my brain. Me, claiming a woman. Marking her as mine for eternity. I'd rip off the heads of any who would attempt to take her from me. A loud rumble snapped me out of the unwelcome daydream, and I looked around to see what the hell it was.

"Son," my father said, placing his hand on my shoulder. "You're growling." I don't think I'd ever seen him smile like he was at that moment, full of pride.

I cleared my throat, unsure how I felt. I'd been waiting my whole life for this night, and the closer the time came, the more I was realizing that I might not be the one in control.

King Ero laughed loudly. "Look at you all! Desperate to claim, fuck, and hunt! I cannot wait to watch the hunt, gentlemen. My sorcerer, Corvus, will be relaying the events back to myself and your fathers. The ravens will see everything, and every action you take will be scored. Each of you will list the women in order of your most desired to the least immediately prior to The Choosing Ceremony. We will calculate the scores and then tally the selections. Remember that when you're out there."

A few cheers went up as excitement built, and I found my own heart racing. I needed to get the fuck out of here and get my head back on straight.

"Let's head to the ballroom. Your futures are waiting!" Ero said, leading the way with Torin right behind him.

Whatever was happening within me, there was no stopping it. My skin crawled as we approached the ballroom. Nobody spoke as we moved fluidly as a pack of beasts parading as men. I didn't want a wife, no matter what my inner beast wanted. The only thing I wanted was to be the best ruler I could for my people. For my kingdom.

And yet, the second the soft scents of vanilla, lavender, brown sugar, peonies, and everything else feminine hit my nose... nothing else mattered. I had to get to them. I needed to see...

"Easy there, Dair," Torin said with a chuckle that I didn't appreciate.

I spun around and stepped up to him, putting the two of us nose to nose.

Torin took a step back. "Whoa, what are you doing?"

My chest heaved and I shook my head, flinging away whatever demon was trying to possess me. "Sorry, Torin. I'm feeling... not myself."

"You're not the only one. Every male here is ready to pounce," he whispered, scanning our group as we reached the mezzanine level. With a clear view down into the room, we drank in our first look at the women that were waiting in two neat rows in the center of the room. My first thought was that there were far more women than men. Tables decorated with the different kingdoms' colors were arranged around the large dance floor.

The women began whispering as more and more of them noticed our presence above them. Thanks to the string quartet, a slow tune started, providing a dark and ambient atmosphere. Torches were lit, and servants were weaving their way through the tables like mice in a maze.

"Follow me down to the middle of the dance floor, I will make a couple of announcements, and then dinner can commence," King Ero instructed, and not a single male objected to the order. In fact, I was confident we would've done whatever was required just to get down there. Closer to

them. Once it was noticed that we were moving, every person in the room stood.

“There are more of them than I thought,” Torin whispered as we descended the grand staircase.

I nodded, not bothering to speak as I continued to scan the room.

“How are we ever going to choose with so many options?” Alden murmured.

“I’m going to have fun figuring that out,” Evander boasted, straightening the cuffs of his jacket.

“Ah, I don’t think we’re going to have a problem,” Ciar said, running the brush through his hair a few more times for good measure. I guess being in the presence of the ladies finally kicked his ass into gear.

“Welcome to The Roaring Keep!” Ero shouted as he strode through the room. “It is my great pleasure to have all of you here for this momentous occasion! Ladies, may I be the first to thank you for making the long journey to be here with us tonight. Please, be seated. The gentlemen will stand here while I explain a few things, and then dinner will be served.”

Ero paused, allowing the women time to retake their seats around the tables while my eyes caught on a deep forest green gown. Whoever was in the dress wasn’t facing the king. Her head was bowed slightly, like there was something either fascinating or minuscule on her dinner plate. Not used to being in the presence of royalty, then. One should always face their king when being addressed.

“A couple of rules for the evening to review before we begin! You will notice that each table is dressed with one of the four kingdoms’ colors. This is so we have one royal at each table during dinner. Use this time wisely. Get to know everyone since connections are the most important thing when

running a kingdom. At this moment, you could be sitting beside a future queen and some of you will *be* those queens. Relationships are vital.”

Smiles broke out from nearly every person in the room as Ero’s words painted a picture in our minds... everyone except for the woman in the green dress that had still not turned around. *Is she sleeping?*

“At the conclusion of dinner, the ball portion of the evening will commence. Please use the rest of your evening to meet all of the royal bachelors. This is the time to make your impression. You want to be remembered. Tonight, The Hunt will begin. Tomorrow, once the forest has been scouted and deemed safe, you will all be escorted into the forest to be reunited with the men.”

Several women gasped at that, and Ero raised his hand, calling for silence.

“I understand that some of you have never hunted in your lives. That is going to change tomorrow. To be a queen, you must be able to do what needs to be done, regardless of your personal beliefs. If your king requests you to do something, you are to do so. Consider this your first lesson in obedience. As royals, things can get messy, bloody, ugly. Our lives are not all gold and feasts. You must be prepared for anything.”

I spotted a strikingly beautiful woman with golden hair that stood open mouthed, and her cheeks were red. I couldn’t tell if she was angry, shocked, or scandalized. As I looked around, that seemed to be the reaction from the majority of the women.

Ero clapped his hands together. “Wonderful! Let us eat and celebrate!”

I took a deep breath as cheers and clapping became deafening. We all began seeking tables with our colors, some men clearly had been scouting while Ero gave his speech because they beelined to open seats. I spotted an

unclaimed green and gold table near the back and headed for it. Six women were seated around it, all of whom rose to their feet as I approached. The urge to growl was riding me hard. I wasn't sure if it was due to annoyance at being forced into this situation or because I wanted to give these frail ladies a little peek at who I was underneath this skin.

“Please, be seated. Thank you,” I said instead.

I guess time would tell because, with every tick of the clock, I was losing control.



image-
placeholder

CHAPTER FIVE

“At least they let us pick who we wanted to sit with,” Isla whispered as she watched the men filtering through the room like farmers at a livestock sale. She wiped her palms on the beautiful burnt orange skirt she had been dressed in for the evening and turned her wide brown eyes to me. “I’m so nervous right now, my hands are sweating. How are you so calm, Evie?”

I pulled against the tight collar of small crystals that adorned my neck. I’d nearly fainted when I found them laid out for me after I bathed earlier. “I’m anything but calm, but after being a teacher for as long as I have, you learn not to outwardly display anything except confidence.”

Rivka chuckled under her breath. “I hear that. Never in my life met a nemesis as terrifying as my three-year-old twin nieces.”

“Would you three be quiet? I’m not going to be associated with women of such poor form,” Belinda whispered harshly.

Once we entered the keep earlier, we were ushered to our wing of the castle. All of the women were staying in the upper east corner, with most of us four to a room. Belinda had made the mistake of approaching our door

while Isla and I were getting settled. Rivka, clearly having a strong dislike of the girl, blocked the doorway and flashed a hint of steel. Belinda scampered down the hallway so fast she nearly ran into an open door.

“Melinda, did you not understand the assignment of choosing your own table? You even tried rooming with us earlier. If I didn’t know better, I’d say you quite like our poor form,” Riv stated, looking bored.

“It’s BUH-linda.”

“It’s about to be BUH bye.” Rivka reached for the steak knife, and the other woman paled at the threat.

Isla’s mouth was hanging open in awe as I discreetly gave a round of applause for Riv’s intimidation tactics—though I really believed that to her, they weren’t tactics at all. That was just who she was, and this realm desperately needed more women like her.

“Oh Goddess, they’re even more handsome up close,” Becca, a girl who was in the room next to ours, gasped. The volume in the room rose, and excited chatter filled the air as the men walked through the tables now.

I hated myself for it, but I turned in my chair to look at whoever had Becca swooning. I made it through the entire introduction without so much as glancing at a royal, but for some reason, I picked that moment to spin my seat to my left. It just so happened that my skirt was so much fuller than anything I’d worn in my life, and I underestimated its reach. Fabric pulled as shoes tangled within the tulle and I stared wide-eyed into pale blue eyes as he attempted to keep his balance. It was pointless. The damage had been done. I immediately noted his blond hair and the dragon kingdom crest on his lapel. Oh, Goddess. Was this Prince Torin?

The entire room seemed to collectively quit breathing as Torin fell like a giant oak tree and I sat frozen in my seat, too embarrassed to move. I felt

Riv's hand land on my arm, letting me know she was there. My heart thundered as Torin pushed himself up from the floor and turned to face me. Speechless, my cheeks were burning with embarrassment as every pair of eyes shifted from the prince to the girl who had just tripped him. No encounter would overshadow this introduction, and it was the exact opposite of how I was planning to navigate my time as a captive on this island.

Being undesirable and obnoxious? Yes. Being the woman who tripped a prince before dinner? Probably not the best choice.

Do they still behead people for stuff like this?

I could feel his gaze burning holes through the top of my head so I took a deep breath and raised my eyes, terrified of what I'd find looking back. Bright, pale blue eyes trapped me like a moth in a web and I'd honestly never seen someone so handsome. And yet, there was also this familiarity to him that I couldn't quite place. A few light blond curls were escaping their hold around his face which displayed high cheekbones and a jaw that could cut glass.

Rivka's hold on my arm tightened and my mouth popped open, ready to apologize for the entire mishap, but before a single syllable could escape, Torin tipped his head back and laughed. Loudly, and with his entire being. The room didn't take long to follow suit and soon everyone had devolved into giggles and chuckles. Except for me. I wasn't going to take my eyes off of him, not because he was beautiful, but because I didn't trust him. Or anyone else on this damn island.

"My lady," he said, his voice deep and melodic, betraying his more northern origins. Everyone from their kingdom had the same musical quality to the way they spoke. Torin reached for me and I looked from his

face to his hand. What did he want from me? His hand was palm up so it wasn't a handshake.

"Your hand," Isla whispered under her breath, causing me to glance at her from the corner of my eye.

"Oh, right," I said, pretending I knew what the hell was going on. I gave him my hand and I never would have thought it possible, but the man smiled, and it would've been a miracle if none of the girls in the room fainted.

His large hand dwarfed mine, and I gasped at the warmth of his skin. I was positive he was feverish. The last thing I needed was some strange illness while surrounded by strange people on an even stranger island. So I clasped his hand and rotated it, shaking it vigorously.

"So sorry for tripping you, Your Royal Highness. It was a mistake, and I am mortified." I continued pumping his arm like a total fool, but I was babbling now, and the way he blinked at me made me want to keep talking. "I'm not used to such, um—" I released his hand and gestured to my dress.

He held up both hands and chuckled again, which kind of pissed me off. What was so funny about that? I watched as he glanced at my table and then back to me.

"I do believe I'll take this empty chair if that's agreeable with the rest of the ladies here?" Torin asked, looking at the other girls, which were all nodding. He turned to the rest of the room and spoke loudly. "Nothing to see here. I just tripped. I suppose I'm a little eager to meet you all."

Applause and girlish laughter surrounded me. I *tripped* the man, and now he was going to sit at our table? What is the Goddess' name? The empty chair was next to—I did a double glance—*Belinda*? She must have planted

herself there during the tripping incident, and she looked like she was going to burst from excitement.

“Can we get the music going? This is supposed to be a party, after all!” Torin shouted, and the orchestra promptly began playing an upbeat song while the rest of the room returned to their own business. That was just fine with me—the less attention, the better. Plus, I spied kitchen staff approaching from the back of the room, weaving to different tables with giant serving platters, and my stomach growled. It seemed Torin was done with whatever conversation we’d just had, and I was hungry, so I spun in my chair, with more grace this time, and faced the table.

Isla’s eyes were comically wide as she stared at me, but then her focus shifted to where Torin was standing.

“Would you mind terribly if I brought the chair over and sat between the two of you?” he asked, and I looked back at him to find him staring at Isla.

“Not at all, Your Highness,” Isla squeaked. “It may be easier if we just moved one seat. I mean, if you agree?”

Torin grinned. “That would be perfect, my lady. I didn’t want to ask all of you to move on my account. I would have made do.”

Everyone spoke at once except for me. “It’s no problem at all!”

I sat there as Isla and three other girls moved a chair, allowing that... smooth-talking, pretty, sculptured-faced, royal snob to sit beside me.

I’d make sure he’d regret it, just as I was sure he’d do the same to me for tripping him in front of the entire room. Torin lowered himself into the seat to my left, and I could feel his gaze on me. “So...” he rumbled. I focused on my plate and waited for him to continue or for whoever he was speaking to to actually reply.

Silence rang for several uncomfortable seconds until Riv cleared her throat and kneed me under the table. I glanced at her and caught the *what the hell is wrong with you* face. Inwardly groaning, I turned to Torin. His chin was propped under his fist as he stared at me with a smirk.

“I didn’t get your name earlier,” he stated as servers placed a plethora of platters on the table.

I cleared my throat. “Ah, well, you didn’t ask for it.”

Everyone was watching the two of us while my stomach growled again now that the strong aromas of roasted meat and vegetables were so close. Fuck it. I reached for the serving spoons and started loading up my plate. Belinda’s eyes were close to falling out onto her plate as I helped myself.

“Well, I am asking now.” Torin reached for another spoon and started serving himself. At least the royal prince knew how to do that much. For his own sake, not for mine. No amount of manners, charm, or handsome faces would sway me from my reason for coming here. I had to ensure I wouldn’t be chosen.

I shoved a huge chunk of chicken into my mouth and proceeded to talk. “Mah namth Evie.”

Riv burst out with laughter which caused Isla to giggle along with her, and Belinda looked like she might puke. Good. I hoped she would.

Torin looked puzzled. The way his golden brows pinched together with his head tilted to the side, it reminded me of a dog when they were asked if they wanted something special. He stabbed a potato with his fork and stuffed the whole thing into his mouth. “Nith to meeth wou, Evie.”

I swallowed my food slowly and had to work not to laugh, so I didn’t reply. I just continued eating, noting several looks of shock between some

of the girls at our table. Goddess forbid a royal act like a heathen during dinner and talk with their mouth full!

“So, Your Highness,” Belinda cooed, gently patting her mouth with her red linen napkin. “Are you excited for The Hunt?”

“I am. I’ve been looking forward to this since I was old enough to learn about it. When you grow up seeing your relatives and friends partaking in the event, it’s hard to wait your turn.” He took a sip of his wine. “And are you ladies happy to be here? Are your living quarters suitable?”

“Oh yes, they’re lovely,” Isla said.

“I think we all feel incredibly fortunate to have been selected,” Ayla, one of the other girls who already seemed to hang off of Belinda’s skirt, chimed in.

An unceremonious snort escaped me, and I quickly covered my mouth with my napkin to cough, trying to cover my slip up.

Torin leaned in so close I could smell him. He had a smoky scent with a hint of salty sea waves. Much to my dismay, the two contrasted nicely enough. “Lady Evie, are you quite alright?” he whispered into my ear. “Shall I flag a server to bring you more water?”

“N-no,” I choked out, waving him off. “Just went down the wrong pipe.”

When he didn’t back away, I turned my head to look at him. Was he trying to intimidate me? Why were his eyes so blue?

“You’re unexpected,” he said softly, so softly I almost didn’t hear him.

A loud voice broke the trance Torin and I appeared to be in, and we all turned toward the sound across the room.

“I hope you’re all enjoying dinner! Please, eat your fill, but remember we’ll be dancing afterward!” King Ero announced, his voice carrying through the room as though it had been amplified. That’s when I noticed the

man with pitch black hair and equally dark eyes wearing a long red cloak not five feet behind Ero, a raven perched on his shoulder. The loose sleeves that covered his arms swayed as he waved his hand against his side, minimizing the attention it would draw. I gasped as soft blue light pulsed from his fingertips. A sorcerer, then.

I was fascinated by magic since I was old enough to know it existed, and my father had told me stories about magic and sorcery, but this was certainly my first experience with it.

“That’s incredible,” Isla said as soon as everyone went back to eating. “I’ve never seen magic before!”

“Aye, tricky stuff, magic. Not all of it is good, though.” Everyone turned their attention to Rivka who was staring blankly at her plate, clearly locked in some kind of memory.

Belinda sighed dramatically. “Those of higher stations are used to seeing the gifts of magic used frequently. It’s nothing to be scared about.”

Oh, sweet Goddess. At the rate she was going, I didn’t think it likely she’d make it another twenty-four hours before Riv killed her.

Torin shifted on his seat beside me as Rivka slowly snapped back to reality, her deadly glare on her new nemesis.

“There isn’t one thing in this realm that I’m afraid of.” Riv placed her hands flat on the table. I could see the muscles and tendons in her arms flexing, like an animal ready to pounce on its prey.

“Riv, have you been around magic before?” Isla asked calmly as she shuffled some food around on her plate. “I haven’t, but I’d love to hear your stories sometime?”

In the Ekpen kingdom, they had venomous snakes—but they also had people who could tame them, like beloved pets. It was particularly

dangerous if criminals mastered the skill because the snakes could be trained to strike on command. It wasn't until Rivka swung her deep brown eyes to Isla and the bitter rage faded within seconds that I realized Isla was one of those people. She had a calming influence on all that surrounded her.

That was a very valuable trait for someone to have, and with how on edge I was feeling, I knew I should stick close to Isla. I needed all the calm I could get.

Riv sighed and gave a roguish grin. "I may have a story or two I could share."

"We don't have anyone with magic in Belney, either. I wish I had been born with that ability. There's so much I would do," I said as thoughts of a fully stocked supply room for my school danced around my brain.

The table began discussing what each of them would do if they had the gift of magic. Torin had been suspiciously quiet, but he was also on his third plate of food. Where did he put it all? As slyly as possible, I peeked a quick look in his direction. The first thing I noticed was the way his leg was bouncing up and down rapidly. His free hand was tapping against the table as he continued to eat with the other. When my gaze made it up to his face, I noticed how flushed he was. Sweat dotted his forehead, and the hair that had fallen free from the leather tie that held his long hair back had begun to curl more.

His appearance and behaviors reminded me of a few gentlemen in my village who struggled with alcohol and addictive substances. Lovely. The Volos crown prince was a drunkard.

"And what about you, Your Highness?" Belinda crooned, batting her eyes from across the table at the man in question.

Torin blinked back at her and shook his head. "I am so sorry. I think I zoned out for a moment. Please forgive my rudeness, ladies."

Belinda gave a ridiculous fake giggle. "Oh, no. You have nothing to apologize for, my prince. You must be exhausted! I can't imagine what all you must've gone through to plan this momentous event!"

Riv rolled her eyes and muttered something about ass kissing under her breath.

The prince waved off Belinda's praises and reached for his goblet of water. "I've actually not done much, to be honest. I'm afraid this is all the work of my father and the kings of the other kingdoms. Of course, their councils played a large part."

"Men," I corrected.

"What was that?" Torin looked at me. "I didn't hear you."

Well, Evie. You're here for a reason. Let it out.

"You mean that men orchestrated this entire event." It wasn't a question. I knew no women sat on any of the kings' councils. They never had.

"Uh," Torin stuttered while his mouth opened and shut several times.

"I simply find it interesting that the only time women are given the time of day in this realm is during these..." I waved my hands around at the situation. "Of course, that's aside from their nightly duties as a wife."

Not even the shocked gasps broke the stare down between Torin and myself. This was exactly the thing that burned my soul, and it was difficult for me to tamp down my anger once it got bubbling. I vaguely registered the servers clearing our table and the sound of Ero's voice as he announced something about the first dance. It wasn't until Torin stood and offered me his hand that the anger within me shifted to confusion.

"Lady Evie, may I have the first dance?" he asked.

May I have the first dance? Was I intoxicated? I'd only had a half glass of wine.

A rough shove from behind had me standing quickly, causing Torin to brace me, his hands on my waist. I whipped my head around and found Riv sitting there, trying to look innocent and failing.

Torin didn't wait as he immediately tucked my arm into the crook of his elbow and began leading me through the tables to the dance floor. The number of unnecessary dirty looks I was receiving from the other women was more than I'd gotten in my entire life. I would need to watch my back after all the attention the prince was showing me. Which was confusing on its own. I'd been rude, ate like a heathen, insulted the monarchy's view on women, and yet, here I was.

King Ero was in the middle of the floor, watching proudly as his son approached. His eyes settled on me, and a cold shiver raced down my spine. Ero Volos was renowned in the realm for being ruthless. He'd been best friends with King Sova, the lost King. However, the two were rumored to have often butted heads over the way things should be handled. Which shouldn't have even been an issue because The Recurrence allowed each king to rule his lands how he saw fit.

The kingdom of Sova never recovered from the loss of its royal family. Most people relocated to other kingdoms, and it was decided between the remaining kings that each kingdom would send a small group of guards to watch over the palace. Any issues that may have arisen were to be dealt with by the kings of the other four kingdoms. I was always curious about what would happen if one of the kings decided they wanted more for themselves.

It wasn't hard to see which of the four thought themselves above all the others. Ero's eyes twinkled in the candlelight as he took in the scene before him.

"Gentlemen, please escort your dance partners to the center of the floor. For our guests who aren't familiar, the first dance is a treasured tradition. It was during my very own first dance that I knew I would marry Queen Corinna."

Applause broke out for the Queen, who wasn't here. None of them were, which I found very strange, especially considering their sons were choosing their wives.

King Ero continued speaking when the applause died down. "In fact, an average of three women chosen for the first dance end up betrothed by the end of our stay here at The Roaring Keep." He turned and took in the group of us, partnered off and standing at attention. "Yes, I do believe I'm looking at some future royalty here," he boasted with a grin.

My stomach churned as once again his gaze settled on me. *Absolutely not.*

"We'll begin with a waltz. After the first round, you may switch with another dancer on the floor. At the conclusion of the first dance, I invite everyone to mingle and have a great time! Let us begin!"

Slow music began creeping into the air. I was overwhelmed. There were at least twenty couples on the floor if all the men had chosen partners. Where was I supposed to stand?

"Do you know how to waltz, my lady?" Torin asked, and I looked up at him, coming face to face with a boyish grin.

"I'm a teacher, Your Highness. Not only do I teach academics to all the children in my village, but I also teach them the basic ballroom dances," I

said, my tone biting.

His eyebrows lifted with interest, and I groaned internally. Why did I give him so much information about myself? Stupid.

“A teacher?” He began guiding us across the floor to our starting point. “That is actually the least surprising thing you’ve told me all evening.”

Curious, I placed my hand on his shoulder. “What is that supposed to mean?”

He shrugged. “Just that you have a bit of an... authoritativeness to you.” His large hand spanned across the lace and satin of my bodice, right where my waist dipped in.

“I’m direct. I suppose that’s not something you’re used to?”

The music picked up and we began gliding across the floor. “You do know who my father is, don’t you?” he teased, and I rolled my eyes.

“Everyone knows who your father is.”

“Ah, well then, I’m not sure where you got the idea that I’m not used to authority.” At that moment, we paused in time with the song as Torin dipped me backward with elegance and stared me right in the eyes. “I’m inclined to think that between the two of us, it may be *you* who has more issue with it.”

My mouth popped open. The audacity. He smiled and raised me back up, tugging my body closer to his than it was before.

“What? Nothing to say to that, Miss Evie?” he taunted as we spun, my dress swishing and twirling in time with the other women.

“You know nothing about me, Your Highness.”

We stepped away from each other and then circled. “And you think you know me because of things you’ve heard. How is that fair?”

I laughed. There were so many things that were unfair in life. Being born a prince and spoon-fed royal bullshit your entire life wasn't one of them.

"It's not about fair." I gasped as the dancing finally started to tire me out. It had been a long time since I'd done a full waltz, and it was surprising how quickly continuous dancing really took it out of a person. I twirled as Torin held my right arm up.

He chuckled. "Then what is it about?"

"When I figure that out, I'll let you know."

"Oh? How will you let me know?"

I thought about that and realized I'd have no way of contacting him even if I wanted to. "You know, by raven. Or a pathetically short letter."

It was almost time to switch partners. Fantastic. Another royal I'd have to endure for the remainder of the song.

"You're wrong, you know?" I looked up into his eyes. Registering my confusion, he continued. "You said that women are only given the time of day during these events."

"I'm not wrong about that," I defended.

Torin twisted us so that he was behind me. My head bent, arching my neck, just like every other woman on the floor. Suddenly, I felt his warm breath on my throat, eliciting goosebumps to erupt all over my body.

"Not that part." He paused, and another breath of air teased my skin. My heart was pounding so hard that I thought I might pass out. "The nightly duties of a wife part."

My eyes opened wide and locked firmly onto a pair of deep forest green eyes. The biggest man I'd ever set eyes on, a mere six feet away, stared at me with suspicion as Torin whispered into my ear. My face was hot enough

to brand a cow's hide, and I wanted to avert my eyes, to hide my reaction to Torin's words and closeness. But I couldn't look away.

"My wife won't think of it as a duty," he growled seductively, his hands tightening on my waist. "Nor will it be strictly a nighttime activity."

Sweet Goddess, I was going to faint. Heat flooded my body so intensely that the room seemed to spin. The man with thick dark hair was glaring now.

"No," Torin rumbled, his chest vibrating against my back. "She'll love every second of it. She'll want it all the time." His right hand began moving upward, nearly to my breast.

The large man stepped away from his dance partner, which snapped me out of the trance I'd been placed in. It was time to switch partners. Spinning around to Torin, I found him just as red faced as I was and breathing heavily.

"You told me I was unexpected earlier at dinner." I hated how breathy my words were, and he stared down at me like he was seconds away from dragging me off to a dark corner. A small smirk was tugging at the corner of his mouth as he studied the way he'd affected me.

"Unfortunately, *Your Royal Highness*," I hissed the title as if the words burned my tongue. "You're exactly what I expected."

If I had a lick of artistic talent, I knew I'd have been drawing that dumbstruck expression on his face at my insult. I spun around and debated making a run for it instead of finishing this Goddess awful dance, and yelped when I slammed into a tree.

"May I?" the tree asked as I stared up at the man from earlier with the green eyes. Torin was a big man, but this guy? He was massive. Wider,

bulkier, and a bit taller. I dropped my eyes to the hand he was offering me, noting that his hand would probably cover my entire face.

“Dair,” Torin spoke, clearly coming out of his stunned state. “I’m not done with her.”

“Yes, you are.” I slammed my hand into Dair’s open one, putting an end to Torin’s protests.

Dair’s dancing partner, who had been silent the entire time, stepped in happily, stealing away Torin. He couldn’t refuse her without looking like the asshole he clearly was, so the two of them disappeared into the group of moving bodies.

I reached for Dair’s shoulder, finding it hard to reach. “Goddess, you’re tall.”

“You are not,” he deadpanned, and I didn’t know if he was being humorous or not. I raised my hand to his arm, and we started dancing. Immediately, I noticed differences between Torin and this man. Torin was thinner, though his arm was hard, revealing the muscle that hid beneath his jacket. This royal was wide and solid, and while his arm was by no means soft, he simply had more mass than my previous dance partner. He also moved more rigidly, like he was following instructions on how to dance, instead of feeling the movements and the music, and I let him lead me for a few moments, getting used to his style.

It was hard fighting the urge to look up at him. He had a beard that was trimmed short, which suited him. Prince Torin had this almost ethereal appearance to his features that were hard to look away from, but this man was ruggedly handsome, and I found that equally appealing. The giant didn’t talk for at least a minute while I racked my brain for what I could think of in order to figure out who he was. He was wearing the Oberon

house colors of green and gold, and the crown on his head told me that he was a direct descendant of King Aric Oberon. There was Alasdair and Alden. The heir and the younger brother. Torin had called him Dair, so this must be the heir.

“You’re Alasdair Oberon?” I asked, throwing him off for a moment after our silence.

“I am. Dair for short. I apologize for not introducing myself immediately. My mind is a little... off this evening,” he explained. “What is your name, my lady?”

“No need to apologize. I’m Evie, from Belney. The one who accidentally tripped Prince Torin earlier,” I said, pointing my thumb over my shoulder toward the table I’d been sitting at. Realizing I’d brought the situation up, I cursed in my head. What if he thought I was making fun of Torin? I was about to apologize for even mentioning the humiliating incident, but a deep chuckle erupted from Dair’s chest.

“That was glorious. Torin is my best friend, and regardless of the fact that we’re no longer teenage boys, I do still enjoy seeing him getting taken down a peg or two.”

I smiled at his words, and surprisingly it wasn’t forced. “I’m willing to bet it doesn’t happen often?”

“Goddess, no. It’s good for his ego, though. Everyone needs theirs in check from time to time.” Dair and I twisted together, and our height difference wasn’t a hindrance in the slightest. I stepped closer to him when he pulled me toward his chest, enough for me to “accidentally” step on his foot.

“I am so sorry!” I proclaimed, moving back and putting the appropriate space between us. He didn’t move though. He stopped dancing completely,

as though I'd glued his foot to the floor instead of stepping on it. His face may as well have been carved from marble with the lack of expression. Nervously, I raised my hand and placed it on his arm. "Dair?"

Slowly, his deep green eyes slid to mine, and they seemed to flash with a burst of... yellow? My own eyes widened, on the verge of gasping, when it was cut short. Leaning down, Dair inhaled deeply, his nose close to my neck. What was with these guys pulling stunts like this? Were they used to taking such liberties with women at court?

"What is that scent?" he asked, awakening goosebumps along my arms.

"W-what scent?"

"Your scent, my lady. It has been puzzling me all evening," he replied, confusing me even further. However, earlier, when Torin was at my neck like this, I knew he was playing with me. Toying with the fresh meat on the market. With Dair, though, this felt predatory. Like at any moment, he might lunge forward and bite me.

All of the men here must be drunk. Two for two now, they seemed to have a switch within that caused them to go from reasonable gentlemen to complete brutes.

"Well, I don't know the answer, my lord. I'm not wearing any perfume, nor did the servants provide scented bathing soap. If the scent is unpleasant, I can excuse myself." I made to do just that when his massive hand caught mine and pulled me back to him in beat with the music. He didn't skip a single move as he maneuvered us around the other dancers, staring down at me the entire time.

"You misunderstand me, Miss Evie. Forgive me for being forward, but I think you may be the most enticing thing I've ever smelled in my life."

“Um...” I didn’t know what to say to that. What a bizarre compliment. “You smell... pleasing as well.”

Dair’s nose wrinkled at my statement. “Pleasing? Only *pleasing*?” He was exasperated as he turned his head to his shoulder and inhaled. “This is some of the most expensive cologne in the realm!”

I shrugged and inhaled him. “I mean, it is nice... but below that, you have some natural hints of pine and—” I paused and took another deep breath. What was the other thing? “Like freshly dug soil.”

He frowned. “Dirt. You think I smell like dirt?”

I laughed as we moved to the center of the floor. “It’s one of my favorite smells, actually. I garden with my father often. We grow all of our own vegetables and some fruit. I love when my hands are covered in rich soil, and my knuckles ache from the work of the day. I enjoy doing work that gives me immediate visual results...” I trailed off, realizing that I’d been rambling and, once again, giving away more of myself than I’d wanted.

“I see. So you need immediate gratification?” His tone was teasing. He was flirting with me.

“What good is doing anything if you don’t get anything satisfying in return?”

He lifted the corner of his mouth. “Sometimes, the best things are worth the wait. When your hard work finally pays off, it can be—” He paused, and I held my breath, desperate for some reason to hear what he was going to say. The way he stared down at me with searing heat told me he wasn’t talking about gardening. The breath I’d been holding shakily rushed out of me when he brushed a rogue curl away from my eyes. “The most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen.”

The music was slowing, our dance nearly over, and I felt trapped in a bubble that only held the two of us. Twice now, I'd been blindsided by boyish charm, and in that moment, under Dair's spell, I found that I didn't mind.

"And do you?" I whispered, and he waited for me to continue. I swallowed thickly. What was I doing? "*Work* hard?"

The only thing I'd ever seen smolder in my life was a fire, but now I could add the look I was getting in response to my question.

"Oh, I can be relentless," Dair replied as the final note came from the violin.

My head was swimming, like there wasn't enough oxygen in the room. All there was for me to breathe was him. We stopped moving, along with everybody else, and I felt a hand brush against the row of green buttons that ran up my spine, breaking the spell. Turning my head, I found Torin standing right behind me, close enough to hide the fact that he was touching me. His partner was on his right, oblivious to everything, with her eyes pinned to the dais the kings were getting situated upon.

"But what of duty?" Dair asked abruptly.

"Duty?" I repeated, confused by his question and trying to ignore the playful fingertips at my back.

"Sometimes results aren't seen for years, and one has to continue their work, regardless of gratification," he explained. Ah, now we were talking about his role as a royal. A future king.

I spoke loud enough for both of the royals I was pinned between to hear. "The only person I owe anything to is myself. Probably better that you're the royal here and not me."

The fingertips halted, and Dair's brow pinched. No matter how attractive they were, I wasn't here for them. It was better if they heard it loud and clear; I had no interest in belonging to one of them.

The crowd began clapping, and other women rose from their chairs, eager to get on the floor to meet the men. I noticed Isla staring in my direction with a concerned expression, so I gave her a small smile.

That girl was so kind I was actually quite worried that she would get eaten alive by the mean girls... but then I spotted Riv coming to stand beside her, and I knew my unease was misplaced. She'd be more than okay.

"That concludes our first dance!" King Ero said from his throne. "You were all magnificent! We invite everyone to enjoy the dance floor at this time. The party shall conclude at eleven!" He waved his hand for the orchestra to start up once more, and I needed to get the hell out of there. Women were already encroaching on the two men beside me.

"Ah, it appears you are needed," I said to Dair, ignoring Torin and his phantom light touches. He looked behind him and saw the row of smiling women. "I'm just going to freshen up if you'll excuse me—" I squeezed between Dair and Torin, leaving them to stare at each other.

I vaguely registered both of them calling my name, but once I broke through the wall of people, I wasn't stopping. Uncomfortable shoes be damned. I recalled seeing a powder room when we were being herded into the ballroom earlier. I just needed to find it. Determined, I pushed through a panel of heavy drapes and discovered the hallway. Perfect.

Rows of ornate frames displayed oil portraits of generations of royals. Weapons were mounted between each picture, some of them so strange looking that I wouldn't even know how to use them. Not that I'd want to... Oh Goddess, was that dried blood on an axe?

I picked up my pace and rounded the corner, bumping right into someone. I stumbled back a few steps but was able to keep my balance. "I am so sorry," I said at the same time the other person spoke.

"Kael!" I whisper-shouted, promptly wrapping my arms around him.

"Hi, Eves," he replied, returning my hug, which made me want to cry for some reason, so I held on tighter. "Hey, what's wrong? Look at me."

He tilted my face up and studied me. *Do not cry, Evie.* My lip quivered, despite my efforts.

"I'll kill him," Kael said. "What the fuck did he do to you?"

I shook my head. "Nothing. I think I'm just overwhelmed." I looked around, making sure that we were alone. The last thing I needed was my only guard to be executed for making death threats about a royal.

Kael continued his assessment as though his piercing blue eyes could see the truth of my soul. Finally, he nodded and dropped his hand. "It is a lot, that's for sure. I had to excuse myself when I saw Prince Torin hit the ground. It may have been the funniest thing I've seen this year."

I had every intention of reprimanding him but when I saw the way his blue eyes twinkled, I couldn't stop the laughter that broke free of my throat. "Oh Goddess, it was absolutely hysterical!"

Kael laughed the way he always did, with his entire body and soul. "I had a hard time not shouting 'TIMBER' just to prevent him from squashing some poor unsuspecting woman."

I clutched my stomach, which was now painful from all of the food, dancing, and laughter. "Okay, okay, enough of that, or I am going to pop every one of the fifty buttons from the back of my corset."

He pulled me against him, hugging me once more. All of the excitement seemed to drain from my body as I listened to the sound of Kael's heart

beating steadily. I glanced up and noticed his neck was flushed. “Kael? Are you okay? You look a little flushed and you do feel pretty warm...”

“Yeah, that’s part of why I had to leave the party. It was too hot in there. I feel better now, don’t worry about me.” He winked and playfully squeezed me tightly, making me laugh.

A throat cleared, and the two of us flew apart like opposite ends of magnets.

“Are we interrupting something?”

Fuck. I knew that voice. Of all the people...

“Of course not,” I said smoothly, flashing a fake smile at Belinda’s smug face. There were two other girls with her, looking scandalized.

“I know you’re not accustomed to acceptable behavior for women at royal functions,” she said slowly as she placed her hand on her popped hip. “But fraternizing with a guard when you’re only here for the men currently in the ballroom? The *royal* men?”

The red haired woman to her right shook her head and covered her mouth as though the mere thought was enough to send her dinner back up her throat.

“Now, wait just one minute,” Kael said, taking a step forward. “It’s not like that.”

I put my hand out to block him from advancing on the women. It was clear to see that he was offended by Belinda's accusation. I didn't blame him one bit, but we had to be careful how we played this because, from what I'd seen of the blonde woman this far, she was a snake. She was definitely willing to do anything she could to get to the top.

“There's nothing to be alarmed about,” I stated matter of factly. “Kael is my guard. What you just witnessed was nothing more than a friendly hug. I

was feeling overwhelmed by the events of the evening, and that's all there is to it.”

The three women stared back at me with disbelief in their eyes. I braced myself for a catty comment from Belinda, but instead, she just sighed. “Well, thank goodness.” She placed her hand over her chest dramatically. “I'm glad to know that it wasn't what it looked like because I can only imagine how that would go over!” She was trying to sound sincere but was failing horribly. I didn't trust her, and now I would have to keep an even closer eye on her. I was positive the ramifications of such an accusation would be more detrimental to Kael than it ever would to me.

“Right, well, now that that's settled, we should probably get back into the ballroom.” Kael offered me his arm, and I looped mine through, promptly leaving the women standing in the hallway. Kael leaned in and whispered, “That woman is a shark.”

We re-entered the party, which was in full swing. “Yeah,” I mumbled. “Tell me about it. She's been nothing but drama the entire time we've been here, and it's only been one day.”

“Well,” Kael said. “You're going to have to watch your back, but then again, we already knew that coming into this. Nobody's safe, and everybody's looking out for themselves.”

Not one person was sitting at the tables; everybody was moving around, including the guards and servants. The sounds of laughter, talking, and music hung heavy in the air. Despite the sensory overload, I actually felt relieved now that the attention was off of me. It could stay that way, as far as I was concerned. I had one goal here: to get the money at the end and get back home to my father.

My heart pinched painfully at the thought of him in the way I betrayed him to come here. I hoped that he would understand. We needed the money though, and this was the perfect chance for me to get it.

“There you are!” Rivka’s smoky voice came from behind us, and both Kael and I turned to find her carefully cradling three glasses filled with bubbly alcohol. “Drinks?!” she asked, pushing a glass into each of our hands. “I propose a toast.”

Kael grinned at that, raising his glass. “What are we toasting?”

“Hmm,” she hummed. “That’s a good question.” Her dark eyes scanned the room. “So many options...”

“Well, don’t hurt yourself thinking about it, dear.” Kael joked.

Riv’s eyes flashed at the nickname. “Don’t call me dear. Now hurry so I can wash out the taste of vomit with this alcohol.”

I laughed, loving everything about Riv and her personality. “I have a toast,” I started, lifting my glass. Kael and Riv followed my lead, and I cleared my throat. “To our beautiful realm. May our next rulers be as merciful and generous as our current ones. And to new friends!” I added, smiling.

“Here, here!” Riv shouted, clearly having already been enjoying the open bar. All three of us clinked our glasses together and downed every last drop. I was positive that wasn’t appropriate for a lady to be doing, but the night was still fairly young. I had already been through enough, and I was ready to drink.

“Whatever this drink is,” Riv mused as she stared down into her empty glass, “it is bloody delicious!”

“I second that,” Kael declared, looking around the room and grinning when he spotted a server carrying a tray of full glasses. “Be right back. I’m

going to get us a refill.”

“So,” Riv murmured as Kael disappeared through the chaos. “I saw you dancing with both Prince Torin and Prince Alasdair.” She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively, and I rolled my eyes back at her. “What?!” she asked, throwing her hands up innocently. “All I’m saying is that your dance with Prince Torin looked a little saucy there at the end.”

I felt my cheeks heating with embarrassment. “Damn that man. He’s a scoundrel. That is not the way that I typically behave, whether in public or private! If any man thinks he’s going to get close to me like that, he will have to work for it first. For many months.”

Riv boomed with laughter. “I knew I liked you,” she stated, bumping my shoulder with hers. I admired the room, which was much easier to do from the sidelines.

“Oh wow,” Riv said, shocked. “Look at our sweet little mouse out there. It seems she finally caught the attention of a man she was hoping to dance with.” She pointed through the crowd, and my eyes landed on Isla, currently smiling ear to ear as one of the Ekpen brothers spun her around like a princess.

“She would make a good ruler.”

“I think so, too,” Riv agreed. “Though she’s so tender-hearted, I am concerned that she might be taken advantage of. So if Isla does win, she will need to have friends watching out for her, and I intend to do just that.”

I nodded. “I have the same worries. But I believe our realm is in dire need of someone with a pure heart. And Isla is the perfect person.”

“It may be difficult though,” Riv murmured after a moment, and I turned to her curiously. “All I mean is that she’s so... good.”

I focused on Isla. Her tan skin and deep brown eyes that were practically glowing with excitement... I hoped that if she did end up on a throne, she'd stay true to herself and that her kindness would infect those around her.

"Here we are, ladies," Kael interrupted, squeezing between us and handing each of us another glass. "Oh, Goddess!" he exclaimed. "Is that a tray of giant shrimp?"

Riv whooped. "Aye, it is, and it's got our names all over it."

Kael raised an eyebrow at me in question, and I shook my head. "No, thank you. Shellfish isn't my favorite if given the choice."

The two of them frowned, looking somewhat disappointed. "Go, go!" I shooed them. "Go eat your shrimp. I'm just going to stand here and drink my drink while I people watch."

"Only if you're sure—" Kael double checked.

"Please." I waved them off. "Go."

The two of them practically raced through the ballroom to get to the shrimp, and I giggled but stopped quickly. My corset was feeling tight, and unfortunately, there was nothing I could do to loosen it since it wasn't tied in the back. If that weren't the case, I could just let it out a smidge. But the designer of this gown was a monster who clearly had an obsession with buttons. My breasts were practically falling out, but I still couldn't take a deep breath. I sat my glass down and attempted to pull the dress to get it to stretch a bit around my armpits.

"Is everything okay, my lady?" a deep voice asked, and I quickly dropped my arms.

"Oh, yes! I'm sorry." I found myself looking into a familiar set of green eyes with a slightly different face. He had the same olive skin as Dair, so

this had to be his younger brother. His face was thinner, more youthful, but he was every bit as tall as his sibling.

He smirked, an expression that would have looked completely out of place on his older brother's more stoic face.

"I don't know why they insist on making these so tight," I complained, vaguely concerned I was being a bit too candid with him, but I was here to break rules and shock people.

"Is there anything I can do?"

I huffed and glanced at his concerned face. Not scandalized, then. "Not unless you can undo about twenty-five tiny buttons, then I'm afraid not."

Oh Goddess.

I realized what I said after it had already been spoken.

"Well, I may be able to, but I can't guarantee they'll all be intact afterward."

My eyes flew to his and found him smirking. "N-no. I didn't mean—" I started. "I mean, that's not..."

Fuck. What was I even trying to say? It was like my brain had just entered a frozen state, and he just continued to stare at me with that playful expression.

"Don't worry, my lady. I know you weren't insinuating that I remove your dress in the midst of a royal ball." Alden smiled mischievously. "I saw you earlier. Dancing with my older brother, Alasdair."

I grimaced at the reminder of being in the spotlight and fought the urge to crawl beneath the nearest table for the remainder of the evening. "Yes, that was me."

"And she also had the first dance with my son!" King Ero came up behind me and stood beside Dair's brother with a serious face.

I wasn't expecting to meet King Ero face to face, and any and all plans of being a pest dissipated immediately. I didn't want to be chosen, but I did want to live. "Oh, Your Majesty!" I curtsied. "It's so nice to meet you."

"You as well. I'm afraid I didn't get your name from my son yet."

"Forgive me. I should have introduced myself already." My heart was racing. I was more nervous about meeting the king than I had been the entire time since I left my home. "My name is Evelyn Quinn. Most people call me Evie. I'm truly sorry about the trip."

Both the king and Dair's brother looked at each other, confused.

"I didn't mean to trip him! Prince Torin, I mean. I was just excited and I spun around too quickly and—"

King Ero held up his hand. "You have nothing to apologize for, my dear. Accidents happen. I see that you have met Alden?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Yes," I replied. "Though I hadn't gotten his name yet, just that he is Dair's younger brother."

"That he is," King Ero confirmed. "And he's a damn fine man, though his manners seemed to have slipped." He eyed Alden. "But, lack of formal introductions aside, any of the men here this evening would be worthy husbands."

I found myself nodding, though in my head I was gagging.

"What area are you from, Miss Evie?" Alden asked.

"Oh, I'm from the Faolan Kingdom. A little town called Belney."

"Ah yes, I have heard of that before. Some of the best wine I've ever had in my life was from that town! From a little winery..." He paused, racking his brain. "I think it was called Belney Barrels?"

“That's it!” I confirmed. “That winery is run by Mary and James, some dear friends of mine. And I have two of their children in my class.”

“A teacher, then?” King Ero mused. “Such a noble profession. You must have the patience of a saint.”

I was feeling pretty *impatient* at the moment, to be honest. I couldn't decipher whether his tone was mocking or not.

“Yes, well, when one works with children, patience is a virtue.” I picked up my drink and took a small sip. “Though I believe that can be said for most any profession.”

Alden chuckled. “Right you are, Miss Evie. Do you enjoy teaching?”

“I really do. It's very rewarding, and since I'm from such a small village, it's great to get to see the children develop and grow. I have all ages in my classroom, so that can be difficult, keeping everybody engaged and not bored.” I took a deep breath and smiled at the two men. “But we get by, when we have enough supplies,” I added at the last moment, speaking so quickly that my words ran together.

“What was that?” Alden questioned. “Are you in need of supplies?”

Oh, sweet summer child. If you only knew.

“We are in need. *Desperate* need. In fact, the day that I was selected to come here, I actually broke my final piece of chalk. Of course, I'm not there now to know whether or not a delivery has been made, but I have been requesting supplies for nearly six months now.”

King Ero appeared scandalized at this news. “Well, my dear, that is simply unacceptable. I will ensure personally that whatever you need will be delivered promptly. If you'll excuse me, I will go speak with King Eamon right now and get this sorted out immediately. We want all children in the realm to be able to receive a good education.”

Whether the king was serious or not, I couldn't really tell. I guess I would find out soon enough once I returned to the school. "Thank you so much, Your Majesty, that would be amazing."

The king nodded and walked away in King Eamon's direction. Corvus joined him, seemingly popping up from the shadows. The man was always lurking it seemed.

"You know," Alden said as he leaned against the table. "I think one day I'd like to try teaching also."

"Really?" My voice sounded much more skeptical than was polite, but that comment had caught me very off guard.

"You seem surprised."

I shrugged. "I mean, aren't there Royal tutors or something who do all that?"

Alden laughed. "The perk about being the younger brother means fewer responsibilities." When he saw my eyebrows rise at his flippant attitude toward being royalty, he quickly added, "Now, don't get me wrong. I do a lot to help my father and Dair, but it is nice being able to have my own life as well. I see how stressed my brother already is, and he isn't even a ruler yet."

I had no clue if he were being genuine about anything he'd just told me. "If being a teacher is what you truly want, then I sincerely hope that you get a chance to try it."

To be honest, I couldn't picture any of these men as teachers. The fact of the matter was that ninety-nine percent of the teachers in the realm were women. Once again, showing that men felt above my position. So I wasn't sure if Alden was serious or if he was just playing a game like everybody else in this room. Even now, I could hear the fake laughter and the giggling,

and I could see the forced smiles as people danced and held conversations based out of necessity versus an organic situation. Did they honestly think this was enough time for everybody to know whether they wanted to marry somebody else?

I was struggling trying to wrap my head around the entire thing. Some of these poor women were going to end up trapped in a life, married to men they knew nothing about. Everyone was on their best behavior, their masks firmly in place.

What would happen when the masks came off behind closed doors?



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placeholder

CHAPTER SIX

The evening was proving to be much more difficult than I had anticipated. There were so many women, and they were constantly swooning over me. Granted, as I looked around, I was not the only Royal being fawned over. I barely had a chance to speak with any of my friends, having been passed off from one woman to another, and it seemed things were getting more aggressive as time went on.

I wasn't joking when I told Dair I was over this. Yeah, I was only nineteen, but I'd had my fun with more women than I could count. It wasn't like I was looking for some sappy epic romance, either. I just needed to find someone with a pretty face who found me attractive enough to let me put my babies in her. Bloody hell, that sounded crass... but it was the truth. That's why we were here, and as if planned by the Goddess herself, there wasn't a single woman in the room who didn't fit those two requirements.

The woman currently in my arms had told me her name was Alice. I glanced down at her curly blonde hair and long eyelashes. Freckles dotted her nose, and she had the perfect lips. She blinked shyly as I considered her as my wife. What would that be like? King Torin and Queen Alice... or

maybe it was Alyssa. Definitely something with an 'A'. In my current state of mind, I considered it a win that I even remembered that much about her. My beast was loving the attention, even if I wasn't completely into it. He wanted all of these ladies for himself; how ridiculous.

I glided Abby across the dance floor, and that's when I spotted my father, Alden, and Evie having a chummy conversation by one of the bars. *Well, now that doesn't bode well. Goddess only knows what he's saying.* My father had a tendency to just say whatever popped into his brain. He was a king after all, but I didn't need him talking me up to anyone. His snide comments of late had been becoming more frequent, and they were starting to sting more than they ever had in the past.

So I liked to have fun? Big fucking deal. I was going to be a king, and if I didn't have fun now, then when would I? No, I wouldn't be some bitter old king who'd never lived his life. I was going to live mine to the fullest before I was forced to take the responsibility I'd been born into. Father always acted like I was lazy, out of control, and immature, but all of my friends were that way. Except for one—his favorite, Alasdair—my lifelong best friend. Our personalities were so different, and our friendship really gave truth to the saying, 'opposites attract'.

I saw my father's eyebrows raise as Evie seemed to be ranting about something. I had to admit that the girl had some fire in her, and the way she spoke exactly how she felt was refreshing. There weren't many women like that in court. I had to admit to myself that I not only found her beautiful, but *fascinating*.

She'd tripped me, ignored me, talked with her mouth stuffed full of food, discussed inappropriate things, and had outright refused my advances. Why then did I want nothing more than to charge over to her right now and see

what else I could do to rile her up? No, I couldn't do that, and not only because my father would see right through me, but ultimately, this was a lifelong commitment. Not only to me but to my kingdom and to the realm. I had to be sure that the woman I chose would be able to handle the stress of running a kingdom and all the other duties that would be required of her.

"Your Highness?"

I tore my eyes away from where my father was and looked down at the cute blonde in my arms. "Yes, my lady?"

"Have you been listening to anything I've said?" Amanda asked me sheepishly.

"Please accept my sincerest apologies. I got distracted for a moment, and it's been such a long evening already."

Her thumb began making circles on my arm where she was gripping me tightly. Her cheeks flushed pink as she smiled up at me, and her brown eyes twinkled. "I'm sure you're exhausted, Prince Torin. If you want to, we could take a break?"

Did she mean a break or a *break*? As one of her golden eyebrows lifted, I knew which one she meant. Was she honestly propositioning me on the dance floor amidst dozens of other women who could potentially end up being my wife? Did I care?

Nope. I didn't.

"Lead the way, my lady," I said, smirking.

Hand in hand, I was practically dragged to a dark alcove while my inner beast was preening at all of the attention.

"Prince Torin, I would be lying if I said I hadn't dreamed of this exact night since I was old enough to know who you were," Abigail cooed, running her hands up my chest.

“Is that so? What did you dream of?” My hand skimmed the dip of her waist, the smooth satin of her deep crimson gown made it very easy to feel the warmth of her skin.

“Of your hands on me, just like this.” She was now pressed firmly against my body. “I dreamt of being in your bed, doing whatever you desired...”

I chuckled and pushed aside a few wayward curls, exposing the length of her neck which she arched so beautifully for me. How could a man resist such smooth, unmarred skin? My nose brushed against her, and she whimpered. Fucking whimpered.

Bite her. Mark her. Bite her. Bite.

My eyes flew open, and I took a step away from Allison. What the hell was that? The voice within my head had been nothing but snarls and deep growls. My heart raced as I shook my head, as though the motion might cause the disturbing thoughts to fall out.

“My prince? Are you okay?”

Sweat beaded on my forehead and I felt entirely too warm. “Is it warmer in here all of a sudden?”

Her eyes rounded as she stammered. “W-what?”

Great, the woman was now panicking.

A hand gripped my arm, and I spun to see who the hell would grab me in such a way, only to find Taj there, grinning. “Torin! There you are, mate!” He glanced down at Alisha with a softened expression. “Miss Eliza, you’ll have to excuse my rude behavior. I need to steal my friend for a toast. Please, come find us in a bit.”

I frowned. Not an ‘A’ name after all. At least I was close.

“It’s not a problem, my lord. I will do that, thank you,” Eliza said, curtsying and then practically sprinting away.

Taj took a step back from me, his eyes observing me as if I were a puzzle that needed solving. “Torin, you are ready to burst.”

Well, that was an accurate observation. I wiped my forehead with my silk pocket square. “What gave me away? The endless sweating?”

We were joined by Mosi and Ciar, who came bearing glasses of liquor. Taj took his glass from Ciar, and Mose handed me mine.

Taj swirled the liquor within his glass momentarily before responding to my question. “I know how I feel right now. Each minute that passes, I feel like I’m losing more control... and yes, the sweating.”

All four of us laughed because, yeah, we looked like hell.

"I do believe you called me over here for a toast?" I asked Taj.

He laughed and shook his head, his locs swaying with the motion. "Indeed, indeed. Gents, I just wanted to take a moment to acknowledge this momentous occasion." His tone turned serious, and we all straightened our shoulders, years of being trained on the importance of posture kicking in. "Tonight, we become men. The men we were always meant to be. We don't know what the outcome of The Hunt will be, nor how we will be changed after the merge with our animals, but I'd like to think that regardless, our bonds as royals will be strong enough that our friendships and relationships as allies will continue."

Nerves fluttered in my stomach. The ramifications of shifting, of becoming one with our beasts, were unknown. Some men remained unchanged after The Hunt... and some? Some seemed to become wholly different men. My father always said that The Hunt—the shift—revealed

your true self. There's no fighting it. Taj was right to be considering those things.

He cleared his throat and raised his glass. "To friends and the realm. May our houses never fall or falter in the face of whatever comes our way!"

Mosi cheered, and I nodded, raising my own glass. "Here, here." The four of us clinked our glasses and sealed the deal with a hefty swallow.

"Do you think we'll be much different? After?" Ciar questioned, his golden eyes tracking each minuscule movement of everyone within his vision. A Faolan trait, one that would give his family name away without a single word. Their house had the best trackers in the realm, and they were often utilized in searches for criminals or missing people.

I shrugged. "There's no way to know... I'd like to think that the men we are by now are our true selves. I'm just glad that we're finally at this point and the endless questions of 'what if' will come to an end. We've literally waited our entire lives to know the answers we are soon to discover."

"And that, my friends, is cause for celebration!" Mosi boomed, clinking his glass against Ciar's once more and downing the rest of his drink. "Now, as much fun as this has been, I have an urgent need to get to know more of these beautiful women. Time is dwindling, don't miss out." With a wink, he spun on his heel and waded through the crowd, searching for a woman to dance with.

"You know? I do believe my brother has the right idea," Taj proclaimed as he also finished his drink. "Time to find a wife, boys."

My mind immediately drifted back to Evie. Where did she get to, anyway? I glanced over to where I'd last seen her, talking with my father. She was gone.

"I'm off to bribe the band to play something a bit more upbeat. This shite is criminal." Ciar glanced at Taj and me. "And if anyone's got a problem with me taking this tie off, tell them they can shove it up their arse, yeah?"

Taj roared with laughter as we watched our friend struggle with his tie. "Sure thing, I'll tell your father exactly that."

Having finally won the fight, Ciar balled it up, launched it in Taj's face, then ran away, laughing maniacally.

"Is he serious right now?" Taj asked me, half-humored and half-shocked.

We watched his bright red hair disappear into the crowd of people, and I shrugged. "I stopped trying to figure out how any Faolan thinks. Just... go with it, my friend." I clapped Taj on the back. "Go find a bride, and remember, don't be late. Our fathers wouldn't like that."

A flash of green caught my eye, and I left my friends without another word. I needed to talk to her again...

"Your Royal Highness," a voice said a second before a tall blonde stepped directly in front of my path. A very beautiful blonde.

I smiled. "My lady, are you having a nice evening?"

"Please, call me Belinda," she replied, revealing a devastatingly white smile.

"Belinda, then," I replied, rolling the name around. "It's very nice to meet you."

"I was hoping we might be able to get one dance in together? I know you're so very busy, and a lot of people are demanding of your attention..." She dropped her eyes, looking embarrassed for some reason.

Before I knew what I was doing, I reached for her hand. "I choose who I give my attention to, my lady... and I would love a dance."

Her blue eyes lit up. "Oh, thank you, my prince."

"Shall we?" I swung my arm out, gesturing to the dance floor. Since her other hand was already secured in my grasp, I gave her an encouraging squeeze.

Belinda seemed to glide across the floor as I escorted her to the center. She was beautiful, poised, and her manners were astounding.

A new song started playing, a slower tune with deep notes from the cello. We moved together like we'd done this dance a thousand times before.

"You're a wonderful dancer, Prince Torin," she said breathily as I pulled her back in against my chest.

"You are not without skill yourself, my lady. You are experienced. Tell me, where do you come from?"

"I grew up within the walls of Andaros."

"You're Andarian? Really? I can't believe we've never crossed paths then." So not only was she beautiful and well-mannered, she was from my kingdom. Andaros was our capital and the largest city in the kingdom. Our castle was positioned in the center, built atop a large hill, towering over the homes and shops of our people below.

"My whole family are proud Andarians. I've attended all of my courses—taught by the best teachers. I'm fluent in several languages and know how to party plan. It's a bit of a passion of mine."

I raised a brow, more interested in her now that I knew she was Andarian. "A passion for parties, hmm? And how does this one fare?"

"It's the best party I've ever been to and likely ever will attend. I can't imagine anything more spectacular!"

I chuckled. "Any one of the prince's weddings will be far more outrageous than this party, I assure you." Her face fell, and I frowned. "What is it?"

"It's just that, while that is probably true, I doubt I'll be witness to any of them. After this, I'll have to return home and help my mother with my younger siblings. My father passed two winters ago, and seeing as how I have eight younger siblings, I will need to prioritize duty over social events."

We continued moving to the music with the other couples, each of us lost in conversation with our partners, the steps of the dance happening from sheer muscle memory. "You speak as though you won't be chosen."

"I'm not planning on that, my prince." Her cheeks began to redden. "With the death of my father, I'm quite convinced that our family is cursed with bad luck."

Cursed?

"You don't know what will happen, Belinda... but I do not doubt that you will get a proposal. You're captivating, humble, and gorgeous. We make our own paths, and while family must come first, we must also ensure that we have opportunities to grow our own. To go out into the world and make our own decisions, our own mistakes."

The music was slowing, getting softer. "Thank you, my prince," she whispered. "You have no idea how much your words mean to me."

The final note rang out, and I released my hold on her. "Thank you, Lady Belinda, for the dance. It was a pleasure meeting you."

She dropped into a deep curtsy effortlessly. My breath hitched as she looked up at me from so low, those blue orbs piercing me like arrows. "The pleasure," she said and began slowly rising from the ground, "is all mine."

A trickle of sweat dripped down my spine. Fucking hell, how much longer would this evening last? I didn't think I could take much more of it.

"My son," my father's deep voice said. I turned to find him right behind me.

"Father," I replied with a small bow.

"And who is this fine lady?" He turned his attention to Belinda. "Forgive my son. His manners have escaped him."

"Forgive me. Father, this is Belinda. She's Andarian, and the two of us just shared a dance together."

I watched the way my father's calculating eyes took in my dance partner. He was never capable of just enjoying a moment—every person, situation, or conversation was an opportunity to him. The way he could quickly deduce the value of something, or someone, had always set me on edge.

"How lovely to meet a maiden from Andaros! I hope you're having a great evening, my lady."

Belinda curtsied once more. "Your Highness, it is a blessing from the Goddess herself that I get to meet you! My head is simply spinning at the moment."

Father chuckled. "I believe that's true for everyone in the room, royal or not. This is no ordinary evening, and with The Recurrence upon us, emotions are high." He looked across the room in the direction of a bar. "There should be some cool water to refresh you just over there, my lady."

Belinda took the dismissal for what it was. "That would be great. Thank you, my king. Prince Torin, I do hope we get the chance to speak again over the coming days."

I nodded, and she turned to head for the bar. Involuntarily, a deep sigh left my throat.

"Now that's a solid woman, son. Excellent manners and temperament."

"Indeed," I replied drolly.

"How are you feeling? We have only an hour to go..."

"Like I'm going to crawl out of my skin at any moment. Like my heart is beating at a speed that surely is unnatural," I confessed, immediately regretting it because what if my words had come off as admitting weakness? If there was one thing my father couldn't stand, it was a weak man. To my surprise, he grinned. He never grinned. I wasn't sure if his wrath was as terrifying as the smile he was giving me at that moment.

"Oh yes, I remember the feeling well. Everything is as it should be. You don't have long to go, son."

It was true, but every second felt like an hour, and each hour felt like a week. I spotted Dair's tall form across the room. I wonder how my best mate was fairing. He was always so composed and in control. Was he suffering as I was? The crowd parted, and I saw who he was talking to. Evie. Father took notice of my distraction and looked over his shoulder to see what had caught my attention.

"Ah, the spirited Miss Evie. I met her just a short time ago. She seems to captivate every male she speaks to. Alden was smitten within a few moments. She is a beauty, that can't be denied."

"You're right about the spirited part. I worry that the two of us would butt heads more than might be healthy."

Dair suddenly laughed, loudly. I thought my eyes were going to pop out of my skull. My father was grinning, and my best friend, who laughed as much as a wagon wheel, was losing his mind with laughter. In public. Everyone was going mad.

My father tsked. "There's nothing wrong with a spirited woman, son. Half the fun is breaking them. They're like the wild horses that roam the Final Fields. One of the best mares I ever had came from the Fields and was

as crazy and stubborn as they come... but once she broke, she was the best horse in the realm. She might be perfect for Alasdair. I've never seen him interact like that before."

We looked on as Dair and Evie began to dance. Their interaction was puzzling. One moment it seemed they were in a heated argument about who knows what, and then she would say something that would cause him to break.

"Though don't think I didn't see the way you were with her, either."

I turned to him. "What do you mean?"

"The fire between you. That isn't something that can be faked, and the two of you were like a living flame as you danced." He cocked his head and observed Dair and Evie. "But there are so many great choices, and it seems Alasdair may already be settled on his."

He was right about the heat I'd felt sparking between us when we'd danced. Hell, even at the dinner table, I could feel the burning of her stare. But Father was right about Dair—she would be an excellent match for my friend. One he truly deserved.

I shook my head. There were mere days left before The Choosing Ceremony. I'd continue exploring other options until then. Dair was smiling down at Evie now, spinning her and causing her gown to flare out in a beautiful circle. *I wonder what she'd look like in red?* My beast practically began salivating at the passing thought. One thing was becoming clear, he was greedy. It's a good thing I was in charge and knew something about loyalty to friends.

"Oi! Ciaran! Put your Goddess damned clothes back on, you feral animal!"

"Right on schedule," Father announced, looking pleased instead of embarrassed or irritated.

Ciaran Faolan could be seen clearly in the middle of the room, atop a table, swinging his suit jacket over his head. His once mostly acceptable hair—was now wild. Women were gathered around the table, cheering him on and clapping. The orchestra began playing an upbeat, fast melody, and Ciar played into every note. We boys always joked with Ciar because he could never make it through an evening without stripping. I just hoped he kept his damned pants on.

"As we get closer to midnight, the energy in the room will become practically riotous. The royals' energy, fueled by *The Recurrence*, will become infectious. A breathable aphrodisiac. Every person will feel the purest form of ecstasy—all of their worries will melt away."

My head snapped to my father. "Do you mean to tell me that this is going to devolve into some kind of... orgy?"

King Ero laughed deeply. "Not at all." He paused. "Though that would be something, wouldn't it? A party for the history books! But no, I simply mean that everyone will feel relaxed and carefree. It will make conversations easier, meeting each other will be smoother, and any anxieties or doubts will simply flee. There is more to feeling ecstatic than sex. One could argue the highest level of euphoria is being at complete peace with one's mind. That is what's coming. *Clarity*. I suggest you continue speaking with the other ladies while you can. You'll know soon what you need to do in regards to choosing a wife."

I blinked at the man. I couldn't deny there was something in the air, and he was acting so out of character... Was I, though?

What would I be doing normally at an event like this? At this point in the party?

I'd be lost in the ruffles of skirts and entrapped within the embrace of silky thighs... and right now? I had no desire to do that. Holy shit, it was working.

I smirked at my realization. Clarity.

It was time to find the woman who I'd be proposing to, and for the first time tonight—and even in the months leading up to this—I felt a sense of peace about what was required of me. Of what The Recurrence would bring.

One day, I was going to be King... and every King needs a Queen.

I just needed to find her.



image-
placeholder

CHAPTER SEVEN

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say your brother has an agenda," Evie said, her eyes narrowing as she peered up at me.

"My brother is a prince—we all have agendas," I replied, returning the look.

We moved across the floor, dancing for the second time this evening. "Well, it was awfully convenient how I happened to 'bump' into you while he was escorting me across the ballroom." She wrinkled her nose. "Who even needs to be escorted across a room like that?"

She looked so offended at the thought, and before I could stop it, a laugh slipped out.

"Why is that so funny? It's a room, not a treacherous wooden bridge."

Evie had a point, but the fact of the matter wasn't that simple. "We are taught certain manners and customs from the time we can walk, so you'll have to forgive the fact that some of us have a higher level of... tact."

"Tact?" I spun her away from me, certain that if she were given the chance, she'd surely kick me. Her face came back into view and, oh

Goddess, it had turned seven shades of red. "I'll let you know if I see any of this 'tact' you speak of, because as of now, it's been missing."

I laughed. Again. Louder that time. What the Goddess was going on with me?

"Are you drunk?"

I lifted a dark brow. "Are you?"

Evie shrugged. "Maybe. But I've known you all of two hours, and you don't seem much like the laughing jokester type. No offense," she blurted.

"And are you always so blunt and rude?" I fired back. *I could have fun. I could laugh.*

"Yes," she replied, batting her lashes in an overly dramatic way.

"Well, let me tell you a little secret then, Miss Evie." I pulled her in, close enough that I could easily smell the enticing scent that was... her. Like the forest in the dead of winter with fresh snow covering everything. "So am I."

"Good." Her head turned so she could whisper into my ear. "Then perhaps you've met your match."

Her breath teased my skin and it was as though every hair on my body stood on point. Even hair I didn't know I had seemed to be prickling me down my back. A cool sweat broke out across my forehead and I just needed—

"That's what I thought," she teased, triumph in her tone. Triumph that made me want to put her in her place. I wanted the push and pull. She'd be a worthy match, that's for sure. One that would cause me to pound my head against the wall, repeatedly.

The song came to an end, but neither of us moved. I could hear her heart pounding. Like a scared little rabbit, knowing it had but moments to live before being swallowed by a predator. My arm that was wrapped around

her, pinning her to me, tightened. The air in her lungs slipped out with a soft gasp.

"My prince," Evie squeaked and tried to lean back. Oh, that wouldn't do at all.

"I can't figure it out," I mumbled against her neck, vaguely realizing I had no recollection of when my lips had connected with her soft skin.

"F-figure what out?" she asked, attempting to push against my chest to get me to release her.

"What is it about you that's so... interesting?" I released her suddenly and took a step back, shocked at myself. At my behavior.

"Is that the 'tact' you were referring to earlier?" Evie advanced on me, wildfire in her eyes. "Royal or not, you had no right to handle me in the way you just did!"

Couples around us stopped dancing and looked on with curiosity. Fuck.

"My lady, I apolo—"

Her hand shot out, cutting me off. "Save it. Many women would probably die for you to do that to them, but I, sir, am not one of them!"

"Evie, please, I would never— I mean—"

But I had. I had squeezed the life out of her and refused to let go. And then my lips were—

"Brother!" We all turned to see Alden, Torin, and Mosi stumbling toward us, their cheeks pink and smiles wide. "Unfortunately, we must go." He winked at me. I stared back at him blankly until he groaned.

Torin jumped in. "It's time, Dair. To prepare for The Hunt. Say goodnight to the lovely Miss Evie, so we won't be late."

My gaze swung to the massive wrought iron clock on the wall. It was five minutes to midnight. Already? The last hour had gone by in the blink

of an eye. No wonder I was feeling so out of sorts.

"Right, of course," I said, nodding to them. "Just a moment?" I had to make sure Evie understood how sorry I was. But when I turned to do just that, she was gone. "What? Where did she go?"

"Slipped off with her dark haired friend, you know? The tiny one? Snooze, ya lose. Now, come on. I don't want to piss my father off."

My friends and brother dragged me through what remained of the crowd, headed for the grand staircase. No matter how hard I looked, I didn't see her anywhere... but the scent of her lingered, as though it was permanently branded into me. As we ascended the stairs, Ero's voice filtered through the room.

"That concludes our bachelor's portion of the evening! Thank you so much for attending and celebrating what is sure to be a most productive Royal Hunt! I hope you all used your time wisely and made lasting connections and unforgettable impressions. Please, feel free to continue dancing and enjoying the entertainment. The orchestra will play for another hour."

We all gathered at the top of the landing while Ero made his way up to us. "The Royal Hunt will commence tomorrow! May it be bountiful! Let's send our hunters off with some good cheer, hmm?"

The crowd erupted with feminine shouts and cries of encouragement. My animal was so close to the surface now, and each cheer was like waving a red flag at a bull. I needed to get out of there.

"Have a lovely rest of your evening. I shall see you all at breakfast!" More cheers went up, and I looked at Torin standing next to me. I had to blink a few times because it looked as though his neck had taken on an iridescent shade. That would be... disastrous. "Come on, gentlemen. We're

already pushing it with time. No delays. Straight to the meeting place beyond the walls of the Keep."

We didn't hesitate. I hadn't had a footrace with someone since I was ten years old, but this felt oddly reminiscent.

"Gotta get these clothes off," Ciar snarled as he ripped his shirt and sent buttons pinging across the hallway.

"Keep it together until we're clear of the Keep," Taj growled. "We don't need questions."

From the upper west hallway, we accessed a hidden door that was built into the stonework. A portrait that was next to the door was the key. Evander reached it first and swung it to the left, causing the hinges that held it there to groan from underuse. The stone door grumbled as it broke free and opened. Eagerly, we all rushed in, straight down a stone spiral staircase.

"Fucking spiders," Desmond cursed, waving his arms wildly.

"Don't they have servants and guards here year round? Why aren't they cleaning this shit?" Mosi demanded from somewhere just in front of me. It was too dark to see where everyone was—we were simply running as a pack now. Instinct was in charge.

Finally, we stumbled into the dungeons in the basement. We'd be able to avoid any people, and it was a straight shot from there to the forest.

Sweat was now running down my back, causing my shirt to stick to my skin. It felt like torture.

"Come on, Dair. We're almost there," Tor called out to me, and I sped up to catch up to him. He grinned at me and whooped. "I've never been this fast in my entire life!"

Our magics were already at work. They had been for weeks now, but it was as though the universe knew we were running full speed toward our

destinies and wanted to give us a boost. I was practically flying across the cobblestones now, the objects in my periphery nothing but blurs. It was time.

By the time we reached the clearing at the treeline, several of us had lost our shirts. Some of us—or well, Ciar—were completely naked. I caught my breath, and where I normally would've been appalled, I wasn't bothered in the least. All worries melted away to nothing.

All of the kings and Corvus arrived, walking to the front of the group, their backs to the woods.

"The moment you've been waiting for has finally arrived! Tonight, you shed your human skin and accept the other half of yourselves!" my father, King Aric, shouted.

My system seemed to flood with adrenaline, knowing that everything was about to change. *Including me.*

"I just have a few things to go over with you before Corvus does the incantation. Firstly, this is a Hunt and is not purely for fun. It will be a scored event. Corvus' ravens will be watching each royal throughout the event, the entire time. Myself, and the other royals that aren't participating, will be able to watch through the Pool of Potentia. Points will be awarded and deducted for the following: kills, injuries, type of kill, tracking involved, and cunning."

"I'm sure you're wondering what the points have to do with anything. Well, the point standings will determine the order in which you get to choose a wife."

I shot Torin a look. His mouth dropped ever so slightly, telling me this was news to him as well. From the few gasps and grumbles, it seemed everyone was in the dark about this news.

"You're telling us that we have to get a higher score in order to ensure we get a quality wife?" someone shouted.

"That's exactly what I'm telling you," Ero grinned. "So make sure you do everything you can to score points because you only get to do this Hunt once in your lifetime, and as a royal, you only get one wife! Don't let the woman you and your beast desire be taken by someone with a higher score."

The excitement of the group morphed into determination instantly. We were all riled up about the women we'd just met, and with our beasts so close to breaking free, it was as though Ero had thrown a match into a haystack.

Corvus stepped up, standing before all of us, the light from the full moon causing his thin face to look haunted. His slender fingers moved to a silent rhythm until a spark of white light ignited. I sucked in a sharp breath as a jolt of pressure hit me square in the chest. A menacing growl erupted from my mouth as he began chanting. My body was no longer in my control as I jerked forward, hitting the ground on all fours.

Howls and snarls filled the air, and I panted through the pain, my eyes widening as my fingers, which were digging deep into the dirt, began to change. Long, thick claws sprouted from my hands, and my skin prickled as thick brown fur began to overtake every inch of me. My back arched violently and cracked, making my head snap forward as a deafening roar shook my body.

The pain was unreal. I was surely going to end up dead before the spell was complete. In the fog of the shift, I saw Corvus produce four balls of light. Orange, red, gray, and green—the colors of our kingdoms. My heart raced, and sweat dripped down my face as he waved his hands and then

clapped them together. The four glowing balls slammed together, and the final thing I saw through my own eyes was the shockwave of rippling light as it hit my body.



image-
placeholder

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Are you alive?"

I cracked my eyes open to find Riv standing over me. "Oh hell," I groaned. "Can I just die now?"

My new friend laughed, causing the pain in my head to spike. Wincing, I grabbed my pillow and promptly covered my head with it.

"Come on, Evie. Don't be like that." The bed dipped down on the opposite side Rivka had been standing on. Lovely, both of my new friends had no respect for hangovers.

"We let you sleep as late as we could," Isla said with sincerity. "But we need to be in the Great Hall in twenty minutes for breakfast. It's mandatory."

The thought of food made my stomach roll. How much had I had to drink the night before? Too much—way too much.

"Here, Evie, drink this. Riv and I already had ours, and we're feeling much better."

I emerged from my pillow hideout to find Isla holding out a glass that contained a purplish liquid. "What the Goddess is that?"

Isla grinned. "Just another little remedy that I learned from my grandfather. Trust me—it will help."

"Don't ask questions, just chug it down. The stuff is bloody amazing! I drank enough liquor last night to kill a cow, and here I am—" Rivka held her arms up and spun around with her usual flare. "Fresh as a fucking fire daisy!"

"What's a fire daisy?" Isla asked, giggling.

Slowly, I pushed myself upright, and to my dismay, it did nothing to prevent the room from spinning. "I am never drinking again."

"Yeah, yeah. We all say that. Never quite sticks though, does it?"

With a shaky hand, I reached for the glass. Anything had to be better than this. Just as I lifted it to my lips, a loud knock sounded at the door. "Expecting guests?"

My friends looked at me with wide eyes. That was a no then. Rivka moved to the door and opened it half an inch. "You look about as well as our friend Evie." Quickly, she opened the door the rest of the way, reached out into the hall, and yanked Kael into our room before slamming the door. My guard took one look at me and erupted with laughter. "Looking a little worse for wear this morning, Miss Evie."

"You're looking a little rough around the edges yourself," I said, taking in his red eyes and pale face.

"I was not completely well last night. My evening ended after midnight when the sweating and dizziness returned." He shrugged. "Either those shrimp we ate weren't the freshest, or the drinks are just criminally strong here." He walked closer, eyeing the glass in my hand. "What's in there?"

"I haven't the slightest clue. It's something Isla made and swears will heal this hellish hangover. She and Riv already had theirs."

Kael looked at the two in question. "Where do I get some of this magical potion?"

Isla laughed and walked over to the small table we had in our room. On it, there was a pitcher that held enough of the purple concoction for Kael. "This should help because none of us felt sick after eating the shrimp. I think the drinks were just double strength!"

"Praise the Goddess," he proclaimed as he marched over to Isla and took his glass. Looking back at me, he raised it. "Cheers."

"Cheers," I grumbled and downed the contents. It was surprisingly sweet. "That wasn't nearly as bad as I was expecting."

"Chop, chop, people! We are running out of time, and Evie needs..." Riv paused, looking me over. "Assistance."

The fog in my brain was already lifting. Amazing. "It can't be that bad." I hopped out of bed and trodded over to the mirror. "Oh. What the—" My hair was an absolute disaster. It was going to be a nightmare to brush. My makeup was smeared across my face, giving me a haunted look.

"Aye, they weren't exaggerating. Sit down and let Isla work on that hair. Riv, can you fetch a washcloth?" Kael asked, quickly forming a plan of attack.

"What are you going to do?" I asked him as I was pushed down into a chair.

Kael smirked and strode over to the wardrobe, flinging the doors open. "I'm going to pick your dress out, of course."

I hmped. "Ouch!" I cried out as the first clump of hair snagged on the brush.

"Sorry, sorry! I'm trying to be gentle," Isla said.

"Here." Riv handed me a warm cloth, and I started wiping away the remnants of last night's poor decisions.

Five minutes of torture later, my hair was brushed and styled, along with my face cleaned and lightly powdered. Kael sat at our table while Riv and Isla helped me get dressed behind the room divider. He'd chosen a gold dress with an empire waistline that was so much more comfortable than the contraption I'd been forced to endure last night.

"So," he began, feigning innocence but failing horribly. "What are our thoughts on the events of last night? How do we feel about the strapping young royals? Did any feelings... *stir*?"

We all broke out into laughter. "You do have a way with words," Riv said as she tied up the back of my gown.

"I'm merely curious. Isla? I saw you dancing with both Ekpen brothers and Evander Volos?"

"They danced with a lot of women, Kael. It doesn't mean anything... I wouldn't read much into it. There, Evie, you're good to go."

The three of us returned to the shared space and began putting our shoes on. "Actually, I don't think that Mosi danced with many women. I even heard some chatter near the bar that some women were speculating that he must've already made his mind up."

Isla sighed. "Exactly. See? It was probably a pity dance."

Kael stood abruptly. "I'll have none of that from you, Miss Isla."

Riv and I glanced at each other as Kael walked over to Isla, wrapping his arms around her tiny frame. She all but disappeared next to his bulk. "Any one of those fools would be lucky to get any of you three, you hear me? And Isla, the conversation I overheard was after I saw you dancing with him."

"Oh," she squeaked.

"Exactly. So, chin up. You never know," Kael said, releasing her and turning his focus to Rivka. "And did you dance with any of them? I don't think I saw if you did."

Riv tossed her head back and laughed maniacally. "Oh, did I ever. I nearly forgot! The Faolan heir, what's his name?"

"You mean Ciar?"

"Ah, yeah, sure. Sounds right. Anyway, during our most unpleasant dance, he said he wanted to remove his shirt and reached for a button. I told him that if he so much as touched that button, I'd chop his thumbs off so he'd stop subjecting people to his nudity."

I gasped. "Riv!"

Kael held his side, bent over and wheezing. "That is gold. GOLD! What did the little exhibitionist have to say about that?"

Riv frowned. "He said I was a she-wolf, and then he howled. Drunk off his arse, he was. I told him that I *am* a fucking she-wolf, and I'd eat him alive if he ever howled in my general vicinity again."

That did it for me. I collapsed on my bed and laughed, picturing the scenario Riv had just painted in my mind. "I- I can't breathe," I forced out between laughs. Kael was wiping his eyes, and perhaps the funniest part of all was the way Isla looked so scandalized.

"I'd do it too," she promised, a wild glint in her eyes that left not a single doubt in my mind. She was brilliantly insane, and I loved her for it. I came here for money, and I got three friends, too. I'd take it.

"But what about Evie?" Isla asked. "You tripped Prince Torin, then got the first dance with him, plus two—*two* dances with Alasdair Oberon!"

"And she was spotted chatting with the younger Oberon and King Ero. Our little Eves was a very busy girl last night," Kael teased, waggling his blond brows.

I marched to the door, desperate to avoid talking about myself. "Don't we have someplace we need to be?"

"Ah, a walk and talk then? Perfect. I'll lead the way," Riv proclaimed, pushing past me and opening the door, seeing right through me. "You can't get out of it that easy."

"Ugh, fine. Yes, I did those things. What else do you want me to say?" I questioned as we walked through the hall. Maids and other groups of women were milling about, having their own hushed conversations.

Isla looped her arm through mine. "Did you like any of them? Were they kind? Did you feel—"

"I'll stop you there. Torin and Alasdair have no boundaries in regard to... what's proper."

Three confused faces glanced at me, and I groaned, hating to have to explain. "I just mean, they were a bit handsy. It just confirmed what I already knew to be true—that the royal men are—"

My sentence died quickly as we rounded a corner and walked right into King Ero and his sorcerer, Corvus.

"Your Majesty," all four of us said, shocked.

"Good morning," he replied coolly. Much cooler than he'd been the night before. I curtsied and tried willing my heart to slow. Had he heard what I was saying? About his own son? His eyes drifted over my friends before coming to rest on me. "Miss Evie, how nice to run into you again. Did you enjoy yourself last night?"

I blinked and looked at my friends before realizing he had only addressed me. "Yes, yes, I did. It was a magical night. Thank you, Your Highness."

He nodded, and the chilliness of his initial disposition seemed to warm slightly at my response. "Very good. I trust the four of you are headed to breakfast? I was just on my way there. I'll let you get a head start; I have some news to share this morning. Make sure you all eat your fill. The cooks went all out."

We all nodded eagerly and mumbled 'thank yous' as we passed, leaving him looking after us. None of us so much as breathed until we broke through the doors of the Great Hall.

"That was..."

"Oh, my Goddess," Isla breathed, holding her heart.

"You don't think he heard, do you?" I demanded, keeping my voice low.

Kael shook his head, looking grim. "You'd know if he had."

"We'll have to save discussions of that nature for when we're in the privacy of our own room, hmm?" Rivka mused, leading us to the end of a long table with three open seats. Unfortunately, Kael would have to sit at the guards' table, but that didn't stop him from pulling out each of our chairs.

As I sat down, my eyes connected with Belinda sitting at the tables directly across from us. She very pointedly looked up to where Kael was pushing my chair in and then back to me. Slowly, she smiled. My skin prickled. After seeing Kael and I hugging each other last night, of course she would draw conclusions about the nature of our relationship, seeing things that weren't there.

She was going to be a problem.

Luckily, I just needed to get through this damned forced vacation, then I'd never have to deal with her again... but if she caused trouble for Kael, I'd ensure she'd regret it. I never had many friends. There simply weren't many candidates being from a small village. The ones I did have, though? I would do anything for... and if Belinda thought she was going to mess with any of these three? She'd find out just how vicious I could be.

Kael said goodbye and headed for an open seat on the back wall where the rest of the guards were sitting. Servers promptly placed plates in front of us full of eggs, sausage links, different varieties of toast and pastries, and what looked like fried potatoes. My stomach growled. I suppose there was hunger lurking beneath the cover of that horrible hangover, which, thanks to Isla, was practically nonexistent now.

We began eating, shoveling food in like it would disappear at any moment. "Mmm, so good," Riv mumbled around a giant bite of eggs.

"It is excellent food," I agreed, slathering a piece of toast with some grape preserves.

"If they feed us like this the entire time we're here, I might never leave," Isla said. "But when do you suppose they're going to have us go join The Hunt? Have either of you hunted before? Are we going to have to actually," she paused and leaned in before continuing, "*kill* something out there?"

King Ero appeared at that moment, his sorcerer Corvus again on his right and a guard on the left. "Looks like we're about to find out," I whispered, not wanting to draw his attention again for any reason.

"Good morning, ladies and guards. I hope you had a good night's rest after the eventful evening we had!" He was dressed in full royal regalia. Black trousers with silver threading and a blazer of deep crimson with embossed silver buttons, each of which held the crest of Volos, a dragon's

face. "I am sure you're all curious as to what the schedule will be over the following days. The most important thing is that in four days' time, we will hold The Choosing Ceremony."

Excited gasps and chitter chatter broke out with that news. What were we supposed to do over the next three days until that moment? Surely there had to be other things on the schedule? At least the anxiety of playing this game would lessen after the ceremony. Then I could get my payout and get home. I was fairly confident in my performance last night. No royal in his right mind would choose me as a wife. I was already daydreaming about how I could stock my classroom with all the supplies we'd never been able to get. I could update our books, get some better desks and tables, and maybe even some musical instruments.

"Speaking of our royal bachelors, they are out in the woods at this very moment!"

Cheers and whoops of excitement rang out, filled with wishes of safety and success.

"After breakfast, you will return to your rooms to get dressed in clothing suitable for outside. From there, all of you, including your guards, will make your way out to the forest to join The Hunt!"

I wasn't sure what the point was with having all of us go out there. Everyone who had a lick of sense knew that the more people, the more noise. Hunting was all about being quiet and stalking your prey. I didn't see how that was ever going to happen if we had fifty people traipsing through the woods.

"I can see that some of you are concerned," King Ero continued, speaking over the conversations that were happening. "But several of your guards will be with you at all times, and everything will be fine. I will leave you

now to finish your breakfast. The head guard of the Keep, Liam, and my sorcerer, Corvus, will meet you all at the wall surrounding the Keep in an hour. Please, try to be on time."

With that, he turned and exited the Great Hall, Liam and Corvus following a respectful distance behind him.

Riv looked down at me from her seat. "Bit strange, isn't it?"

"What is?" Isla questioned.

"The fact that we're going on a hunt... with a huge group of people. If they think we're going to actually get anything, I think they'll be sorely disappointed," I explained, shrugging. "It's their call. The Hunt is all for show, anyway."

Isla hummed. "I think they likely just want to see which of us will willingly do what's being asked and how we act once we're out there."

"Yeah, you're probably right." As we finished our meals, I made a mental note to continue my mission of being the most undesirable maiden of the lot. I'd made it through the ball, so now I just needed to really seal the deal.

We were all fairly quiet after breakfast as we changed into clothes better suited for the forest. I would've loved to have unearthed some trousers, but I wasn't surprised in the least that there were none to be found in my wardrobe. *Women are to wear dresses and look pretty at all times.* I rolled my eyes at my own cynical thoughts. Last night Alasdair had spoken of tact and responsibility, his duty to his family and kingdom. In fact, each royal I spoke with had mentioned something along the lines of duty, and it made my anger flare each time I thought about it. Their duty consisted of what? Attending balls and social gatherings, deciding how much to tax their people, choosing what was to be done with prisoners and criminals? And all

this while they slept in their massive, warm beds, safely surrounded by the stone walls of monstrously huge castles. How rough it must be for them.

King Ero was the worst of them all, though. His promise to ensure my school supplies was most definitely empty. He was exactly as my father had described. Pompous, arrogant, manipulative. I had a pretty good eye for spotting narcissists, and that king was the biggest one I'd ever encountered. He was dangerous. I'd never trust someone with that level of power. And it wasn't just him, either. All the men in that room last night thought very highly of themselves. Power corrupts. It twists even the most noble of people's minds into something unrecognizable. Not that I'd ever been around royals before, but all I had to do to learn was pick up a damn book and read it. It was one of life's oldest lessons.

"You doing okay?" Kael's question interrupted my negative thoughts.

"Yeah, just thinking," I replied.

Rivka and Isla were a ways ahead of us now, headed toward the grand doors that would lead us outside.

Kael huffed. "You don't say."

I shot him a narrow glance.

He laughed. "I'm fairly certain the animals in the forest could hear your thoughts with how loudly you're thinking over there."

"I've never been good at hiding what's going through my mind," I admitted, frowning. I probably should work on that.

"At least you can admit it. One must know their own weaknesses in order to achieve growth."

"And what's your weakness?" I teased.

Kael leaned down and whispered, "Large, red-haired men."

I cackled and held my belly. "You know, I'm so glad we met."

He grinned. "Me too, Eves. Me, too."

We joined the group of people that were waiting at the gate. The weather was beautiful, if a bit warm. Luckily the trees would provide decent shade.

"I'm just so excited," one of the older girls said to no one in particular.

"Me too," another squealed.

"Ugh, well, I am not. This is ridiculous," Belinda all but snarled at the two girls, shutting them up immediately as she stormed past them.

Riv whispered under her breath, "I vote once we get into the forest, we leave Belinda behind to fend for herself."

I couldn't hide my smirk as several of the girls actually looked intrigued by Riv's plan. Belinda was making enemies left and right. Any woman here who was serious about winning should be doing everything in their power to make friends with every single person they came into contact with. Even I knew that royal life was all about connections and who you knew. If she did get chosen, she was setting herself up for a very hard time.

Unfortunately, Riv hadn't been quiet enough, and Belinda looked back at me with a smirk. "What are you smiling about, Evie? You're probably just excited to get some alone time with your gu—"

Belinda's catty insult was cut short and she jumped when she realized Kael had moved directly behind her. He simply stared at her, and that was enough to get her to shut her mouth.

"Come on, Isla and Riv. Let's go stand over there," I said, pointing to an empty spot near the gate. I didn't care to look at her face for another second.

"What was that about?" Riv questioned. "I feel like I'm missing something."

I groaned. "Last night, I needed some air and ran into Kael in the hallway. I hugged him, and Belinda and two other women saw us."

“Oh, that’s not good,” Isla murmured, glancing over at Kael, who was still behind Belinda.

Riv shook her head at the situation. “She’s intimidated by you. You’re competition.”

“I don’t want to be, though!” I blurted out and quickly regretted it. I still hadn’t been honest with them about my real reason for being here. I knew I would at some point, but I couldn’t just yet.

“Tough shit, my friend. Those dances last night put a target on your back. We just need to make sure she doesn’t develop a case of loose lips and start spreading gossip.”

"Why is she the literal worst?" Isla asked, looking angry for the first time since I'd met her.

"Some people just choose to be miserable," Riv said.

Kael was making his way to us, his expression stony.

"She was about to do some real damage," I spat. "Does she have any idea what would happen?"

“Believe me when I say she doesn’t care. That woman only cares about one thing, and who cares if my shoulders are relieved of my head so long as a crown sits on hers?”

I gasped at his brutal words. “That is *not* going to happen.”

Riv leaned back against the stone wall. "Well, if she wishes to spew venom, I can always just remove her wicked serpent tongue."

"If only you were my type," Kael breathed, holding a hand over his heart.

"Back at ya, luv." Riv winked and resumed her spot next to Isla.

“No, really. We could be great together.” Kael spread his hands wide. “Total realm domination.”

I rolled my eyes. “Seriously? You must have a death wish.”

Suddenly, the air around us became charged with energy. My hair began to stand on end like an invisible force was causing it to rise. With a crackle and a pop, Liam and Corvus appeared. Some of the girls shrieked while others jumped. I stared in absolute awe as Liam adjusted his navy blue and white shirt, the colors of The Roaring Isle.

Magic.

I'd always had an obsession with studying all the magics, probably because my father tried to forbid it. He learned the hard way that restricting a child from something just makes them that much more curious about it. So, I learned everything I could, as if that would suddenly bless me with the ability to be able to perform it. Unfortunately for me, that's not how it worked. You were born with the gift.

"It is time!" Liam shouted, quieting the noise. "Your guards will escort you all from here to the forest. From there, you'll continue into the woods until you reach a small stream. That is where the royals will meet up with you. You are to return to this spot at dusk to be readmitted into the keep. Any questions?"

Nobody said a word.

"Very well. Corvus, please open the gate."

The sorcerer closed his eyes and placed a hand upon the thick iron of the gate. He whispered something and a loud click sounded as the lock on the gate was undone. With a strong push of magic, the gate swung open, creaking loudly.

"Happy hunting to each of you. Thank you for your commitment to the realm," Corvus called to us as a group. He held out his cloaked arm, indicating that it was time for us to go.

"Let's go last," I whispered to my friends, and we scooted back, letting the others slip through first. A chill ran down my spine as I stepped through the threshold that separated the Keep from the wild. I felt a tingle of awareness as if someone was watching me. Looking up, I got lost in the deep, dark stare of Corvus.

My intuition was all but screaming at me that Corvus was dangerous, possibly the most dangerous person here. With his inky black hair that was darker than any shade I'd ever seen and the way his eye color seemed to match. He radiated darkness. Uncomfortable from our stare down, I offered a small smile that was met with absolutely no change in his stony expression.

"Come on, Eves," Isla murmured, looping her arm through mine and pulling me along with them. I broke my stare down with Corvus and turned my focus to the group ahead of us. The trees loomed so high above us that it appeared we would simply disappear within them and be devoured.

A gust of wind barreled through the valley, swirling my hair all around, and with the wind, whispers carried. Corvus' deep, baritone voice swept over me, the melodic cadence of the words he was speaking, almost like a song.

"Do you hear that?" I said to my friends, stopping and spinning back to the gate we'd crossed through. Liam and Corvus were there, arms crossed, looking out at us when suddenly, another blast of wind came out of nowhere, and the doors to the Keep were slammed shut.

"That sorcerer is creepy as hell," Riv stated, shaking her head. "Crawled out of some scary children's book, I'm sure of it."

"They say he can infiltrate your dreams and turn you madder than a rabid dog," Isla whispered.

Kael grunted. “I don’t doubt it.” He batted his blond hair away from his eyes. “Where the Goddess is this wind coming from?”

Leaves began descending from the trees from how strong it was. “I don’t know, but we better catch up,” I said, noticing the distance that had grown between the four of us and the rest of our group.

“Oy! Wait up, ya ninnies!” Riv bellowed, catching the attention of the back of the pack. We ran, making up the distance easily.

“Alright, attention, everyone!” one of the guards at the front yelled loud enough that everyone could hear. “Stick together. We’re to head in and continue until we find the stream. That’s where we’ll team up with the royals. There are enough guards to have four to five women to one guard. If you must stop, inform your guard. Do not go off alone. Most of you seem to have already grouped into smaller groups, so if you haven’t yet, get in one. We have about an hour to go until we reach the stream.”

There was a little shuffling around from people deciding what groups they would be in. Nobody else joined us, which was just fine with me.

“Right then! Let’s go,” the guard shouted, which was met with a few excited whoops and a fair amount of nervous laughter. “At least the wind seems to have died down. May the hunt be bountiful and set the bar for this Recurrence!”

Rivka met my eyes and dramatically rolled hers. The wind had dissipated as quickly as it had manifested. Very weird, indeed. No sooner had we all entered the forest, silence descended like a blanket of warning.

“Wait,” I whispered, causing my friends and a few other people to stop in their tracks.

“Wh—” Kael was cut off when a noise shook the very trees.

Not a noise. A roar. An ear-piercing, bone-rattling roar.



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CHAPTER NINE

More than a few women dropped to the forest floor, covering their heads. With wide eyes, I scanned the woods, coming up empty. There was nothing there, nothing that could've made such a sound.

"What the fuck was that?" Riv hissed, gripping her blade that never left her body.

My heart was pounding so hard I could hear it. I'd never heard a noise like that before, and I'd been on more hunting trips with my father than I could count. We'd hunted all kinds of animals... My mind raced with ideas of what creature could possibly produce a roar like that. "Whatever it was, it's massive."

The sounds of the forest came alive once more. Birds were singing as though nothing had happened. As if there were no threats lurking amongst the trees. That was another well-taught lesson from my father...

"Come, little Evie," Father said, smiling at me fondly. His full cheeks were rosy from the crisp fall air.

"Coming, Daddy," I replied, throwing another flat rock across the small lake and squealing as it skipped three times before disappearing beneath

the blue-green surface. I ran to my daddy, slipping my small hand into his. They were always so warm.

"You're getting really good at skipping rocks. You'll be better than me soon," he praised, helping me jump over a fallen tree.

I giggled. "Not for a long time. I've only gotten three skips, and I saw you do ten one time! Ten!"

"One day you'll be big and strong, just like me, and you'll be able to do anything you set your mind to." He squeezed my hand gently before adjusting the quiver of arrows on his back.

"What are we hunting today?"

"Deer or rabbit, we'll see what we run into. With winter coming, I'd love to bag a deer. It would put my mind at ease that we'd have plenty of meat for a good long while."

I frowned. I didn't enjoy the killing part. No matter what, I always cried. I knew it was necessary, and Daddy always made sure his aim was true so the animals wouldn't suffer. But I loved animals, so it made me a bit sad. I loved venison stew though, too. I sighed loudly.

"I know, Evie girl. The Goddess provides the animals for us to be able to survive. The least we can do is be thankful and utilize her gifts as she intended."

He always knew what I was thinking without me having to say a word. He liked to tease that I was an open book. Just then, I spotted a chipmunk. He was perched upon a large rock, his cheeks stuffed full of acorns and other nuts. "Look, Daddy," I whispered, pointing. "It's so cute!"

"Listen, Evie."

Listen to what? I didn't hear anything. I wondered if I could catch it. I just wanted to pet its little face. I was so focused on the chipmunk that I

hadn't noticed my father looking in the opposite direction. Tiptoeing, I made my way closer. So far, so good. The chipmunk froze, and so did I, as his little black eyes met mine. What happened next was so fast it was a blur. A snarl, a squeak, the sound of an arrow flying by me, and a yelp.

With wild eyes, I spun around to see my daddy lowering his bow and racing toward me. "Daddy!" I cried, throwing my arms up so he could scoop me up.

"Evie, I said to listen," he admonished, squeezing me tightly.

"I did, I did listen! I didn't hear anything," I replied, my little heart racing against his chest. "What was that?" I raised my face from Daddy's neck and looked over to where the chipmunk had been moments before. He carried me to the large rock, and that's when I saw it. A big gray wolf, an arrow jutting out from its chest, surrounded by dark red blood.

"Oh," I whispered, as if the beast would hear me if I spoke any louder. "I didn't know wolves ate chipmunks."

"The wolf wasn't after the chipmunk. Maybe at first, just for fun. But then he saw something better. You."

I shivered. I hadn't even realized the wolf was there, so close. Stalking. Waiting.

"The reason I said to listen was that the forest had gone silent. The animals who live here know when predators are near. Every good hunter knows to pay attention not only to the tracks in the dirt but to the sounds in the air. Tracking is just one part of hunting. If we pay attention to all of our surroundings, we will be successful and safe. Safe is the most important, sweet girl. Beasts aren't easily hidden, and there's almost always a warning before an attack. Do you understand?"

I gazed into Daddy's blue eyes. I nodded. "I'll always listen, Daddy."

He squeezed me and set me back down on my feet. "Then you'll always be safe."

"Whatever that was, it's no longer nearby," I announced, helping Isla to her feet and plucking some leaves from her skirt.

"How do you know?" Belinda asked, her voice as snide as ever.

"Because the birds are singing again," Kael replied for me. He was a royal guard and grew up in the Final Fields. I was positive he was no stranger to the dangers the wilderness posed. Not to mention, he literally saved me from a wolf. That was the second time in my life I nearly died thanks to a wolf.

Everyone started talking, some joking around even. A result of the adrenaline rush we'd all just felt. "Seems it'll be a good Hunt, indeed!" one of the guards shouted.

"Best to keep moving! Let's go," another called, turning and heading deeper into the forest.

We walked in silence for about ten minutes. I was on high alert. Every twig that snapped, every scuffle in the leaves, I heard it, and I watched. So far, the path we walked had been pretty flat. I knew that would change the deeper we got into the trees. I wasn't looking forward to the complaining that would happen as a result. It was cooler under the cover of the canopy, but with the excitement we had already, along with the exercise, I was getting warm. I unclipped my broach and removed my cloak. The damp, cool air felt refreshing on my arms.

"Good idea," Isla said, removing hers as well. "How do you know so much about... all of this?" She waved her arms around, indicating the forest.

"Grew up with a widowed father," I replied. "I learned a lot of things that most girls aren't taught. Weapons, hunting, woodworking... stuff like that," I

admitted.

Riv raised a brow. "I think that's the first personal bit of information you've offered up about yourself, Eves."

That was true... and it wasn't that I didn't want to share anything about myself; it was that I knew the reason I was here likely didn't align with any of the others. I didn't want to put a damper on anyone's excitement for being here. Why share information about my life when I didn't know how this would all pan out in the end? I might never see these people again. I held a hand to my stomach as it rolled at the thought. I liked my friends, and I didn't want to say goodbye to them at the end of this, but I knew realistically that's what would have to happen.

"Just not a big sharer," I mumbled.

"Aye, that's alright, doll. We'll wear you down eventually," Kael teased. "We're quite a charming lot."

I laughed. "Charming, huh? I think we're more intimidating than charming."

Isla stopped walking. "Hey! There's nothing intimidating about me!"

"Like hell," Riv barked. "You're a bloody chemist with all of your remedies and concoctions. You could probably poison your enemies and get away with it."

Isla looked scandalized. "I would never!"

I pointed at the most petite of my friends. "Ahh, but you could. That's what makes you scary, Isla."

Her mouth opened and then closed as she thought it through. When she didn't argue with my logic, I nodded and turned back to the path, but I definitely saw the satisfied grin on her face.

The time seemed to pass quickly, and soon we arrived at a fairly steep hill where I heard some of the girls ahead of us saying they could see water. Once I got close enough, I could easily spot the small pool of water that collected at the base of the hill. The stream fed into it via a small, bubbling waterfall and then flowed out at the opposite side, continuing through the forest. It was beautiful.

"Wow," Isla said.

"It's gorgeous out here," Kael agreed.

And it was, but I couldn't shake the feeling of unease. "Where are the royals?"

"Eager to see how many you can get with today?" Belinda commented, brushing imaginary dirt from her skirt. Some of the girls standing with her laughed and glanced my way.

"No woman here is more eager than you," Rivka replied coolly.

I ignored her and the laughs from the group. They could think whatever they wanted, but little did they know, I was of no threat to them when it came to those asshole princes. I turned to Kael. "Isn't it weird that they're not here? We were supposed to meet them at the stream, right?"

He scanned the area. "There aren't even any tracks in the mud by the water."

I looked, and sure enough, nothing. No boot prints, hoof prints, nothing. It was as though nobody had been here in days.

"Well, I don't know about you ladies, but I really need to, um, relieve myself," one of the girls said, embarrassed. I think her name was Cynthia.

"Seconded," another said.

Kael tossed a look over his shoulder in the direction we'd come from. "Alright, ladies. I saw a spot just over that way. I can stand guard. Come

along."

Now that someone mentioned it, I did need to pee as well. Isla and I followed Kael and four other girls to a thicket. Plenty of large trees and green bushes. Kael leaned against a tree. "I'll wait here."

The five of us disappeared into the thicket.

"My mother would have an absolute fit if she knew I was peeing in a bush right now," Cynthia whined.

Undeterred, I squatted behind a thick tree trunk and listened to them all whine and complain. I was going to rip my hair out if this was what it was going to be like the entire time. A branch creaked overhead, and I looked up. There was no wind, so no reason a tree should be creaking like that, but I couldn't identify the source. I quickly finished up and stood, something inside urging me to get moving. "I think we should hurry up," I whispered to the others.

"Honestly, Evie, you need to chill out. You've been being ridic—"

A flash of orange seemed to drop from the sky and land directly on Cynthia, her shriek of fear ending immediately following the sound of a loud snap. My eyes nearly popped out when my brain caught up with my sight. The world seemed to tilt on its axis as I stood there, frozen. A massive tiger stood over the still-form of Cynthia's body. Dead. *Dead*. She was dead.

Another creak from above snapped me out of my shocked state. "*Run!*" I screamed as loudly as possible, grabbing Isla by the arm and pulling her with me. It was just in time, too, as a second huge cat pounced from above and landed right where she'd been standing. More screams pierced the air as we dashed out of the thicket, finding a wild-eyed Kael.

"What the devil—" he started to ask, but we didn't slow our pace. I grabbed him with my free hand and sprinted.

"We have to warn the others," I panted as we raced back to the place we'd left the group.

Right away, it was clear they already knew. Women and guards were running around, some of them rolling down the ravine to get to the stream below.

A whistle had us looking to our right. I breathed a sigh of relief to see Riv standing off the path, waving us over. The howls of wolves joined the chaos, and Isla whimpered. "Come on," I urged. "We need to get out of this area."

We ran over to Riv, all of us out of breath. "Bloody wolf pack showed up. Took out at least five people that I saw, but they're still prowling. They were massive."

"Let's run and worry about talking later," Kael barked, the soldier in him taking over.

"Good plan," I agreed, and the four of us took off, not so much concerned with the direction we were running. That wasn't of much importance. We just needed to get far away from the smell of fresh blood and fear in the air. It would be like a beacon for any other predators in the area.

After what felt like an hour, but was probably only twenty minutes, we began to slow. I collapsed onto a fallen tree. "I need a second. Do you think we're far enough away?"

"We have time for a quick rest, but we should really keep moving... look for some kind of shelter," Kael said, scoping out the area.

"Did you know there were tigers on this island?" Isla asked no one in particular, hunched over with her hands on her knees.

Kael shook his head. "There are no tigers here. They're only native to the Ekpen Kingdom and known to roam the Final Fields."

"She wasn't asking if they were here. She was asking if you knew that they were." Kael and Rivka both looked at me, puzzled. "Two tigers attacked us in the thicket. I know Cynthia is dead. It sounded like it broke her neck when it landed on her."

"What?!" Riv gasped.

"I think one of them got Samantha, too," Isla said softly. "Why is this happening?"

"Fuck if I know," Kael replied, pacing back and forth. I could practically see the wheels turning in his mind as he thought through everything.

"And where were the damned royals?" I growled, standing up again as my anger gave me a new burst of energy. "They send all of us out here, and then we're attacked by tigers and wolves!? Girls are dead. They think this is a fucking game?" Oh, I was pissed. My body shook, and I wouldn't have been surprised if steam was coming off of me.

"Maybe they got attacked first," Isla said, looking worried.

I thought about that possibility. In our short walk to the stream, I hadn't picked up on any signs of an animal attack—and there were always signs. The earth would've been torn up, with tufts of fur and blood left behind on vegetation. There was always blood. Then again, it was a big island, so it wasn't an impossibility.

Kael hummed. "We should get a move on. I don't want to linger too long—we're still much too close for comfort."

"Let's do it," Riv declared. "But first." She pulled a blade from her skirt pocket and proceeded to bend over and hack away at the lengths of cloth. When she was satisfied, she stood tall in the pile of fabric she'd sheared.

Her skirt now hit just above her knee. "Much better. I can't stand these fuckin' things." She held the knife out to Isla and me and lifted her brows in question.

"I'm okay, for now," Isla answered.

"Same... but I may take you up on that at some point." A long skirt could prove annoying, but we needed to get back to the Keep while avoiding the animals that were stalking us, and who knew how long we'd be out here.

"Rivvy baby, have I mentioned lately that you're my hero?" Kael proclaimed as the four of us left our rest area behind.

"Have I mentioned that if you call me baby, I'll make you cry like one?" she fired back, and we all laughed, which seemed completely uncalled for, given the situation we were in... but we had each other, and right now, that was worth clinging onto.



image-
placeholder

CHAPTER TEN

"What are we going to do? I mean, are we going to stay out here all night? Shouldn't we try to get back to the gate by dusk, like that guard said?" Isla asked as we carefully made our way through a particularly dense part of the forest littered with briar bushes.

"Only two of us have weapons. The best thing we could do is try to get out of here as soon as possible," I said, yanking my cloak away from the clutches of a briar vine.

Kael turned and offered me his hand as I jumped over a muddy puddle. "Getting out of here is the goal, but we've been walking for a couple of hours opposite of the gate. We won't make it back by dusk, I'm afraid."

"Aye, we won't, and the last thing we want is to be out in the open when the sun goes down. Those bloody wolves will be out and about," Riv stated calmly. Nothing scared that woman. Befriending her had been my smartest move since I started on this adventure.

"Right, well, I guess we'll just keep a look out then for somewhere to set up camp," I mused, a little discouraged at the fact that there hadn't been anywhere that would work so far.

I wondered if the rest of the people were alright, if they'd made it back to the Keep, or if they were also wandering through the forest, like us. I could only imagine the backlash the royals would get from the families of the girls and guards that had been wounded or killed. This was not what any of us signed up for. The crown's duty was to keep their guests safe and protected, and they'd failed. Horribly.

The flutter of wings had me looking up and seeing two black ravens. They landed on a tree branch a little ways ahead of where we were headed.

"Hey," Riv whispered, causing the rest of us to stop and look at her questioningly. "Don't be obvious or anything, but I think those two birds are following us."

Kael frowned. "I saw some ravens back at the thicket moments before the attack happened."

Isla nodded. "I think you're right, Riv. But what does it mean?"

I stepped closer to my friends. "It *means* we're being watched."

"What?" Isla gasped. "How?"

"There's magic everywhere. Ravens and owls are the two avian species connected to magical abilities." I lowered my voice further. "I suggest we be careful with what we say about certain... people."

Everyone agreed, and we started moving once more. There was one burning question in my mind, though, that wasn't adding up. If we were being watched, then why had no aid been sent? Those birds' eyes were a window to what was going on out here, and if I had to hazard a guess as to who was on the viewing side, it was Corvus. But no, there was no way that the king's sorcerer, his most trusted advisor, would know the carnage that had taken place and the danger that we were still in and wouldn't alert the king. The royal guards who were still in the Keep would be storming the

woods. They wouldn't leave their precious royal sons out here to face the teeth and claws of the beasts that were out here.

Unless...

No. I couldn't go there. That idea was sheer madness. Completely unreasonable.

I wondered what my father would think about all of this. I could practically hear his voice saying, 'I told you so,' but there was no point or time for regrets. I'd made my decision to do this, and here I was. I'd be damned if I went through all of this trouble, betraying my father, leaving my village and my school, to die between the jaws of a tiger. That was simply not an option. Too many people were depending on me—my father, to care for him. My students, to teach them and guide them. It would take a lot more than mindless beasts to take me down.

"Oh, let's gather some of these." Isla's voice broke me from my thoughts, and I watched as she knelt beside a bush that was full of blackberries. "I have a small bag here. We'll need food at some point."

"Good eye," Riv praised, dropping down to help her pluck the ripe berries from their stems.

"I'm also keeping a lookout for wood-ear leaves. They're a dark green plant that looks similar to an ash apple. If any of us happen to get some cuts or scrapes, it has medicinal properties to help fight off infections. None of us need a little cut turning into something much bigger."

"You're so good at this stuff," I said, popping a berry into my mouth and humming at the explosion of the sweet and tart juices on my dry tongue. I was thirsty. Yet another problem to solve.

Isla shrugged. "My grandpa taught me a lot. I might not be a fighter or very outgoing, but this," she waved her hands over the blackberry bush,

"this is my happy place. Studying botany and the medicinal properties that are possible, it's fascinating to me."

"And for good reason," Kael declared around a mouthful of fruit. "Had an old chap in training who didn't know the difference between nettles and an oak leaf. Wiped his arse with the wrong one, and I'm telling you, the man didn't walk right for days."

"Dear Goddess," Isla exclaimed, shocked. "But... they look nothing alike. Nettles have a very distinct shape and color..."

"Did I mention he was an idiot?" Kael deadpanned, and I laughed.

"Well, I'm glad we have you on our team," I said to Isla, grinning. "We're a group of misfits, but we all seem to have a distinct strength that, when we come together, just works."

Isla smiled. "I'm the healer. Riv is our strength. You're our brain, and Kael—"

"Is the handsome asshole who is going to keep you lot safe," he finished.

The distinct sound of a twig snapping had all of us freezing in place. I met Riv's eyes. The noise had come from behind me, but she had a direct view. Her blade was drawn within the time it took for Isla to gasp. Spinning around, I stared in disbelief as a group of people filtered through the trees.

"Thank the Goddess," Isla breathed.

A few guards and maybe ten women made up their party. One of the women was being supported by two guards, clearly favoring one leg, and I recognized her. Ayla was one of the women who had been with Belinda last night when I hugged Kael.

"We're glad to see you," one of the guards said as they reached us. Gently, they helped her down onto a rock to rest.

"What happened?" Isla asked, immediately jumping into healer mode.

The girl winced. "When the wolves started attacking, I slipped on that hill at the top of the stream. I think I rolled my ankle, and I know I scraped my leg up pretty bad." She pulled up the skirt of her dress, revealing a horribly swollen ankle that was already a nasty shade of purple, along with a wicked laceration that was probably eight inches long. Even now, blood was slowly trickling from the wound, dripping down her leg and off her shoe.

"By the sun," Kael cursed, grimacing.

Isla nodded. "We need to clean this out and wrap it before you lose more blood. Ideally, a wound like this should be stitched, but I don't have the necessary tools."

Several people stepped up, asking Isla how they could help. She became someone completely different than the quiet girl I'd come to know over the little time we'd spent together. Confidence oozed out of her very being as she calmly directed the guards to remove their undershirts so she could use them as a tourniquet, and before she could even ask, Riv was there.

"You need some of those herbs, right? The ones you were just telling us about?"

"Yes, please." She glanced around for a moment, scanning the woods. "There should be some just over there, that eastern facing hill, near those bay trees," she directed, pointing her finger.

"You, and you," Riv said, nodding at two of the girls. "Come with me."

The three of them jogged off to where Isla had pointed. Focused completely on her task, Isla got to work.

Kael greeted the guards, formally introducing himself. "Welcome, brothers. Glad to see you're safe."

"Was dicey there for a second. I'm Rion, and this here is Tiro and Girane."

Rion had long, dark hair and a weathered face that wasn't unattractive, which just seemed to symbolize his life experience. He'd seen some stuff. Tiro was the largest of the three, with a shaved head and a wicked scar that slashed over his right eye. Girane was the eldest of the three, with silvery hair, and as he removed his shirt, I saw that his left arm had been amputated. He wore a sleeve at the elbow underneath his uniform, so you wouldn't take note that he was missing the appendage unless you noticed his hand wasn't there. It wasn't uncommon to see guards that had lost legs, hands, or arms while in service.

"What the devil do you think is going on out here?" Tiro asked Kael as he buttoned his jacket.

"Wish I knew, brother. It's madness, all of it," Kael replied. "And it's not like the guards of the Isle were exactly forthcoming with information."

Rion scoffed. "You can say that again. Do you think they're offended that some of us will be stationed here after The Hunt?"

Kael shrugged. "Or that none of them were trusted to protect the women out here? I didn't see a single one, did any of you?"

The other three guards shook their heads.

"I'm sure if we're patient and just sit tight, the royals will be here to rescue us soon."

I cringed. I knew that voice. Of all the people, why did I have to be stuck out here with her?

I turned slowly, my eyes landing on Belinda. Her normally perfectly powdered face was smeared with dirt, and her cheeks were bright red. She was still trying to act better than us, but her back wasn't as straight as usual,

her shoulders sagged, and when she straightened her skirt, I saw the way her hands shook. A pang of sympathy struck me, and I felt no joy in seeing *anyone* in this situation.

"And what if they don't come?" another girl, whose name I believed was Tiona, challenged. She wiped sweat from her forehead, not realizing she'd just smeared mud across her light brown skin. Nobody bothered pointing it out because we were all filthy. "This entire situation is bullshit and stinks like it, too."

Before anyone could respond, Riv and her two helpers returned and eagerly handed Isla the herbs. She got to work, ripping the plants into little bits and pieces. "Spit in my hand," she demanded, holding her hand up to Ayla.

"W-what?" she stammered as if she'd misheard.

"I need some moisture to make this work, and I'd rather use your spit instead of mine. You already have your own germs, so no need to add to it." She moved her palm closer. "Now, spit."

Ayla leaned forward and cupped her hand around her mouth, trying to shield the rest of us from actually seeing her spit, though the others who were watching still looked horrified. Isla didn't so much as bat an eye as she mixed up a dark green paste and began gently pressing it into the wound.

"What do you mean by that, Tiona? You don't think they're going to come to rescue us? That's preposterous!" Annabelle, a very striking woman from the Ekpen Kingdom, demanded, clutching her hands against her chest.

Arguing broke out between the group, which had now multiplied from four to nearly twenty. Not only that, the majority of the people here were horrified by the act of spitting. What the hell were we going to do now? It

was going to be substantially more difficult to hide our tracks now—not to mention they'd been leaving a blood trail right to us. My eyes widened. *Shit.*

Kael seemed to have come to the same conclusion I had because we both looked at each other with urgency at the exact same moment. He marched over to me, and we stepped away from the group, not that they would've noticed with all of the bickering going on.

"Are you thinking what I am?" he demanded, the blue of his eyes becoming harder.

"The blood trail?" I guessed, and he nodded solemnly. "We need to move away from here as soon as possible."

He ran his hands through his hair which was now thoroughly out of control. None of it was tied back at this point, and a long blond curl hung over his right eye. "Idiots. We're out here, surrounded by apex predators, and they didn't think they should wrap that shit up?"

I shrugged. "What's done is done, but if those animals follow that trail..."

"No, no, you're right. Time is of the essence."

We hurriedly returned to the group just as Isla finished wrapping up the leg.

"It will be good enough until we get back to the castle," she said as she stood up and brushed her hands on her skirt. "I also wrapped the ankle as best I could to limit mobility, which should at least help with the pain a bit."

Ayla did seem to be more relaxed now, which I hoped was from the pain relief and not from going into shock.

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but we need to move out. As fast as possible," Kael said, getting a mixture of looks ranging from determined, to confused and scared.

"The blood," I said, pointing at the puddle at Ayla's feet. "If she was bleeding like that the entire way here, there's a blood trail leading right to us. Those animals can track us without fresh blood, but factor that in, and we may as well have a rope that attaches us right to them."

Several girls hopped up, understanding the urgency.

"I just really think we should wait for hel—"

A howl sliced through the forest, cutting off Belinda's absurd idea.

Riv grabbed a handful of the herbs and stuffed them into her pockets. "Right then, we're getting the fuck out of here. Anyone who wants to stay with her and wait for help, be my guest. Those who want to live, let's go."

Tiro scooped Ayla into his arms, and we were on the run once again. Belinda whined about it but didn't hesitate to stay with the group. She was a horrible person, but I was glad she'd decided to come. Anyone who stayed behind would end up dead, of that I was sure.

"We need to find shelter—a cave would be ideal!" Kael shouted over his shoulder to everyone. "If we can't find a cave, then at least a spot that has great visibility in all directions. The last thing we need is to give the animals a place they can sneak up on us!"

"I thought I saw some caves near the coastline when we were coming into port!" someone shouted.

"Then we need to head east," Girane barked, pointing to the location of the sun, which indicated we were due west at the moment. "This way, ladies."

We veered as a group, and a second howl echoed. It was further away than the first one had been but still much too close. "I think they found the spot we were in," I announced, forcing my legs to move faster. I bloody hated running, and it wasn't like I ever ran around like this in my daily life.

My lungs were already on fire, and my legs matched. I was probably going to die due to a lack of oxygen and being out of shape.

"I can't breathe," the girl beside me panted.

"We can't stop," I urged, grabbing her by the arm and dragging her with me. "If we stop, we're dead."

"I'm dead if I can't breathe!"

"What's your name?" I asked as we flew over the dead leaves and twigs beneath us.

"B-Becca."

I had to get her to keep running. "Trust me, Becca," I gasped for air, "I'm right there with you... but I'd rather die... because I'm a shit runner and out of shape... than be ripped to shreds."

Becca glanced at me with tears in her brown eyes. "Don't leave me."

"Never," I vowed, tightening my hold on her arm. We were evenly matched at running speed, so it wasn't an inconvenience for me to help encourage her. Maybe it would trick my own body into continuing, knowing that I had this girl depending on me.

We kept running for at least twenty minutes; it felt like twenty years. When I got out of this, I vowed I'd never run again. Or even walk briskly. This was enough for a lifetime. Finally, the trees began thinning. Almost there.

We emerged from the forest into a meadow of tall grass and wildflowers like a herd of sheep being led out to pasture. *Fatten them up before the slaughter.*

Surprisingly, we seemed to move quicker now. As though we knew we were close to our goal and we'd gotten a burst of hope. Without warning, I

crashed hard into the group of girls in front of me. "Oof," I groaned, hitting the ground along with Becca. "What the—"

Having landed on my back gave me a direct view above. Of the blue sky... and the... *What are those?* I strained my eyes, focusing on the shapes above.

"Are those birds?"

"That has to be the biggest bird I've ever seen."

My heart raced as one of the massive creatures descended from a height that I knew no bird would ever fly—and if they would, they'd be nothing more than a speck at that distance.

A quick scan had me counting two.

I pushed myself up and pulled Becca to her feet. Everyone's eyes were on the sky now, which I guessed was why we'd stopped so abruptly. We needed to get moving again, fast. My brain was screaming at me that I knew what those creatures were. Regardless of what logic was saying, I knew.

"Run!" I shouted, making some of the people jump from the sudden noise. "Run, NOW!"

We took off. There were maybe a hundred yards between us and the rocky boulders that lined the coast. If we could disappear within them, we'd be safe... at least from those things. I don't know why, but I glanced back and saw two of the women still standing there, watching the sky.

"Come on!" I screamed. "What are you doing!?"

"We just want to see what those things are!" Annabelle shouted back. Glancing up, my heart nearly choked me when I saw how much closer they'd gotten—and how fast they were moving.

"THEY'RE FUCKING DRAGONS!" I shrieked at the top of my lungs. "FUCKING RUN!"

Others were yelling at them to run, but it was too late. I saw the moment they realized they needed to move. The way their legs sprang into action and how their eyes told the tale that this was going to be the last thing they ever saw. My mouth opened as a giant red dragon swooped down, its wingspan easily the length of the ship we'd arrived on. Smoke belled out of its nostrils as the girls ran from it, not getting far before the shadow of the dragon swallowed them up. A brutal grip on my arm snapped me out of my terror. It was Becca this time, encouraging me to action.

I tore my eyes from the sight just as the dragon opened its mouth with a roar, spewing out flames that engulfed the two girls and scorched the earth surrounding them.

"Oh my Goddess! Oh, my sweet Goddess!" Belinda cried, her voice more shrill than I'd ever heard. It didn't even bother me.

"Get into the boulders!" Kael barked, letting the women slide past him into the narrow pathways. The boulders were all giant—even the smallest ones stood at least ten feet tall. They were all pressed together, making a maze of pathways between them. If we were lucky, we'd be able to find a cluster of boulders, where they'd ended up stacked upon each other, leaving an open spot beneath them.

"Just keep moving until we find a spot that has aerial coverage!" Riv shouted as we ran single file through the stone maze.

"We're sitting ducks in here!" I screamed. "If the dragons blast us with fire from above, there will be no escape!" My heart was beating at a very unhealthy rate. Who knew it would take getting so close to death in order to feel so alive.

"Not gonna happen, Eves!" Kael shouted from behind me. "We're getting out of this, come hell or high water!"

Speaking of high water... I looked down at the sand beneath my feet and found... seashells and kelp. "Goddess damn it, Kael! The tide reaches these boulders!"

"I know, but I can tell by the salt lines on the rocks that it doesn't get very high. Now shut your mouth and focus, Evie."

My mouth snapped shut, and I blinked at Kael, unsure of how to feel about the way he'd just barked at me like I was some new recruit in the guard. I didn't get to ponder it for long.

"Up here!" someone called out from the front of the line. "I think this will work!"

Becca and I took off, following the group, when the sound of a ship's sail caught by the wind came from above. Stumbling, I tilted my head back and nearly choked on a scream. A reddish-gold dragon swept over the boulders, its massive eyes tracking, searching.

"Go, go!" Kael boomed as I made eye contact with the beast.

Yelping, I darted forward, following the footsteps in the sand. I was moving so fast that I didn't see the cave, nor that the footprints ended. The scent of smoke filled my nose, and I froze, knowing I was about to become nothing more than a charred lump of flesh. Suddenly, I was pulled to the left, slamming my shoulder against a rock. I yelped and spun around, coming face to face with a madwoman.

"Sorry, luv!" Riv grinned maniacally. "Get yer arse in here!" She yanked me into a cave that was hidden between two fifteen foot boulders, only accessible through a very narrow opening. No wonder I hadn't seen it.

"Kael!" I screamed and jumped out of the way just in time for him to dive through the opening. A blast of intense heat blew past the entrance of our hideout, and my legs finally gave out. I collapsed to the ground and fell

onto my back, gasping for breath. Screams echoed from outside of our hideout and I slammed my hands over my ears, trying to block it out and immediately feeling shame for it. I had no idea how many of the group were still out there, wandering through the maze of rocks.

I was terrified to find out and my entire body trembled and shook from the exertion and adrenaline. In my peripheral, I saw Kael leaning against the rock wall.

"Is this— what death— from running— feels like?" Becca gasped for air to get her words out, and I weakly flopped my head to the right, finding her stretched out on the ground right next to me.

I cracked a pathetic excuse of a smile. It was the best I could do. But I was so glad to see her, and since I could scarcely get enough air in my lungs to continue living, I simply reached out and grabbed her hand.

Isla ran over and crashed down next to me and Becca. Her wide eyes bounced from me to Kael. "That was way too close."

"Ya think?" Kael panted, wiping his face with the back of his arm.

Riv let out a whoop, which made several of us jump. "Goddess, I have never had such pure energy flow through these veins!" She looked around. "And let me tell ya, these veins have been with me through many a dastardly situation!"

All I could do was lay where I was and attempt to calm down. It wasn't easy. I'd never been so terrified in my life, so why did I suddenly feel the urge to cackle like a deranged witch?

"Are you insane?" Belinda barked at Riv.

Riv grinned. "Maybe."

Belinda rolled her eyes and went to get up when, abruptly, Rivka reached down into her boot and pulled out her knife. She spun the handle of her

blade against the palm of her hand, then tossed it into the air, grabbed it, and hurled it through the air right at Belinda.

Several screams and gasps echoed around the cavernous walls. A thunk told me that her blade had hit whatever the target had been, and Belinda swallowed roughly, turning slightly. Just behind her, an enormous crab lay pinned to the ground, and the handle of Riv's blade protruded from its blue shell.

"Crab legs it is!" Riv announced, pumping her fist in the air as she waltzed over to where her kill lay. She didn't take her eyes off Belinda as she passed her, nor as she bent down and retrieved the knife, wiping the blood on her skirt. Belinda's face was pale as a ghost, and I couldn't hold it back any longer. Laughter bubbled out of me like the water rushing through a broken dam—forceful, overpowering, and limitless.

Several questioning faces watched on, probably wondering if I was having a mental breakdown, which made me laugh harder. Riv joined in, and soon, nearly everyone was hysterically laughing. At what? I didn't have the slightest clue, only that if I didn't laugh, I felt like I might cry... and I didn't cry. Ever.

"Right then," Riv proclaimed, holding her stomach, which had to be cramping from laughter like mine was. She retrieved the crab and plopped it down on a small rock.

"I'll find some dry wood," Tiro offered. "And I'll keep an eye out to see if any more of those buggers are hiding out in here."

"Are we even going to be able to make a fire here?" Belinda asked from her corner, far away from Rivka.

I chuckled, still battling the giggles. Oh Goddess, was this the hysteria that women were accused of? I definitely had it.

"Did you not witness the absolute inferno that just occurred on the other side of that wall? I have no doubt we'll be able to have a fire," Tiona answered Belinda when nobody else piped up.

"Well, good. It will be cold here soon, and I'll get sick. I'd hate to have the sniffles on my wedding night with Prince Torin."

Kael leaned into me and whispered in my ear. "I kind of hope she snots on his dick."

A snort, one I hadn't seen coming, came out, and I slapped my hands over my face. *Hysteria*. I was hysterical.

Kael and Isla both started laughing again. "That's probably the sound he'd make, too."

"Oh Goddess, please stop," I begged, inhaling a few staggering deep breaths, trying to get myself together. I knew it was no time to laugh, but the trauma reaction was running the show. This was not how I'd typically behave.

A yawn overtook me, and just like that, all the energy I had seemed to evacuate my body as I exhaled. "Goddess, I'm tired."

Several other people yawned and mumbled their agreement with that statement. I felt like I could sleep for a hundred years. The last few days had been nonstop—leaving home for the first time, traveling across the realm and then the sea... meeting so many new people, and attending the ball. And then today... running as though my life depended on it—because it did.

It was all too much.

"You think we're safe here?" I asked Kael, looking back at him. He was sitting on the ground, his back resting against the smooth wall.

He nodded. "As safe as we can be, for now. No dragon can reach us here, and the wolves will be inclined to stay back if there are dragons lurking. Survival of the fittest and all that."

I scanned the cavern we'd made our safe space. Becca was huddled against Ayla, who had her leg propped up. The guards were sharing soft words with serious expressions. We'd lost two on our journey here, but it could've been so much worse.

How many more would we lose?



image-
placeholder

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Do you think dragons have night vision?" Isla questioned as she plucked a juicy chunk of crab from its broken shell.

"I think it best not to put it to chance," Kael muttered, wiping his hands on his pants, already littered with the stains of trauma.

"We can't stay here forever," I added as I tried to tame my hair. "Aside from the obvious lack of resources like fresh water and food—aside from crab—we aren't visible to anyone. So if there are people looking for us, they'd never find us."

Girane cleared his throat. "So maybe we should try to head back to the Keep? That would be the safest place."

"The only question is: when do we move?" Riv mused.

"Well, we know that we've seen wolves, tigers, and dragons. Wolves and tigers are both nocturnal animals," I explained and cut off the incoming question from Belinda, already knowing what she was going to ask. "And no, I don't know why they were so active during the day. It's definitely not... normal."

Several people shifted uncomfortably, no doubt reliving the events of the day.

"So we have to decide... do we make a run for it tonight, knowing two of the three predators we've encountered are known to be night hunters, or do we stay put and take our chances in the daylight with the dragons thrown into the mix?" Belinda stood up, radiating anger. The way her fists clenched, it wouldn't have been surprising if she'd drawn her own blood. "This is absurd! This is not what I agreed to!"

"Nobody agreed to this," Isla said, tossing the now clean crab shell into the small fire the guards had made.

"Where the bloody hell is our rescue?!" Belinda demanded, pacing now. "It doesn't make any sense."

Tiona leaned back against the wall and threw her hands up, exasperated. "That's what I've been saying all along. Nothing about this adds up."

Everyone was thinking it, yet nobody was willing to actually say the words. It was as though speaking our thoughts amongst each other would give truth to what was, at the moment, a terrible suspicion.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Riv cursed. She held out her giant crab leg and pointed at each of us around the room. "You lot *all* know what is going on. Nobody wants to say it?" She shrugged and picked at the shell in frustration. "Fine then. I'll bloody say it. *This was a set-up.*"

It shouldn't have been a shock, which was why only a few gasps were heard. The fire flickered, illuminating the somber expressions of the survivors.

"You think—what? That the royals sent us out here to get massacred by animals!?" Belinda asked, waving her arms around frantically. "Think about that. That makes no sense!"

"Actually, if you think about it, it does make sense," I said calmly. Belinda wheeled around on me, malice in her gaze. "What?" I held up my hands. "It's not like I want to believe it. Because you're right. It shouldn't make sense. It completely defies sense. But there are things that have happened that can't really be explained..."

Tiro sat down next to Kael and looked me in the eye. "Speaking of such things is treason against the crown."

"And what if it's true, Tiro? What then?" I stared him down, unwavering. I saw the flash of doubt there, like a black hole. Now that the conversation had come up, the paranoia and doubt would spread like a toxin.

"I'm simply stating something that is a fact," he said, crossing his long legs. "Everyone knows that when it comes to treason, what's true and false, none of that matters. All that matters is loyalty."

"This is simply a conversation between a group of people who were nearly slaughtered today. Multiple times. I think it is fair to say that what is discussed within this cave stays within this cave." Kael looked at the other three guards, giving them a hard expression. "Right, brothers?"

After a moment, they all nodded in agreement, and Rion cleared his throat. "Since we're in agreement to speak candidly, I thought dragons were extinct."

"They are. It's believed none have been spotted since before the peace agreement between the five kingdoms was originally signed," Isla piped up. "And that was generations ago."

"And the tigers," Rion added. "Tigers are not native to this island. Wolves, sure. Wolves can, and do, live practically everywhere... but not tigers."

Tigers. Wolves. Dragons. All animals that represented one of the royal houses. The only animal we hadn't come across yet were bears.

Alasdair's deep green eyes flashing to gold surfaced in my mind. Was this a coincidence?

"So the royal families had the animals brought in for The Hunt, so what?" Belinda scoffed, crossing her arms. "This entire conversation is outrageous."

Nobody acknowledged her. Whether that was due to the fact that our minds were collectively spinning with dark thoughts or we'd all just heard enough of her whining, it didn't really matter.

"We're going to need water at some point," Riv said, redirecting back to the point. "Most of us haven't had any since breakfast, and the last thing we need is dehydration."

"The only freshwater I've seen was at that stream." Tiona visibly shuddered. "I'm not going back there."

The cave grew quiet once more.

"I think we should stay here for a few hours and get some rest. Everyone is exhausted, and tired people make stupid decisions," Kael stated, looking around for any objections.

"I agree," Tiro announced, backing up his brother-in-arms.

Kael nodded once. "Perfect. Get some rest then, and we'll prepare to move out. We should head out early, about an hour or two before the day begins to break. I don't think we're that far from the Keep, maybe two to three hours if we keep a good pace."

Everyone started settling down immediately. Even without total darkness, it wasn't difficult, as though our bodies and brains just needed to be told to stop. Riv positioned herself between Isla and myself, leaning back against

the wall with her legs out. "Come, rest your pretty heads," she said, patting her thighs. I didn't need to be told twice. I nestled down and laid my head on her leg. Thankfully I still had my cloak, and I wrapped it around me.

"Thanks, Riv," I mumbled sleepily. If she replied, I never heard it. The sweet oblivion of sleep pulled me under with an intensity stronger than a rip tide.

I wandered through hallway after hallway. The ceilings towered over me, and I absentmindedly wondered how it was possible to build something so grand. The stone floor was cool against my bare feet. Where were my shoes?

I looked down and found myself in a sheer white sleep gown, one that trailed behind me as I moved through the castle like a phantom. I'd never worn anything like that in my life... it was something I'd imagine a bride would wear.

"This way," a woman called out as she appeared at the end of the long hall. She was dressed in a servant's outfit, but her features were harder to make out at such a distance.

"I'm coming," I replied, eager to find out where I was. I blinked and then jumped when I found myself standing right next to her. I glanced back down the hall. Wasn't I further away?

The sounds of conversation reached my ears, and I looked around, only finding one open door. "Come, now. The wedding night preparations are complete, and you should not be wandering about when you're dressed in such a way," she scolded and began walking down the hall to the open double doors where the voices were coming from.

My stomach rolled with a sudden burst of anxiety. Wedding night? I wasn't married...

I slowed my strides, my feet finally catching up with my brain. Something wasn't right.

"Here we are, Your Majesty," the servant woman said, holding her arm out toward the open doorway, her gaze firmly locked on... me. I tossed a look behind me, wondering who she was talking to, and frowning when nobody was there.

"W-what?" I stammered, coming to a complete stop.

She smiled softly and approached me like one would a frightened rabbit. "Now, dear. It's nothing to be scared or worried about. Consummation of the marriage is expected, queen or commoner, it matters not." She leaned in closer and lowered her voice. "It's a woman's duty to please her husband. May I recommend you close your eyes and picture something pleasant? It will be over before you know it, and myself and your other maids will draw a warm bath for you for afterward..."

I blinked. "Afterward," I repeated, vaguely aware of her looping her arm through mine and guiding me to the doors. A massive four poster bed came into view. Sheer white sheets hung above, falling down to the floor and completely enclosing the bed.

A group of people were gathered off to either side of the bed, and I could feel all of their eyes on me. What were they doing in here? I looked at my... maid. As though she had read my mind, she squeezed my arm reassuringly. "Royal marriage consummation must be witnessed, so there's no doubt of the validity of the union."

Witnessed? They were going to watch? Who had I even married? There was no way...

Suddenly, everyone began bowing and curtsying. Were they doing that for my sake or...

"Ah, I see you've found my queen, Hildegard."

My eyes flew open, and I sat up with a start. A cool sweat had broken out over my skin, causing me to shiver. My thoughts were hazy as I tried to calm my heart, which was racing. What kind of dream was that? It felt so real. Not like a dream at all, almost like a memory.

And that voice. *"I see you've found my queen..."*

It sounded so familiar. My nightmares should have been filled with tigers and dragons. The only explanation was that I was so exhausted and traumatized from this entire ordeal that I was having dreams about horrific outcomes that I'd ensure would never come to pass. If I ever got married, it would be on my terms to someone I chose, not some royal asshole who thought they owned me. Who thought I'd let people watch our wedding night...

I'd heard rumors that royals did such things—that eyewitnesses were needed to validate the consummation of the wedding. Such topics were naturally exciting for schoolgirls and boys to discuss once they figured out what sex was. I was always open with my father about questions, but I never thought to bring up that particular thing.

"You okay, Eves?" Kael whispered, and I glanced over, finding his concerned face.

"Yeah," I whispered back. "Just had a weird dream." I scanned our group, finding that most were still asleep. Soft snores, and some loud ones thanks to Tiro, bounced around the cavern.

Kael shifted, turning toward me. "This is the most fucked up situation I've ever been in... and I've been in my fair share of shit."

"None of it makes sense, Kael. Were the royals even in the forest? Where in the damn realm are they?" I demanded, struggling to keep my voice low enough as my temper rose once again. It seemed I was just living in a current state of irritability, and I felt unstable, like the slightest thing would cause me to explode.

We sat silently as we processed. Despite the exhaustion, the urge to do something, anything, was rising inside of me. The fire had burned down considerably, while the embers' red glow painted the dark of the cave in an ominous light. Belinda was slouched against a rock directly across from us, sound asleep. She really was beautiful. It was too bad she was completely rotten on the inside. Even though I hated the royals, I felt a modicum of pity for whoever ended up choosing her as a bride... and I just knew she'd get chosen.

"We'll have to wake them soon," Kael sighed.

I pulled my gaze from Belinda back to my guard and froze. "Kael," I said calmly, despite the strong urge to scream. "Do. Not. Move."

His blue eyes widened, and like a good soldier, he didn't so much as blink. My father's words echoed within my head. *"Move fast and sure. Don't hesitate."*

The snake that was inches from Kael's head was seconds from striking. Snakes never scared me, and I'd run more than a few of them from our house before. This snake, though, was a sea snake, and poisonous. I could see its green scales glimmering from where it was pressed within the rocks of the cave wall.

My hand moved quickly, and I aimed as close to the head as possible. Kael jumped forward as I tightened my grip around the hissing serpent, pulling it from the rocks, both of my hands clamped firmly around its head.

"How the bloody hell did you even see that!?" Kael gasped as he looked from my face to the writing body of the sea snake that was a good three feet long.

"Snake!" A girl screeched, waking everyone.

"It's okay, it's okay," I assured them.

Rivka hopped up and produced her knife. "Looks like we have breakfast."

"Oh, don't kill it," Becca cried out.

"I'm hungry. Anyone else?" Riv questioned, looking around.

I kicked away the snake's tail, which was trying to wrap around my leg. "Um, I don't care one way or the other, but can someone decide soon because this thing isn't exactly lightweight..."

Becca clamped her eyes shut as Riv's knife slashed through the air, leaving me holding a snake head.

"I will not eat that garbage," Belinda sneered, pointing at the now still body lying in the sand.

"Good, more for the rest of us who actually want to get out of this nightmare," Riv shot back as she bent over and plucked the carcass from the ground. She didn't waste any time before setting on her self-appointed task of preparing breakfast.

Kael walked over to me and grabbed the snake head from my hands, which I realized were shaking. He tossed it into the burning coals and then guided me by the arm over to a corner in the front of the cave. "Evie. You saved my life. Thank you."

"It really wasn't that big of—"

He held up a hand. "Don't underplay it." He paused, running a hand through his blond hair. "But really, how did you see it? It's too dark in here. Even with a strong fire, it would've still been hard to spot..."

I looked behind us into the belly of the cave. It didn't seem that dark to me. I could clearly see each person, even the ones in the very back. Girane and Rion were talking to each other, Isla was talking to Ayla, presumably about her injury...

"Are you serious?" I asked, looking back to Kael. "It's not that dark."

His mouth dropped. "Are you messing with me?"

"Uh, no?" I questioned, getting confused. "What do you see right now?"

He peered into the cave. "I can see the dim, red coals of the fire. I can see that a few people are standing around it. That's it."

I swallowed harshly. "Yeah, same," I lied and chuckled. "I guess we just have different ideas of what 'really dark' means."

Kael hummed as he stared down at me. He was smart and observant, so I wasn't completely sure he bought my lie, but I didn't understand it myself... How was it that I could see so well in a supposedly dark cave? People were on such high alert right now—I didn't want to give anyone a reason to view me as being 'different.'

"Right," he cleared his throat. "Well, in any case, thank you. Sea snake bites can kill a man in under a minute, and I hear it's an excruciatingly painful way to go."

"You would've done the same for me," I replied, bumping him with my shoulder, attempting to lighten the mood.

"Aye, I would. Don't forget it. Let's grab a bite and then get a move on. I have a feeling our journey back to the Keep today isn't going to be an easy

one..."

If only we knew how right his feeling was.

"We stick together, don't venture off alone, no exceptions," Kael ordered our group as we stood near the exit. "Our plan is to head back to the Keep along the coastline. We need to move as quickly as possible, as quietly as possible. There's no telling what we might encounter, so keep your eyes and ears open at all times."

Nobody spoke, but I could see the looks of fear and determination painted on their faces as everyone nodded.

My muscles twitched from adrenaline and the weight of not knowing what the day would bring. All I could do was keep going. I couldn't give up.

I was at the front with Kael, Riv, and Isla. The salty air hit my face as I squeezed through the narrow opening, back into the labyrinth of rock walls and sand. It was dark now, with maybe two hours until dawn. Despite the other night being the full moon, heavy cloud cover blocked any light that would benefit the others as they stumbled through with their hands against the walls for guidance. I still found it easy to see though. Almost as if everything was illuminated, and that was definitely something I'd never experienced before. As strange as it was, I couldn't focus on why it was happening or what it meant. I decided it was a blessing from the Goddess, giving us the advantage to escape this disaster.

"Do you see anything overhead?" someone behind me asked nobody in particular.

Murmurs of 'no' trickled through the line. I turned my eyes to the sky, peaking through the towering boulders, and felt relieved that I, too, saw nothing.

"Maybe dragons aren't nocturnal," Isla whispered, hope heavy in her tone.

"One small win for us then," Riv replied.

The sand was packed and damp beneath my boots, which made it easy enough to walk through and I was thankful for that small win. My body ached while standing stationary, so the flat terrain was practically a gift as it was easier to maneuver through.

"What do you think the royals will do? You know, for the families of the fallen girls?" Isla asked.

"Probably pay them hush money so they don't cause any problems," I huffed.

Kael turned a corner, leading us deeper into the maze. "They're going to have to pay more than just those families. Think about it. We all saw what happened—we're all out here, being stalked like prey. They're going to have to pay every single person who was a victim of this madness if they want to avoid scandal."

"And that's on top of the money they already owe the women who won't get a proposal," Riv added.

"They're going to be out a lot of coin by the end of this, that's for sure," Kael agreed.

We walked in silence for a while, lost in our own thoughts. There were too many questions, too many what-ifs. At the end of the day, all I knew was that the four kingdoms had completely failed the women who they had invited here. To a place that was supposed to provide a life-changing opportunity for most of us and had ended up being a living nightmare. A massacre. How would they ever make things right?

For me, I knew it would be an impossible feat. I came into this hating them, and now, my feelings had hardened. There was no excuse as to why we were still out here, marching through rock formations, single file, like a perfect row of prey. More than enough time had passed for us to have been rescued. So where the hell were they?

A scream pierced the air, halting all of us in our tracks. Frozen, we looked back, trying to see where the sound had come from. The walkway was too narrow to see everyone, but nobody was moving. Whispers came from the back of the line, working their way toward us at the front.

"It wasn't one of us," Tiona said.

"Quiet." Kael shouted. "Listen."

All I could hear was the pounding of my own heart and the distant sound of the waves crashing against the shore. A roar came next, followed by more screams. By the sound of it, they weren't very close. Probably near the forest, which sent a cold shiver down my back as I realized just how loud that woman had screamed. And that roar...

"Tigers?" Becca gasped, full of terror.

"No," Kael answered somberly. "I'd know that roar anywhere."

We all looked at him urgently, desperate to know what our next challenge was going to be.

"Bears," he supplied.

My stomach sank. The final animal of the four kingdoms that we hadn't encountered yet.

"What do we do?!" someone shouted.

"We're all going to die," another whimpered.

"We're going to stop talking and keep moving. There's nothing we can do for whatever poor soul is out there right now. Bears have an excellent sense

of smell. It's how they track their prey," Kael explained.

"Now, let's fucking move," Rivka barked, snapping everyone out of the fear trance they'd fallen into.

We didn't so much as whisper a single word as we moved faster than before. Each roar that reached us spurred us on, giving us the energy we needed to keep going. When the screams abruptly stopped, I sighed. Maybe it made me a bad person, but I was thankful that the victim's suffering had ended.

The sky slowly began to lighten as the sun rose from the sea, and it should have been a relief. A moment of triumph that we survived the night, but for me, all the sun brought was a new day of unknowns. I wasn't sure what was worse—terror in the darkness, where the carnage was hidden... or terror in the broad daylight, where you could see the things that scared you, look them in the eye, and fully witness their deadly wrath.

My mouth was so dry it hurt to swallow, and I knew dehydration had already begun. With the amount of running and walking we'd all endured over the past eighteen hours, we would need water. The sooner, the better.

"Kael," I rasped, holding my throat. "We've been keeping this pace for over an hour now. How long do you think we have until we reach the Keep? Water is going to become necessary."

Not stopping, he nodded. "I think we should be getting close. I'm going to have to climb up and see where we're at. Let's keep going a little longer, and then I'll take a look. Our best bet for water is at the Keep. There is a freshwater pond just outside of the front gate. The path we're on will lead us right to it."

"Okay," I croaked out, then relayed the plan to Riv and Isla, who were right behind me. They'd pass it along so that everyone was on the same

page.

Sea birds were circling overhead, calling out to one another without a care in the world. That was a good sign. If dragons were to show up, the birds would be the first to know and their scattering would be a dead giveaway. I watched as they swooped and glided, some of them eagerly swallowing down whatever they'd just found in the sand or water. Two black birds joined the circling flock, and I squinted, trying to get a better look. Ravens. *Just like the ones that had been in the forest yesterday.*

"Riv," I whispered over my shoulder.

"Already spotted them. About a mile back," she said, her voice low.

I gritted my teeth. We'd been followed by ravens nearly the entire time we'd been out here, and that could only mean one thing. Corvus knew where we were and what was happening. His cold, dark eyes flashed in my mind. The look of complete boredom as we'd walked through that gate yesterday. He had something to do with this, I was one hundred percent sure of it now, and I couldn't wait to get back to the keep and raise hell.

"Okay," Kael announced, coming to a stop. "I'm going up there to see where we're at. With any luck, we'll be right where we need to be and this madness can end."

"Be careful," I said. I'd only known Kael a short time, but I cared about him. A lot. My heart couldn't handle it if something happened to him.

He grinned roguishly, in a completely Kael way, and winked. "Don't worry about me, Eves. Be right back."

Kael was so tall that he was able to walk up the side of the rocks with each foot on one side of the wall. He searched for a good hold with his left hand and then pushed off the opposite wall, hoisting himself up and over the ledge, disappearing from sight.

"I don't think I've ever been so nervous," Isla admitted.

"Please, let us be close," Becca murmured under her breath as she gazed up at the spot Kael had vanished from.

Seconds ticked by, which felt like hours. I shifted on my feet, ready to do — well, I wasn't sure what. But I was ready.

"That's it, I'm going up," Riv declared, shoving her blade into her skirt and placing a foot on the wall.

"No need, love," Kael said, making us all jump. His blond hair hung down as he leaned over the edge above us. He smiled. "I was more on point than I thought. The Keep is within eyeshot."

Cries of relief and whoops of joy came from our group. I grinned at Riv and then at Isla, who had tears running down her pretty, dirt-splotched face.

"I'll stay up here and guide you all out. It's a pretty straight shot, but just to be safe..." Kael trailed off, hopping up and looking around for threats. "Coast is clear. Let's get out of here!"

Rion stepped up, offering his strength to help us climb up, and since I was at the front of the group, I also volunteered to help. I couldn't just stand around. Kael grabbed hold of nearly every single girl and helped pull them up the rest of the way. When it was just myself and the three remaining guards, Girane patted his thigh, indicating it was my turn. Nobody was screaming in terror, so we were still safe, but I was still wary. *It only takes a moment for things to shift drastically.*

Pushing away my more negative thoughts, I stepped up onto the guard's thigh and reached as high as I could. Tiro put his palms beneath my foot and boosted me up into Kael's arms. With an 'oof.' I was on high ground, and my eyes squinted as the bright morning sun nearly blinded me. I scanned the landscape, spotting the Keep.

"We did it!" Belinda exclaimed, clapping her hands together. Other girls joined in, excitement taking precedence over any other emotion.

Riv walked up next to me, rolling her eyes. "I'll be most grateful to get the hell away from that viper."

Luckily, the viper in question didn't hear her. She was too busy trying to tame her hair and clean up her face in case any of the royals were to find us first.

"Agreed," I replied. Delusion seemed to run deep when it came to the royals and this entire sham of an event. I still hadn't pieced together exactly what was going on, but one thing was certain—I would find out, and I would make sure that whoever was responsible for such atrocities was brought to justice.

The sounds of the guards behind me crawling out of the tunnel had me straightening my spine. I looked around at our ragtag group, marked with scrapes, bruises, dirt, and blood. A calm washed over me as I accepted my self-appointed mission, and I knew we had to get back into that damn castle.

"Ladies and gents," I announced. Every person turned to me, and I inhaled deeply and gestured to the Keep. "Shall we?"

I'm not sure what I was expecting, but when the group parted, making a clear shot to the very front of the line, I wondered when I had stepped into the role of leader. I came here wanting to be unnoticed, unliked, and free of any connections to anybody here. At some point, that had shifted. As I marched to the front of the group, with Kael, Rivka, and Isla right behind me, I realized that I actually cared. Not just about my three friends, but about all of these girls. Maybe it was the teacher in me, the protector, but I was completely invested now.



image-
placeholder

CHAPTER TWELVE

As we made our way over the last of the rocky terrain and into the sandy grass, we were all on high alert. There was no telling what we might encounter and when. We needed to be smart and vigilant.

"Can we please stop at that pond and get some water? I'm dying of thirst," Tiona whined.

Several others piped up at the suggestion, and I had to admit, my throat felt like it was on fire.

"A quick one. We need to get inside as soon as possible," I stated as we hit the gravel pathway that we had walked not two days ago when we got off the ships. Speaking of, I turned and looked out to sea, relieved to find three ships still anchored a ways off. *At least we still have a way out...*

With water in sight, there was no holding back anyone. Nearly everyone began running to the pond, eager to quench their thirst.

"Shhhh!" Riv barked. "We're all bloody thirsty, but I don't feel like dying this close to the goal."

"They're just excited, Riv," Isla responded, smiling at our friend, who looked ready to murder the lot of them.

"I don't give two goat shits, Isla. It's as though none of them have ever read a damn story before. This is the turning point. Where everyone thinks they're saved, and they let their guard down. What happens then?" She dragged her finger across her throat. "They die."

I laughed. "Wow, Riv. That's some dark stuff you've been reading."

We reached the pond, and I all but fell to my knees, eager to get a drink. I dipped my hands into the cool water and nearly cried at the way every tiny cut on my hands stung from the liquid. It would be a miracle if I didn't end up with an infection.

"Oh, fuck!" Becca cursed, and I lifted my eyes from the water cupped in my palms to where she was crouched down. Her face was ghostly white as she pointed at something.

"What is it?" Kael demanded, dropping his hands and letting all of the refreshing water in them fall back into the pond as he stood and marched over to where Becca was.

Her mouth was moving as though she was trying to speak, but the words wouldn't come out. Kael followed her finger with his eyes to a patch of reeds on the other side of the pond that butted up against the stone walls of the keep.

"Stop drinking the water!" he snapped, earning gasps of shock and fear from the girls. I dropped the handful of water I was just about to drink and hastily wiped my hands on my skirt as I hopped up and ran over to him.

"What is that?" I questioned, already looking for a stick or something to fish out whatever that *thing* was. It was just beneath the surface and appeared whitish-blue, about the size of a large carp. But it wasn't a fish. I knew that much.

"T-t-t-" Becca stammered just as I spotted a long and thick enough branch on the ground between a tree and some rocks near the water's edge.

Leaning forward as far as possible, I reached out and drove the branch into the reeds, pulling it back toward me, but I was unsuccessful. Whatever was stuck in there, it didn't budge.

"Try again, Eves," Kael encouraged, his usually jovial smile nothing more than a flat line.

I threw the branch out again and felt it catch on something, grimacing to Kael at the way it stabbed through my target. "Got it." Grunting, I put some force behind my dragging motion and abruptly fell backward as whatever I'd caught broke free from its watery hold.

"Oh my Goddess!"

"I'm going to be sick!"

"Is that a... leg?!"

Cries went out as I pushed myself up off the ground, and those were just a few exclamations I heard, followed promptly by the sounds of vomiting. Lots and lots of vomiting. I held my own stomach as I saw what I'd brought to the surface. Right there, in the middle of the pond, was a detached leg. Ripped jaggedly just above the knee, it simply floated there.

What a perfect replication of how I feel at this exact moment. Detached. Separated from reality.

All I could hear was whooshing in my ears and a sudden, overwhelming feeling of heat overtaking my body.

"EVES!"

Everybody was looking at me from above. How had I ended up on the ground? "What? What's wrong?"

"You fainted, my lady," Tiro explained.

I blinked. Fainted? I'd never fainted a day in my life! I tried to sit up, but Tiro held out his hands, slowing me down. "Careful now, Miss. Take a moment to get your bearings."

"—just drank severed leg water."

"Who's leg is it!?"

"Where's the rest of the... person?"

I had seen a lot of stuff in my life. I spent hours upon hours hunting with my father, and I had been out here, bearing witness to extremely disturbing deaths... and in the end, it was a severed leg that took me down. Feeling slightly more collected, I took Tiro's offered hand and allowed him to pull me up. Kael was at my side, looking down at me with concern.

"Okay, Eves?"

I cleared my throat. "Y-yeah. I'm fine. I think we should get to the gate... Sooner, the better."

Some of the girls already took off in a dead sprint in the direction of the gate. I didn't blame them. We were at the end of our mental ropes.

"Let's go," Riv said as she and Isla walked over to us.

Isla wiped her mouth, having just been sick. "We have to get inside those walls."

I nodded, and the rest of us left the tainted pond behind, our sights set on safety. "That poor—"

Screams cut off any further discussion, and we collectively froze, looking at each other with wide eyes. The girls! We took off running toward the gate, and I was terrified at what we were going to find. Were the animals waiting for us there? Were we about to meet our bloody doom?

We rounded a corner, and there stood Tiona, Belinda, Becca, and a few others, their mouths open in fear and their faces whiter than a phantom's.

"What is it?!" Kael demanded.

Slowly, Tiona lifted her arm and pointed, first at the massive gate door, then swept it outward toward the field we had trekked through to reach the woods not so long ago. My heart sank as I took in the blood splattered across the old wooden door, as though someone had exploded on the spot. My eyes trailed down and landed on the pile of bodies and parts of bodies... Shredded fabric, exposed bone, vacant eyes, and still faces that were forever locked in a horrible expression of absolute pain and fear. I lifted my hand to my mouth as I took in the rest of the scene.

The field was littered with bodies. Guards and women alike. Parts of the earth were scorched and still slowly smoking, the tendrils gently climbing higher and higher into the air, as if not even the evidence of what happened could stand to be a part of this nightmare for another moment.

Becca snapped out of her trance and ran to the door. She pounded her fists against it as hard as she could. "Help! HELP US!"

Tiona and Belinda joined her, their cries for help so loud that the birds sitting atop the wall took flight.

"How many—" Isla swallowed harshly and wiped the tears from her face before continuing. "How many do you think we lost?"

Riv's brow pinched together as she surveyed the carnage. "Too many. Ten? Fifteen?"

"A lot," Kael said somberly.

The rest of our group was now at the gate, attempting to beat the door down. It was no use. That door was at least six inches thick.

"Nobody is going to let us in," I said, acceptance of that fact settling in me like a weight.

A gust of wind blew in from the sea, sending my hair flying around my face, and with it, the horrible sounds that let us all know we were still being hunted. Howls, roars, and growls. All of them together in a sinister symphony.

"Hush!" I barked at the group at the gate. Tiona grabbed Becca, who had become possessed with determination and refused to quit. Tiona pinned her arms down to her sides, and I didn't miss the blood that was dripping from her knuckles.

"Quiet, Bex," Ti whispered as Becca struggled like a rabid cat. "Shhh, hush now. Shhh."

Becca broke down and started sobbing in Tiona's arms. "I can't do this anymore."

"Listen up. We're still in danger, and we likely just alerted every predator within a five-mile radius of our location. We need to run from here. NOW," I instructed.

"B-but," Becca hiccuped. "When they open the door, we won't be here!"

"Nobody is coming," Rivka stated, her voice completely void of empathy. "Everyone needs to pull up their big girl britches if you hope to have any shot at getting out of this alive."

"It's horrible," I shook my head. "What happened here—what's been happening here. But it's clear that there is zero chance of rescue."

Girane nodded. "I saw the ships docked just off the coast when we climbed out of the tunnels. Perhaps we could swim for them?"

I considered that. It would certainly be safer in the water than standing around here like sitting ducks.

"That's perfect. We'll just leave," Kael said, scanning the area on the lookout for the predators.

"I can captain a ship. It wouldn't be the first time," Riv informed us, and several of the girls looked at her in surprise.

A sound from above caused all of us to jump into action. That horrible, horrible noise, the sails in the wind that preceded the arrival of the dragons—giant wings flapping against the air as they prowled the skies.

"Don't stop. Just bloody run!" Rivka shouted out as we all took off, sprinting faster than ever toward the beach.

"They're coming!" Becca screeched.

I couldn't speak. I couldn't do a damn thing except focus on the sand ahead and the water just beyond. Three ships swayed in the waves, just out of reach. I refused to fall. This wasn't how I died. Not today.

My feet hit the sand as the sound of giant wings gained on us. *Run, run, run!*

Isla was beside me. I could see her out of the corner of my eye, running with desperate determination. We were so close. Finally, I reached the wet sand, the water just out of reach. Glancing over, I didn't see Isla. Frantically, I looked back and saw her lying in the sand, struggling to get up. I couldn't leave her.

"Isla!" I screamed as I ran back to her and hoisted her up.

"I rolled my ankle, Evie," she hissed as we moved together to the ocean.

"It's okay, it's okay. We have to keep going," I encouraged, trying to shuffle her along faster.

"They're coming," she panted. "We're fucked."

This was the second time I'd ever heard her use a curse word, and I knew she believed what she'd said. "Not today, Isla. We're getting on that fucking boat. Now SWIM!" I threw us both into the waves before releasing her. The

cool water was a shock to my system, but I powered through, swimming beneath the surface for as long as I could.

With my lungs burning, I broke the surface and greedily sucked in a deep breath just as a wave crashed over me. I kicked and pushed through the force of the sea, which was intent to return me to the shore. I came up again and looked around frantically. I didn't see anyone else, but I knew I needed to continue forward, and as I dove beneath the waves, all I could do was hope that my friends were safe.

My muscles screamed, already exhausted from the lack of rest, water, food, and overuse. I came up for air and let my body rise with the next wave, lifting me high enough to get a look at how far out I was from the ships. I looked back, trying to see where the dragons were now, but I didn't get a clear look before I plummeted down into the water. Dipping beneath the surface, I kicked my legs wildly, pushing my way back out and sucking in a deep breath as soon as I broke through the water and rode another wave to the peak.

"EVIE!" Kael bellowed to my right, and I looked over, scanning the water for him. I spotted him a moment before he disappeared beneath the water. I kicked my legs, letting wave after wave lift and drop me. Suddenly, something grabbed my leg, making me scream.

Kael's face popped up right next to me, and I gasped. "You scared me!"

"Sorry," he panted, clearly feeling the effects of exhaustion as he pushed his wet hair off his face. "The ships aren't far out now. One more solid push, yeah?"

I spat salty water from my mouth and nodded. I was too short of breath to respond with words.

We swam together for what felt like forever. I didn't know how much longer it was going to be, but the realization that drowning was a real possibility was beginning to set in. As awful as that reality was, it was better than being ripped to shreds. If I had to choose, I'd drown a hundred times instead of being tracked down and mauled by a beast.

A horrible roar had both of us looking up. I swallowed a scream as a massive red dragon sailed right over top of us, maybe ten feet up, close enough that I could easily see the talons on its feet, which had to be six inches long and two inches thick. My eyes widened as the beast dove down.

"Kael! They can pluck us right from the water like fish!"

A distant shriek and cries of several voices told us it had done just that and had likely caught a prize.

"Fuck," Kael cursed as we stared in horror as the dragon rose higher into the sky, giving us a clear view of a struggling Girane. The dragon had him by his thigh, and we watched as the old guard wrestled to get his blade out with only one arm. He must have fallen behind when we were swimming.

"Oh, Goddess," I whispered, sickened.

"There's another one," Kael shouted, and sure enough, a green dragon flew in, racing past the other one. We rose with a wave and looked on as it opened its massive mouth and blew a stream of flames at the closest boat.

"NO!" I screamed as it went up in flames instantly. Pieces of the massive ship began falling into the water almost immediately. If a dragon's fire could incinerate a ship to that level of destruction within seconds, I shuddered, thinking about those two women we lost in the field. One thing was certain, nobody could survive if that flame hit them.

Kael grabbed my arm and pulled me forward. "Come on. We have to try to get to the other ships before those get fried, too."

"But, Girane—"

"Girane is lost to us," Kael replied firmly.

I looked to the skies, hoping that, by some miracle, he'd gotten away.

"FUCK YOU, YE DEVIL BEAST!" Girane yelled as he sent his blade slicing through the air, slashing the dragon's ankle. The beast bellowed in outrage as the hold it had on Girane was lost, and the guard fell from a grim height into the sea.

"Wily old man," Kael said with a grin of satisfaction. "He wounded it!"

"But there's no way he survived..."

"There is honor in his death, Eves. Let's do right by him and get to that fucking ship."

We swam hard, and I tried as much as I could to block out the roars and screams. "Almost there," I panted. The ships that were still standing were closer than ever. Bits of wood floated past us, remnants of the scorched vessel.

"Oof," I grunted as my face slammed against something hard.

"What the hell?" Kael said, puzzled as he was also halted. He made to swim forward again and slammed into something invisible.

I lifted my hands and frowned when they rested against what felt like a wall. I pounded against it with my fists and kicked with my feet, but it was no use.

"Someone used bloody magic and put up a barrier!" Riv's voice carried to us from the left.

"Rivka," I whispered to Kael, relieved that our friend was still alive.

"Go that way," Kael said, nodding to the left. "We should run right into them."

Sure enough, we did. Riv, Isla, Becca, and Tiro were floating together against the magic wall.

"Bloody hell on a sea snail, am I glad to see you two!" Riv announced, alerting the others to our arrival.

"Thank the Goddess," Isla sighed.

I couldn't swim anymore. A piece of smoldering wood floated right in front of me, and I grabbed ahold of it, submerging it completely under the water to extinguish any hotspots before using it as a raft of sorts.

"Great idea," Becca said, grabbing a piece of wood for herself.

Everyone else began finding their own little rafts as we caught our breath.

"Do you believe it now? That this was intentional?" I asked nobody in particular.

"No doubt in my mind," Riv replied. "But what are we going to do? With those beasts circling, it's going to be hard to get out of the water safely..."

Above us, I saw four dragons flying lazily as though they didn't have a care in the world.

"Was Girane with you when he was taken?" Kael asked Tiro.

He shook his head. "No. When he entered the waves, he was with Ayla, Belinda, and Tiona."

Isla frowned. "I hope they're okay..."

"I have an idea, but it's not perfect. We need to get to the shore, maybe back to the tunnels to regroup." I looked at what remained of our group. "Keep your wooden boards. We'll have to do as much of this under the surface as possible. There are so many broken wood pieces floating around right now that it would be hard to tell them apart. I say we go under but hold on with both hands. Swim backward for as long as you can. Pop up

and get a breath and go right back under. We do not want the dragons to spot us. Understand?"

"It should be much easier getting back to shore than it was getting out here," Becca commented, looking determined.

"Agreed," Tiro said, ready for action.

"If we get separated, keep going to the beach. Once you get there, don't hesitate. Run to the rocks. Stay hidden, but keep an eye out. We'll meet up there," Kael ordered, looking at each one of us.

We were about to start our mission back to shore when Isla stopped us. "I just want to say really quick that there are no other people I'd rather be out here with... and regardless of what happens—"

Rivka slapped the water, splashing all of us. "Absolutely not, love. Our stories don't end here. Now shut up and swim like you've never swam before."

Isla's mouth popped open. Riv had never been so *direct* with her before. "Okay," she responded simply, her flushed cheeks turning a deeper red.

Riv, Becca, Isla, and Tiro all disappeared from view below the water, and I glanced at Kael. "Ready, Eves?"

"As I'll ever be," I muttered, taking a deep breath. "But Kael—"

He cut me off, clearly knowing I was about to say something sappy in case we all died. "Race ya to shore," he teased, then dove under the water.

I had no idea what awaited us. As I swam back to the beach, the dark and cool water surrounded me, and it was, sadly, the safest I'd felt in days. Were we going to make it out of this? Why did the royals commit such a horrendous crime? I knew they were guilty—there was way too much evidence now for it to be anything else... but to what end? There were pieces of the puzzle that I was still missing, and it was driving me insane.

I wasn't going to let these deaths go unanswered... I just had no idea how we were ever going to get off of this hellish island. If this was all for sport, then we'd have to be extremely cautious if we did encounter any royals or guards that weren't part of this "hunt." One thing my father always told me about the crown—they didn't leave loose ends.

As my back hit the sand, I knew I was close enough to make a break for it, and after confirming the sky was clear, I pushed away my board and jumped up from the water. I spotted the others all racing to the tunnels, and I knew we were survivors.

The only problem was the royals wouldn't see us as survivors.

They'd see us as loose ends.



image-
placeholder

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

All of us had safely made it out of the ocean. We couldn't take another step without catching our breath, so we wandered a little way into the tunnels and collapsed against the stone walls. Each of us was lost in our thoughts, and I didn't know if my friends' thoughts were anywhere near as dark as mine, but based on the grim looks on their faces, I could only assume they were.

We'd been brought all the way here just to be killed. Why in the realm would the crown spend so much money on such a farce? Sending guards to collect all of the women alone must've cost a fortune, and then the ships, the crews on them, the staff at the Keep... the list went on and on. A lot of money went into this event, and it wasn't the first one. *Is this what they do every time?*

"My grandfather used to tell me stories as a child," Kael said softly, drawing us all out of our minds and into the present. He dragged his index finger through the sand, making circles and squiggles as he spoke. "Stories about how years ago, the royal families had special... abilities."

"What kind of abilities?" Isla asked curiously.

"The crests of each kingdom," he explained slowly. "Each one features an animal."

I leaned my head back against the wall as I listened to his tale.

"Myths of old say that the royals could actually... turn into those animals. At will."

Nobody spoke or moved a muscle as his words sank in. I'd never heard about this from my father, and in my eyes, he was well versed on all things royal... but what Kael was saying—it had some merit.

"Volos, the dragons. Ekpen, the tigers. Oberon, the bears. Faolan, the wolves... and, of course, Sova, the owls."

"And we've had encounters with all of them. Except owls... but that makes sense since House Sova was annihilated twenty years ago," Isla said.

Becca ran her hands through her tangled red hair. "I always thought dragons were creatures made up to entertain and scare children. Myths."

"Exactly," Kael said, pointing at Bex. "They are. Nobody has seen a dragon in their lifetime. So why here? Why now?"

Riv stabbed her knife into the sand and sighed. "There are too many things that point to the impossible being possible."

"The things we've seen and experienced..." I trailed off, trying to ignore the flashes of memories in my mind that were nothing more than a collection of horrors.

"What stopped them from being able to shift before?" Becca asked.

I brushed some sand off of my arms that had begun to dry. "Who says they ever stopped?"

We thought about that for a moment before Tiro spoke. "But there would've been witnesses to that, right? I mean, these creatures are not normal animals. The wolves are horse sized!"

As soon as the comment was made, Kael and I looked at each other knowingly, arriving at the same thought. The wolf from the forest that Kael slayed to save my life when we were traveling to the port was abnormally large. He opened his mouth, but I shook my head. I didn't want anyone to know about that. Especially not if it wasn't a coincidence.

Riv crossed her arms harshly, drawing everyone's attention."Not to mention the giant sky lizards blowing fire like it's just a normal day doing business..."

"My father always said the animals of the kingdoms represented those houses' behaviors." Everyone looked at me curiously. "For example, the wolves. They're pack animals and extremely loyal to each other. I am from the Faolan kingdom, and that tracks with the way their family has always been. You never see one Faolan—you see multiple."

Riv nodded slowly. "That makes sense. If you look at Volos, the dragons. They're big, strong, and territorial. Also incredibly *sneaky*. Like snakes. And what are dragons if not massive, winged snakes?"

"This is insanity," Isla said, rubbing her swollen ankle. "If this is true... we were brought here just to be murdered by the very bachelors we were promised marriages to... and for what?"

"Shits and bloody giggles," Riv growled. "They don't care about the people in their realm. We're nothing more than walking meat targets for them to act out their sick and sadistic whims on."

The sound of shuffling footsteps had all of us going silent. I held my breath as they got closer... someone was in the tunnels with us. I hoped it was Tiona or any of the other people from our group that we'd lost track of.

A blonde woman stepped out from the dark depths, and I gasped, seeing her face completely covered in blood. Dried blood. I vaguely recognized

her from the ball but didn't know her name.

"By the Goddess," Isla exclaimed, appalled. She tried to get up, but Riv quickly pushed her back down.

"Absolutely not. Not with that leg swelling the way it is. I'll help her." Riv jumped up and rushed over to the woman, who all but collapsed into her arms with a cry of relief.

"Oh, thank the Goddess," she gasped as she held onto Rivka for dear life. "I thought... I t-thought that everyone was dead!"

Kael was up and ready to help the woman over to where we were sitting. "What's your name?"

"E-Eliza," she sobbed, unable to keep her emotions in check for another second.

"Welcome to our group, Eliza," Becca said as Kael lowered Eliza down next to her. Becca took her hand immediately and squeezed it. "We got you."

Eliza tucked her knees to her chest and buried her face into them as she cried. "I'm sorry," she mumbled against the dirty fabric of what was left of her gown.

"Nothing to apologize for," Tiro assured her. "We've all been through a lot."

I could clearly see an open wound along her hairline, one deep and wide enough that, in any normal circumstances, would have required stitches. "Eliza?" I asked gently. "If you're up to telling us... what happened to you? How have you survived up to this point?"

She picked up her head and let go of Becca's hand to wipe away her tears, which somehow made the blood on her face look worse. "When we

got to the stream... I was with a group of ten or so people, both women and guards..."

Her eyes glazed over as she talked, and I knew she was reliving the memories. "When people started screaming to run, and the tigers and w-wolves came out, I ran with that group. We went the opposite direction of the ones who ran out from the thicket. Four of us were picked off right away, but we kept running. We thought it would've been smart to return to the gate immediately..."

Tears steadily streamed down her face as she recalled the tale, her voice completely void of emotion, which seemed eerily unsettling with the quietness of her tears.

"It didn't take long for us to get there. Another group emerged from the tree line just behind us, all of us locked in a dead sprint across the meadow. Meredith... one of the girls I'd befriended on the walk out to the stream—she was right next to me, along with a guard. His name was Axil... I don't know why, but I looked over to our right and spotted th-them."

She sucked in a shaky breath, and Becca patted her knee. "If you want to take a break, it's okay."

"N-no," she hiccuped. "I have to tell someone." Eliza took a deep breath and composed herself. "They were massive. Abnormally large. *Fast*."

"What were they?" I asked, my heart in my throat.

"Bears. Two of them... racing each other, almost as if they were competing against each other to see who could get to us first. I grabbed Meredith and Axil by the arm and stopped the three of us. I pointed to what I saw. Axil said we needed to run for the beach, and we immediately took off, breaking away from the group. I wanted to warn the others, but when I started to call out to them, Axil told me to shut up. That it was every person

for themselves and that all that would do was lead the bears right to us. The first sounds of death reached us right as we hit the beach, and I didn't want to look. Oh, Goddess, I tried not to... but I did!" Eliza's whole body began trembling as she described an absolutely terrible scene.

"The bears were bad enough... they didn't slow down as they ran, they simply... ran right over people, knocking them down. But then... and I know this is going to sound insane, but it's the truth... the dragons came."

"You're not insane. We've seen them, too," Isla reassured her.

"S-some of the people made it to the gate, and they were banging on it, screaming... nobody opened the door. Why didn't they open the door!?" she wailed, and my stomach turned from the sheer pain in her voice, and much to my own surprise, I felt tears of my own sliding down my face. I was not a crier, but there was something so raw and disturbing in listening to Eliza and seeing the physical effects of her trauma, the way she shook and bounced all over the place with her emotions. From hysterical to zero feeling at all, it was haunting.

"Between the bears and the dragons, I doubt any of them survived. I haven't been back to look. Axil, Meredith, and I ran into the tunnels. We were so disoriented and traumatized that we didn't think to go deeper into them, farther from the beach. That first night we had fallen asleep, and I woke up to water rushing through the pathways, rising fast. We tried to escape the tide, but it was too much. We got separated, and once I was lifted high enough, I was able to climb out. I quickly found Axil and Meredith, and we had to regroup... But before we could do that, the wolves came. Meredith and I saw their yellow eyes glowing. We heard their low growls, their promise to kill..."

She trailed off, staring vacantly at the wall in front of her face. "What happened next... I keep wondering what I could have done to prevent it. What I should have done..."

Despair settled in my gut as I prepared myself for her words, but nothing could have prepared me in the end.

"A sound... a horrible thunk, then a crunch. Meredith crumpled to the ground—her limp hand slipped out of mine. Everything slowed down to a snail's pace. Axil, holding a bloody rock in his hand, yelling at me to run. My eyes going back to my friend, who had a massive dent in her head, dark blood pooling... The wolves howling as fresh blood hit their noses..."

I gasped in horror. We all did.

"He killed her?" Kael asked, his face sterner than I'd ever seen it.

"Yes. He screamed at me to run. That he only did it so we had a fighting chance at getting away from those wolves... I knew she was dead. Nobody could survive a blow to the head like that, but I struggled with leaving her! She was my friend! She didn't deserve that!"

Riv made a noise of disgust. "No, she didn't. But none of us have deserved any of this shit, Eliza. There's nothing you could've done for yer friend."

Eliza tapped her fingers anxiously against her legs. "I know that. *Now*, I know that. But in the moment... It was hard. I waited too long to run, and when I turned around, Axil was gone. I apologized to Meredith the entire time as I ran away blindly. Tears blurred everything. It wasn't until I tripped over something and fell on the rocks that I snapped out of my trance. I looked back to see what had tripped me, and I was horrified to find Axil there. He'd slipped down beneath a crevice and waited for me to run by. He

tripped me on purpose, clearly trying to increase his own odds of surviving by offering me up as the next sacrifice.

"Something in me snapped. Like a bow that is tied too tight—there is a breaking point. That was mine. I'm still not sure if I actually was seeing red or if it was the blood dripping in my eyes from hitting my head during the fall, but I've never been so enraged in my life. I wiped my wound with my hand and flung the blood at Axil, knowing it would mark him just as much as me. He bellowed in rage and tried to wipe it off, but it was no use. Even with the ocean water, the wolves were too close. My vision began spinning, and I knew I was close to passing out. As Axil frantically tried to clean himself, I crawled on my hands and knees, hoping to find an opening large enough to slip through. Axil's sudden screams told me the wolves had gotten him, and I was next. With the Goddess' help, I fell through a crack. At least, that's what I think happened. I didn't wake up until the sun was high in the air. I was laying on my back in shallow water, maybe an inch deep."

"I can't even imagine how scared you've been," Isla said, shaking her head. "What a horrible thing to go through."

The mood was somber at best as we reeled from Eliza's tale, but if she'd fallen down here, then... "You've just been wandering around here ever since?"

"Yes. I was terrified to go back out. I've been on my own, thinking I might be the only one still alive. I knew at some point I'd have to try to get help, whether by thirst or hunger. Thirst is winning out at the moment," she explained. "What about you? What happened to you?"

I couldn't find it in me to retell our story, so Kael started explaining the events of our last twenty-four hours. I zoned out for most of it, not wanting

to relive a single second of it. My mind was trying desperately to concoct some sort of plan. What were we going to do now? At least one of the ships was burned to ash, and those evil people within the walls of the Keep couldn't give a shit less about us—that was clear.

Suddenly, my stomach growled, the effects of lack of food making itself known. Just like a yawn starting a chain reaction, several other people grabbed their own stomachs as they twisted with hunger.

"We can't go on without eating something," Riv stated. "I can look for some more crabs?"

"No, splitting up and wandering these tunnels is too risky. It's too easy to get lost and we already lost half of our group in the ocean. I don't want to lose anyone else." Kael paused then, rubbing his chin in thought. "The shite part of it is, it seems we're going to be out here for the foreseeable future, and if that's the case, we'll need water as soon as possible."

Eliza shifted. "You know, when we first got to the stream that first day, I did see a cavern near the base of the ravine. Maybe we could use that for shelter?"

"How large was the opening?" Riv asked, her eyes already hardening with the determination to survive.

"Not very. Definitely not big enough for th-those *creatures* to squeeze through."

"It's risky," Tiro added, pressing on a large bruise on his forearm.

I pushed myself to my feet, groaning as I went. I felt as though I'd aged thirty years in one day. "Yes, it's risky. We're walking right back into the battlefield. But we can't sit here and waste away to nothing. If we can make it there, we will have a constant supply of fresh water."

"And I know I saw several edible plants surrounding that area," Isla added. "Also, some with medicinal properties, so we can get some of these wounds cleaned up."

"So, we are in agreement?" I asked, looking at my comrades. I didn't want to force anyone to go unwillingly back into the forest, but if they came, it would be at their own discretion. I refused to have anyone's potential death on my hands. This was an individual choice.

Tiro, Kael, Riv, Isla, and Becca all nodded. Riv helped Isla to her feet and slung her arm over her shoulder. We all turned to Eliza, who was still in the same position as when she first sat down.

I walked over to her and crouched down. Taking her hand, I looked into her blue eyes. "Eliza," I stated gently. "We won't force you to come, but if you stay here, you will die. There isn't fresh water, and there isn't enough food to sustain you. There's a chance we won't make it going back in there, but I'd rather have a fighting chance over staying here and ensuring that death will be the outcome. I'd love for you to come with us. Will you?"

The choice was hers. She searched my eyes for a long moment. I wasn't sure what she was looking for, but I hoped she saw that I would fight for her. That I'd fight for myself and my friends. That I would never, ever betray her the way Axil had. She must've seen something that assured her I was a safe bet because she slid her hand further down my arm and grasped me.

"Help me up, friend. I'm not staying here alone."

I smiled and gripped her arm in return as I stood, pulling her to her feet. "I'm so glad you found us when you did."

"I can't even express how relieved I am. Thank you." She looked at the others. "Thank you, all."

Everyone responded with words of encouragement. Boosting one another up, we were a motley group of battle-torn victims who had somehow bonded. I watched as Isla took a few practice steps, testing her injured ankle.

"How is it?" I asked my friend, who was wincing with every step.

"It's not broken, just sprained," she explained. "It could have been much worse. I'm hoping that once we get into the forest, I'll be able to find some supplies to fix it up a little bit. I'll be fine." She paused when she spotted Riv's skeptical expression. "I will! It's not my first time doing this, and I know what needs to be done. Just promise me that if we're attacked... and I'm slowing you down—"

Riv grabbed Isla's chin and turned her shocked face toward her. "You stop right there, little healer. I admit, in my life, I've been known to be a scoundrel. I've done some questionable things, some things that may seem to be on the line of what is *legal*."

"Really?" Kael said sarcastically. "I'm absolutely shocked by this." He turned to me. "Eves, did you know we're in the presence of an immoral and lawless woman!?"

"Hush it, golden man child," Riv snapped, pointing her blade at Kael before turning back to Isla. "Despite my past, despite everything, the one thing I would never do is leave someone behind. Especially not someone who..."

We collectively held our breath and watched as though a magnet had begun pulling Rivka and Isla closer.

"Someone who... what?" Isla whispered.

"Someone who," she whispered just as softly, which was something I wasn't sure Riv was capable of. My eyes nearly popped out as Riv's lips

brushed Isla's ever so delicately. "Makes me... *feel*."

Isla made a noise that reminded me of a little kitten, and Riv took the opening, pressing her lips against the much smaller woman.

My mouth dropped, and I snapped my eyes to Kael, who was wearing a similar expression. I could see the excitement building in my guard, and I couldn't stop the laugh that came out when he legitimately squealed in delight.

Riv had lowered her knife during the chaste kiss but promptly raised it in his direction once more as Isla pulled back, also giggling.

"Immature, prepubescent, infant-like—" Riv ranted with a smile as Kael howled with laughter, making the rest of us join in.

It wasn't the right time to be having a laugh session, but it also wouldn't likely be for a very, very long time. I decided to enjoy it. My abdomen ached from joy and happiness instead of fear, anxiety, and hunger. The tears built in my eyes from the touching moment I'd just witnessed and, subsequently, the friendly-enemy dynamic that Kael and Riv had built their friendship. When Riv launched herself at Kael, wrapping herself around his back and climbing up him like a tree trunk, I sank to my knees, losing it at how ridiculous they looked.

Isla and Riv. I shouldn't have been shocked, looking back at their interactions. I was thrilled for them, but concerned about the future. We were here to be married off to royal men, supposedly. Who even knew if that was actually going to happen anymore? So I pushed away questions about how their relationship would work out in the end. I was determined to see something good come of this nightmare, and their kiss had given new fuel to the fire in my soul.

Eliza abruptly turned from laughing to sobbing, and Becca rushed to her and wrapped her in a hug. "It's just so... beautiful! A-and tragic!" she wailed dramatically.

It really was, and I think we all knew we were leaving the safety of our hideout and potentially walking right into our deaths, but we didn't have a choice. Just like we hadn't had a choice in being a part of such a sick game. The sounds of laughter died down, while our moods quickly shifted back to a more serious state.

"Right," Kael started, stepping to the front of our group. "Let's get this over with. Stick together and try to be as quiet as possible."

We all nodded and accepted that delaying the inevitable any further was futile.

It was do or die.



image-
placeholder

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

For once, it seemed as though luck was on our side.

Despite our slow pace, thanks to injuries, dehydration, and exhaustion, we didn't encounter any predators as we walked through the meadow to the forest. Birds and small animals were actively singing and scurrying around without a care in the world. That didn't mean we were going to take any chances, though. We remained silent and kept our strides soft as we wove through the tall trees and vegetation. Isla was doing fairly well with her injury. I was thankful she was able to bear any weight on it at all. With her limping along, my mind went to Ayla, the poor girl with that nasty leg wound. I know she was with us as we made our way to the ocean, but just like several others, she was unaccounted for. I hoped that she, Tiona, and the others missing from our group were okay and that Rion was with them, keeping them safe.

That included Belinda. As horrible as this had been, I was hoping that it might be enough to turn her mean girl attitude into something a little bit nicer. I glanced at Kael, who stepped over a log. Belinda had suspected something was going on between the two of us, and that fact still made me

uneasy. If we got out of this hell and returned to the Keep, she could very well still try to ruin him and me. Tarnishing my reputation with a secret affair would ensure that no royal would touch me, which was perfectly fine with me, especially after this ordeal. To make such accusations though, and against a royal guard? He'd likely be executed. I couldn't have that...

But those were thoughts for later. Things that might not even matter in the end because our reality was looking very grim at the moment. I pushed the worries aside and tried to refocus on the present. Leaves and foliage crunched beneath my boots as I stalked along, and the soft sound of scratching on a tree pulled my gaze to the right. Three black ravens sat on a low hanging branch not far from me. Their beady eyes tracked us as we walked, and one took flight, landing smoothly on another branch that was closer to the front of our group. I had the sudden urge to kill them all.

Corvus wouldn't be seeing very much without his pets to do his spying, would he? Were they actual ravens or illusions created by his dark magic? If they were real, were they extensions of his evilness? Was he controlling their every move?

I rubbed my temples as my head pounded, likely from too much thinking and lack of water. We had to be about there by now.

Suddenly, Kael stopped and held up his fist. We'd all seen enough from the guards to know that meant to stop. Slowly, he turned to us and waved us toward him.

"What is it?" I whispered.

"We made it," he answered. "But it's crucial that we continue silently. If this is one of the few water sources in the forest, we won't be the only ones seeking it out. Let's just hope we're the only ones in this area right now."

"Let's go," Riv said to us and then glanced down at Isla, who was now grimacing in pain. "She needs to sit. The sooner, the better."

We walked another hundred feet or so as a group, and there was the stream. We had come in from a different point, and I was so grateful. The steep ravine was on the other side of us, giving us a fairly easy path to fresh water, and based on what Eliza had told us, the cavern should be close.

"There," she said, pointing to a crack wide enough for a person to squeeze through.

"We should probably check it out first, just to be safe," Riv told Kael and Tiro.

"I agree." Tiro began walking toward the cavern.

"Isla, you can sit here while we investigate," Riv said, guiding her over to a rock.

Isla stopped their progress. "I really need to get some herbs. We all need our wounds cleaned as soon as possible. I saw some just over that way."

Becca and Eliza were both already sitting down. "I can't walk another step," Becca groaned as she removed her damp boots. "My feet are covered in blisters."

"You're not going out there alone," Riv told Isla, looking outraged.

"Of course she's not," I said, stepping up next to Isla and looping her arm over my shoulders. "I'm going with her."

"I can come w—"

Isla put her hand on Riv's shoulder and shook her head. "We'll be fine, Riv. Go help Kael and make sure he doesn't get himself killed."

Riv sighed in defeat. "Fine. But if you two aren't back in twenty minutes, we're coming to look for you."

"Twenty minutes is plenty of time." I looked longingly at the stream. "Let's do this quick because I'm dying of thirst, and if I don't get to sit down soon, I think my legs are going to fall off."

Riv released her hold on Isla, and the two of us began backtracking, both shaking our heads at Riv's stern 'twenty minutes' reminder as we left them behind.

"How far do we have to go?"

Isla hummed in thought. "This way. These particular herbs love ash trees, and see that big tree right there?" I followed her finger with my eyes, spotting the tree she was talking about. "That is an ash tree."

I sighed in relief. Not far to go at all. Thank the Goddess. In no time at all, we were at the base of the ash, and Isla began happily plucking leaves from the plant she needed. I pulled off a large leaf and sat it on the ground where Isla was making a nice pile. "So, you and Rivka?"

My friend's face snapped to mine, and I laughed quietly as her whole face flushed pink. "There's just something about her, Evie. I've never felt a connection to somebody like I have with her. And I know it's... not exactly ideal, given the whole choosing ceremony situation."

I smiled and took her hand, which was moments from stripping another leaf. "I'm happy for you and Riv. Worry about the rest later, when or if the ceremony actually happens."

Isla beamed at me. "You're a good friend. The best. We wouldn't have made it this far without you."

"Ah, I'm not sure about that, but thank you. We're not safe yet, though, and I'm not positive that we will be for a very long time," I confessed, the taste of the words bitter on my tongue. That was the thing about words—

you could think them inside the confines of your own mind, but the moment they were spoken aloud, they were given life.

"We can't think that way. We need to stay positive, no matter how dire things get."

"Always the optimist," I teased, releasing her hand after squeezing one more time. We got back to work, gathering up what we needed.

"That should do it," Isla announced, gathering up the bundle of greenery she'd collected.

I stood and helped her up. "Let me take these from y—"

A twig snapped loudly. It hadn't been anywhere close to twenty minutes yet; there was no way it was Riv coming to find us. Isla and I stared at each other with wide eyes as I raised my index finger to my lips, silently relaying the need to be quiet. Another snap, closer this time, and Isla slammed her eyes shut.

Something was just on the other side of us, and it was closing in. Loud sniffing and heavy steps were easily heard now. Isla couldn't run. *What are we going to do?!*

A soft touch on my forearm drew my gaze back to my friend, who was staring at me with tears in her eyes. "RUN!" she mouthed.

Run? But she couldn't run. She couldn't even walk briskly at this point.

I winced as she dug her nails into my arm, bringing me back to the here and now. "RUN!" she mouthed again, pushing the herbs into my arms. "GO!"

I shook my head frantically. *No, no. I wouldn't run. I wouldn't leave my friend.*

A low growl from behind me sent every hair on the back of my neck upright. I stood there, frozen in fear, as Isla's eyes got even wider, staring at

whatever was behind me. Her mouth dropped the higher her gaze climbed. Whatever it was, it was tall. Much taller than me. Swallowing harshly, I spun around slowly. Nothing could've prepared me for the sight that greeted me.

Black fur that never ended. Sharp claws. A maw of glistening teeth that promised absolute destruction, and finally, a pair of amber yellow eyes.

The bear stood easily eight feet tall, and the rumbling from deep within its chest vibrated the very air surrounding us. I stepped back carefully, trying to put every minuscule amount of distance between us. Even now, if the bear decided to, he could lunge and strike with one paw to rip my face right off.

"Evie," Isla whimpered softly. "Please run and save yourself."

I shook my head slowly so as not to startle the bear. Drool was beginning to drip from its open mouth, making the standoff so much more tense. With Isla behind me, I could sense her shifting back, further from the beast. Further from me. Good. Only seconds had passed, but it felt like hours. The bear inhaled deeply and then exhaled, releasing a roar that made me cover my ears. It dropped down to all fours and began moving in, death in its eyes.

"Isla," a voice whispered, and my heart hammered within my chest. Kael was here. "Keep moving backward." I didn't dare look to see where he was, but it was close enough that I could hear him. I stepped on something, almost tripping, and looked down to see a stick. It was thick enough and sharp enough to potentially do some damage... I just needed to get it.

My eyes lifted and locked on the bear's, and there was something so familiar about them. That shade. It was a crazy idea, but I had to try.

"Dair," I said, loud enough to cover up the sounds of Isla backing away. Surprisingly, the bear faltered in its steps, his eyes flashing from yellow to green, confirming my suspicions. "Yeah, I know it's you."

The beast cocked his head to the side and growled.

"Don't like that, do you?" I slowly lowered myself as I reached for the stick. "This game was supposed to be a secret, isn't that right?"

He snarled and took another step, putting us a mere two feet apart. My fingers curled around the stick as he lifted his right paw, preparing to strike me down. I stood now and chanced a look behind me, relieved to see Kael and Isla, now a good ten feet away, huddled together against a bramble of brush. At least he'd be able to get her out of here safely. If anyone could do it, it was Kael. My life was about to come to an end, and there was nothing I could do about it. Tears blurred my vision as I accepted it, grateful that at least my friends had a chance of escaping. I turned back to my killer, and something snapped in my brain as his paw lashed out.

"Alasdair!" I shrieked, shocking him and staying his paw. His ears went flat, his eyes turning green once more, but he still reared back. "Don't do this! Please! It's me, Evie!" His furry brow pinched together, and he shook his head. He'd hesitated! *Keep going, keep going.*

"This isn't you, Dair," I said, my voice shaking as I rose back to my feet, my makeshift weapon in my grip. "Don't hurt us."

If it was possible to confuse a bear, I'd just succeeded. He stared at me like he was seeing *me* for the first time. Seeing where he was for the first time. Unfortunately, I saw the moment any lucidity that may have been there vanished. His now amber eyes hardened, and he slammed his front two paws down with all his might, releasing another terrifying roar. I

prepared myself for the impact. My plan was to aim the sharp stick right at his nose. I never got the chance to try, though.

A second roar, a louder one, shook the earth beneath my feet, and both the bear and I followed the sound. My heart felt as though it stopped beating completely when smoke appeared first, filtering through the trees, and then the enormous red dragon followed. The beast's eyes were locked on Isla and Kael, and where Dair had hesitated, this creature did not. Not even when I screamed louder than I ever had in my life as the dragon opened its mouth and released a fireball directly at my friends.

It happened so fast. Kael pushed Isla hard, making her fall behind a rock. Flames flickered in his blue eyes as they slammed into mine for a split second.

"NO!" I cried with every fiber of my being as Kael, my protector, my best friend, was engulfed in an inferno of fire. I vaguely processed the bear running past me toward the dragon, snarling in outrage. My feet moved of their own volition toward Isla, who was already on her feet, bracing herself against the rock as sobs wracked her body. Kael's body crumpled to the forest floor and continued to burn, while the sounds of a dragon and a bear viciously fighting each other eliminated any other noise.

Someone grabbed my shoulders and spun me, forcing my eyes from Kael.

"EVIE! COME ON!" Riv's face appeared out of what seemed like thin air.

"Ka—"

"Kael has fallen, Eves. We need to go. NOW!"

I couldn't just... leave him. Air suddenly felt nonexistent, like there wasn't enough for me to breathe. *I could come back for him. Yes, I'll come*

back for him.

The bear roared in pain and took off through the forest, making the dragon chase after him. Silence descended upon the three of us as we stared horrified at our friend. A deep sob ripped from my throat, as though the loss of Kael suddenly became a physical being, one that demanded it be heard.

I started ripping at my already destroyed skirt, trying to get a large enough section that I could use to extinguish the flames. I cried out in frustration when only a small strip ripped off into my shaky hand.

"I got it. Hold still," Riv said gently as she cut off a large section of my gown. I grabbed it and tossed it over Kael. Since much of the fabric was still damp, it quickly killed the fire, and I collapsed over his chest. I'd reached my breaking point.

Isla sank down across from me and covered me with her embrace. Her own body shook with sadness and shock. I sensed Riv next to me, and when I felt her embrace being added to the mix, only then did things feel somewhat okay. The four of us were meant to be a team. A unit. With an unbreakable bond that was built on survival and trauma. And now Kael... he'd been burned to death. I wiggled and my two friends sat up, looking at me questioningly. Glancing down at my bodice, I pressed my palms to it. My brows pinched together as my eyes slid to the part of my dress that was covering Kael's body.

"Shouldn't—" I swallowed my question as a strong gust of wind blew through the trees, carrying the sounds of horns.

Isla jumped up. "Rescue? We're being rescued?!" I remained where I was, on my knees, next to my best friend.

The horns got louder, and soon the thundering of hooves mixed together with the familiar melody of The Royal Guard's March. *Now? Now they are*

coming to get us?

Sure enough, horses broke into the clearing, carrying guards who were stationed at the keep. They wore navy blue and white, the colors that represented loyalty to the realm, not to any one kingdom. An emblem on their chests showed an image of the Keep with trees behind it and waves below.

"Let's get you ladies out of here," a deep voice announced, and all but three men dismounted smoothly, looking at us with pity.

"Where have you been?" Isla demanded. "We've been out here for days, being hunted, wounded—killed!"

"My lady, we were not aware there was anything amiss until less than one hour ago, and we immediately set out to find you," another guard explained, not meeting Isla's narrowed gaze. "We're to return you all to the Keep, where you can eat, drink, and rest. The kitchens are already hard at work making a delicious meal."

I rose to my feet slowly, unaware of my own intentions, until I threw my whole body at one of the guards, taking him down to the forest floor in surprise. I raised my fists and began throwing wild punches. Fury completely overtook me as I pounded my knuckles against his chest. I didn't even feel the moment my knuckles split and began dripping blood.

"Evie!" Riv shouted as I continued my assault.

"Stupid. Evil. Barbaric!" I screamed as I felt the loss of every person over the last days. I screeched like a wild cat as I was pushed off the guard, and Riv climbed on top of me, pinning me down. I hated it. I squirmed and swore so loudly I am positive the Goddess heard every single word.

Riv grabbed my wrists and pinned them down beside my head.

"LET ME UP! I'M GOING TO KILL—"

A palm covered my mouth, ending my threat abruptly. My wild eyes found Isla's, and she subtly shook her head no.

Riv leaned down and whispered into my ear. "Keep your strength. You can't do anything right now. Say nothing. Do. Nothing!"

My heart was pounding as I glanced around. Six guards surrounded us, some of them even with their weapons drawn. They'd kill me and not look back. What the hell was I thinking? Attacking a royal guard like that was cause for imprisonment. I nodded, and Isla removed her hand from my mouth.

"Are ye calm?" Riv asked, searching my eyes for any sign that I wasn't going to leap up and run into my death.

I swallowed roughly and nodded, too aware that nothing good would come out if I actually attempted to speak.

She released my wrists and hopped up. My two friends extended their hands to help me to my feet, and I took them. I needed to be smarter. We all needed to be smarter. I forced down my pride and looked over at the guard I'd beaten. "Apologies." I dropped my head. "I am not myself."

"Quite all right," he replied, wiping my blood from his metal chest plate.

The other guards began snickering and whispering, much to my victim's annoyance. "What?!" he snapped at them.

"It's just, I never thought I'd see the day a maiden takes down a royal guard in such a—" he paused, "spectacular fashion."

The guards all howled with laughter. They were making jokes and laughing like they weren't here to rescue us from a murder hunt. We were surrounded by psychopaths who had absolutely no regard for humanity. My knuckles screamed in pain when my fists formed once again, and I prepared myself to go all in on the bastards. A hand grabbed my right fist, and I

looked over to Isla. She smiled, soft and forced, and pried my fingers apart so she could slip her hand into mine. Rivka took my left hand and did the same. I would've been dead without them.

"Fuck off, all of ye!" the guard I attacked shouted, hurling the bloody cloth at the group of men. "Get them on the horses so we can get back in time for supper. I'm hungry."

Three guards still on horseback approached, hands stretched down to us.

"There's more people that way." Riv pointed in the direction of the stream.

One of them tugged on his reins, and his horse turned toward the stream. "Half of you come with me to get them."

I watched as the group tore off, ripping up the ground as they did.

"W-what about the dead?" Isla asked the man who she was to ride with.

"They'll be collected," he replied, clipped.

"Now," I barked. Not a question. The guards looked at me. "They will be collected *now*."

The guard I'd attacked marched over to me and bent down so we were face to face. "Listen here. I've excused your behavior earlier due to you being absolutely out of your head, but there will be no more excuses. You'll get your arse up on that horse, or I'll throw you up there like a sack of potatoes. What's it to be?"

I ground my teeth together. I did not want his hands on me. I glanced at where Kael lay, and my eyes welled with tears. He'd tell me to just go. That I shouldn't fuss over him.

"I'll go," I whispered, absolutely hating the feeling in the pit of my stomach. I had no choice. I had no say in what happened to me. It was fucking terrifying.

"Sterin, get the girl on the bloody horse," he snapped, walking away to his own horse.

Riv and Isla were pulled up, and their riders kicked the horses into a gallop straight away. I'd be damned if we got separated now. I clasped Sterin's hand and groaned as my muscles objected to the effort it took to get on the horse. We took off, and all I could do was look back, my vision blurring through tears and my dirty, windswept hair.

"I'll see you buried, Kael," I whispered, my throat constricted with grief. "It's my turn to protect you."

When I could no longer see the place where he'd fallen, I turned back and couldn't hold my head up another second. I rested my cheek against Sterin's back and let the tears fall like rain. My father always told me that thunderstorms were his favorite because they were more than just water. They were thunder crashing, lightning flashing, and the speed with which the rain fell from the sky was clarifying. It washed away the messes of the world and provided what was possible for new growth.

I pulled back slightly, just enough to see the tears I'd left behind on Sterin's metal armor. Dirt and dust smeared wherever my tears touched.

My heart finally slowed, my hands ceased shaking, and I took my first steady breath of air since before Alasdair had shown up in the forest. The castle came into view, and I straightened my spine and remembered that conversation with my father like it had been just yesterday and not two years...

"So, now that I've explained why I love storms so much, why do you?" Father asked me as we watched the rainfall from our covered front porch.

I was about to answer when a deafening boom of thunder ripped from the clouds and caused both of us to jump.

"That. That right there," I replied, grinning at him.

"The thunder?" Lightning flashed overhead, lighting up the entire sky.

I shook my head. "No. The moment before the thunder. You know it's coming, and you can do nothing to stop it. Everything kind of stills for just a moment, like even the raindrops fall a little slower, providing the thunder with a grander entrance. Just when you think it's not going to happen—" I paused with a smile and continued, "BOOM!" in perfect timing with the explosion of sound from above.

As we crossed the gate into the castle walls, I wiped my cheeks.

I was the storm. My tears were the rain, while the lightning was my fury that would keep me going... And the thunder?

The thunder was going to be my justice.

Kael's justice.

And they'd never see me coming.



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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I felt my head pounding before my eyes even opened.

Groaning, I tried to think, and that was a mistake. A sharp pain shot through my skull, and I pressed my palm to my forehead.

"What the Goddess," I gritted out, keeping my eyes closed.

"Son! You're awake!" My father's voice was loud as ever, doing me absolutely no favors. "How are you feeling?"

His hand landed on my shoulder, and I growled, surprising myself. My father just chuckled.

"Still feeling the beast, are we?"

The beast? I cracked open my eyes and found my father's face directly above me, grinning like a madman.

"Don't worry, son. It's completely normal. You won't remember anything for a time, but you were magnificent out there. The biggest dragon in our family to date!"

Dragon.

I could practically feel the cool wind on my face as I flew through the skies, a hunter. The ultimate hunter.

My eyes finally caught up with my brain, and I met my father's stare. "I did it. I became the dragon?"

"Yes, Torin. Yes! And what a dragon you are!"

I lifted myself upright, already feeling the pain in my head waning. "The last thing I remember was being outside of the Keep's walls... Corvus chanting..." I trailed off, searching my memory for anything else. There was nothing. I was scared to admit it, but I couldn't deny the truth. "I don't understand. I have no memory of my time as the dragon?"

"The first shift is always the hardest and that's to be expected. All will be restored by dinner, don't worry, Son. But you still feel it—within you?" He searched my face, and I nodded. I did feel it. As if I was sharing part of my consciousness with something else. "Excellent. I have never been so proud of you. We won't be revealing the scores of The Hunt until the Choosing Ceremony, but believe me when I say, you did well."

I swung my legs off the bed and made to stand, only to wince at a horrible pain in my leg. Confused, I looked down and saw a stab wound. *Someone had stabbed me?* "What is this? Who did this?"

"A wound you obtained in The Hunt. No worries, it will be healed by midday."

"What day is it? How long have I been asleep?" I looked out of a window and found the sun to be low in the sky. Morning, then.

"The Hunt ended yesterday. Most of you are still sleeping it off. We retrieved you from the forest and brought you in to sleep. You've been asleep for about eighteen hours."

The dryness in my mouth confirmed that. "I'm thirsty enough to drink an entire lake," I rasped as I moved through the room in search of water. Locating it on a wooden stand near the door, I skipped pouring it into a

glass. Instead, I raised the decanter to my lips and chugged greedily, only stopping when it was completely empty. Satiated, I turned to my father. "What is the plan then?"

"We will give the others another two hours to awaken on their own, then we will wake them. A discussion is to be had in the smoking room, and then we will prepare for the Choosing Ceremony. It will be held this evening."

I blinked. "So soon? Don't we have more time?"

"There is no need to delay. The remaining women are eager to know their fates after witnessing The Hunt, and then we must prepare for the next steps. Returning to the capital to prepare for the weddings and celebrations could take days or longer. Not to mention all of the celebrations and parties that will be held in honor of The Recurrence. It's going to be a very, very busy month."

The *remaining* women.

As though he could read my mind, my father placed a hand on my shoulder. "If they didn't make it to this point, they were never going to be strong enough to rule. I know it sounds harsh, but it is the truth."

I didn't want to dwell on it, especially not in front of my father, so I nodded in understanding and changed the topic. "I'll use this time then to get cleaned up. I desperately need to wash." I could smell myself, and it was not pleasant. "No woman would appreciate me in this state."

"I highly doubt that. You're to be a king. You're desirable no matter if you smell of shit or flowers."

Flowers. I could see them in my mind, beneath me. Swaying in the wind, moving in rhythm to the powerful beating of my wings.

I snapped my eyes to my father's and found him nodding encouragingly. "You're remembering."

"Yes," I whispered as flashes of memory came to me. The landscape, so small below, my shadow being cast over the trees like a warning.

"Wasn't it incredible, Torin? I'll never forget the first time I became my dragon."

"It was everything I ever hoped it would be, Father. Better, even. The freedom in the air, the power..."

My father approached me and placed his hands on my shoulders. "Now, imagine if we could do this all the time. At will. To be in control of our dragons. Can you imagine that, my son?"

I could practically feel the scales rolling beneath my human flesh as I nodded. "But, the curse. It is impossible."

"Corvus and I have spent many years searching for a solution. A way to break this barbaric curse. You cannot contain beasts the way ours have been locked away within us. I believe we're getting closer to the answer, and we've recently made some progress, but we need allies. Those men of the other kingdoms, who share the same curse as we do. We must all be in agreement and work together to break it."

"I don't think we'll have any issue with that. Who wouldn't want access to such a gift at all times?" It made no sense to me. This was our birthright, who we were at our very core. Not something that could be restricted to a window of thirty days every ten years. Our beasts were a part of us, and to deny a man a part of himself was unfathomable. Especially now that I knew what it felt like to have the dragon within me—awakened.

My father's lips pressed together for a split second, but the expression disappeared just as quickly. "I'll leave it to you then? To speak with the others? After your display of strength over the last couple of days, I suspect your friends will admire you even more than they did before. I always knew

you were destined for greatness, Torin. I only pushed you as hard as I did because you needed it, because I believe in you."

As much as I hated to admit it, the words he said were ones I had longed to hear from him for many years. My entire life, really. To this point, I'd often worried he saw me as a disappointment. A foolish boy who was only interested in ale and women. I'd proven myself, and while I couldn't recall the events of The Hunt, I knew whatever I'd done had to have been unforgettable. *What had I accomplished to earn such praise from a man who had never freely given it to me before?*

"Do not worry. I'll speak with my friends. I'll get them on board."

My father tilted his chin down. "Then I'll leave you to clean up. Meet in the smoking room in two hours."

I bowed. "Thank you, Lord."

I watched as he marched to the door, his spirits the highest I'd ever seen.

"Father?" He looked back at me in question. "Aren't you and the others going to shift before we leave? You must be losing your minds..."

He chuckled. "Well, we couldn't join the hunt. That was purely for our heirs. But don't worry, Torin. We'll have our fun before we leave." With that, he left me to prepare for the day.

As I washed and changed, the pain in my leg vanished, along with the wound. I had completely healed myself. There wasn't so much as a scrape upon my skin. Incredible. And yet, even though my flesh was restored, my memories were not. I tried to keep an open mind and allow them to come to me, but either I needed more time, or those memories simply belonged to the dragon.

A servant delivered a huge platter of meat and fruit, and I devoured everything on it. My stomach didn't protest once, despite being three times

the amount I normally would have eaten. Was this to be the new normal? A never-ending appetite and thirst? And perhaps... flying. Whenever I desired?

After dressing, I lay on my bed and stared at the ornate ceiling. The choosing would take place in mere hours. Who would I pick? Which of the royals would get first choice? Names of the maidens filtered through my thoughts; Eliza, Becca, Belinda, Isla, Evie...

No. Not Evie. Evie was for Dair—she transformed him.

And yet, a ripple of awareness moved through my body as I pictured her face the night we'd danced together. That wildfire that lived within her, unable to be concealed.

She is not for me, I reminded myself.

A knock at the door snapped me out of my deliberations, and I rose from the bed. "Come in."

The door swung open, and there stood my friends. All of them. My brother Evander, Mosi and Taj, Alden, Ciar, and the rest of the Faolan pack. I scanned the group in search of the tallest bastard of us all and frowned when I didn't see my oldest friend.

"Where is Dair?"

"Here," his deep voice responded as he stepped around the threshold and into view.

I grinned at the other royals. "Well, boys, we did it!"

Cheers and laughter erupted from us all. "Let us not keep your father waiting," Mosi spoke above the chatter.

"Indeed." I stepped out of my room and closed the door behind me. "So, how was it?"

"Fucking amazing," Ciar boasted. "Best time of my life."

Several others chimed in, agreeing with the Faolan prince.

"Do you remember anything?" Taj asked nobody in particular.

"Just bits and pieces," Alden answered, making me feel a little better about my memory being the same.

I glanced back at my oldest and best friend. "What about you, Dair?"

His green gaze slid to mine, and his very eyes seemed to glitter. "I feel whole. As though I could do anything I wanted and succeed."

"Like propose to a woman and have her agree to marry your huge ass?" Alden teased loudly, earning the laughter of everyone.

"Careful, little brother. Not only am I a bigger man than you, but I am also a bigger bear." Dair winked, and Alden shook his head.

"Will we remember anything else? Like the actual hunt? Who won? How many animals did I kill?" Mosi rambled as we turned the corner that led to Father's study.

"We will." I spotted Corvus as he walked into the study. "I actually suspect that's what we're being called here for. To restore our memory." I gestured to where Corvus had just been, and there were several murmurs of agreement as well as bets between each other about who beat who. Dair remained stoic as ever, and I frowned. I really thought that shifting would have given him a sense of peace to let loose a little bit.

I stood back as the others entered the room, grabbing Dair's arm before he could follow. "What's going on with you?"

He ran his hand through his black hair. "I'm just... struggling in my mind. Knowing what is a real memory versus a dream. Or a nightmare."

I frowned. "What do you remember?"

He opened his mouth as if to speak and then closed it. Rubbing his hand over his chin, I observed thick stubble from days of not shaving. "It's

nothing. It has to have been a dream."

"If you say so," I said slowly, removing my hand from his arm. "But I would like to have a word with you? After this?"

Dair smirked. "Missed me that much?"

"You know you're the only one for me," I replied, fluttering my lashes.

Dair's smile fell. "Do not ever do that again, or I fear I will lose control of my stomach."

I slung my arm around his shoulder and we laughed together as we entered the study.

This was a brand new day. A brand new time for each of us. We'd been made whole with our other halves at last. Tonight, we'd each be betrothed to the women we'd spend the rest of our days with.

And best of all, I'd earned the respect of my father. The King. A title I'd one day bear proudly.

Yes, the tides had turned from good to great. Destiny was within grasp, and I was going to reach out and grab it. For my kingdom. For my realm. For my crown.



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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Spirits were high as we all gathered in the study. I had to admit, I had never felt so powerful in my life. Even now, with the bear at rest, strength coursed through my veins.

I sensed my brother at my side and found him grinning at me. "I feel like I've been reborn."

"That's a good description, Alden," I replied. "Do you remember much?"

"No. Mostly just sensations—like, I know I must've climbed several trees. It's as if I can feel the wind upon my face, even now." He clapped me on the shoulder. "What about you?"

I searched my head, and I had much of the same. Not memories per se, but feelings. Except for that one thing, the one image that seemed to return to me with the intensity of a lightning strike. I snapped myself out of it before I had to relive it. It was that picture in my mind that snapped me out of my slumber post-shift. It had to have been a dream. A fleeting, haunting vision from my subconscious. They were supposed to be safe from us, *right?*

"Same as you, brother," I confirmed. "Now we're both the men we're supposed to be. Our kingdom will be better for it."

Movement at the back of the room had all of us turning to the sound. Our fathers, the fathers of the four kingdoms, entered. Each wore strong looks of pride as they gazed around the room, finding their sons in the crowd. I met my father's eyes, and he bowed his head to me and I to him. The room seemed void of air as we waited for the rulers to reach the front of the room.

"Sons of Quintaria!" King Ero proclaimed, holding his arms out wide. "You've done each of your kingdoms proud! We are now stronger than we've ever been. Each of you fought and hunted bravely, bringing great honor to your family's names!"

Cheers went up, and several of my friends clapped and hollered, boasting about their success. I stood still, as I always had. Even with the excitement and sense of pride hanging heavily in the air, there was still that nagging in the pit of my stomach that wouldn't abate. What was it?

"You all know that we went through the same hunt when we were of age," my father said, arms crossed over his chest.

Mosi and Taj's father stepped forward. "And we all must accept that there are things we must do in order to ensure the success of our realm and the continuation of our bloodlines."

My brow pinched together as the unease in my stomach grew.

"As your memories are hazy, so were ours. For good reason," King Eamon added.

"Corvus," King Ero said, gesturing for his sorcerer to step to the front of them before addressing us once more. "Your first shift is the most difficult in regards to breaking through the mental fog and accessing your memories. Corvus is going to help speed up your ability to remember. Before doing so,

I ask that each of you keep an open mind. When we were cursed all those years ago, stipulations were placed. Things which served to make it harder for us to shift and to become one with our beasts. I ask that you trust and believe us when we say this was the only way. The curse demands blood to be spilled, which is why we do The Hunt. Without fresh blood, you would shift once and only once. Your beasts would fade away into the ether, and you would not be able to pass your gift to your own sons."

A few of my friends shifted on their feet at Ero's words, and I started to feel like perhaps the dream I'd had... hadn't been a dream at all.

"Sacrifices must be made!" Ekpen said loudly.

"We do what we must. For Quintaria!" King Eamon shouted, once again earning cheers.

Ero raised his hands, silencing the room. "All I ask is that you take a moment to process the things you're about to see. Think about it. We will give you an hour, and then rejoin the room to answer more questions." Our fathers began heading to the door, leaving all of us with questioning looks. Catching Torin's eye, he gave away nothing in his expression. It was the first time I'd been able to say that he'd made a face that resembled his father.

Once the door closed, all eyes were on Corvus. "Repeat after me and learn the truth."

He began chanting, words that were foreign and ancient, and one by one, everyone in the room joined in. A rhythm formed among our voices and the room suddenly felt heavy, like the air was thick and weighted. The hair on my arms lifted with each cycle of the magical words, and then, from the dark depths of my mind, the memories returned. I grunted as pain shot through my head with flashes of images and moments in time.

Running into the forest next to Alden. Meeting his yellow eyes, the both of us letting out a roar. Taj and Mosi raced past us, using the trees as launch pads, depositing deep claw marks in the trees. The wolves grouped off and disappeared into the night, leaving only the eeriness of their howls behind.

Movement to my left. A stag. Mine. Blood exploded in my mouth as I sank my teeth into its neck while Alden tore into its hind leg.

We worked as a team, killing many animals as the moon hung high in the sky. It wasn't until the sun was at its peak the following day that I caught my first whiff of new prey. I had to have it.

Screams. Women and guards running to the gates. Flesh being flayed with the swipe of my massive paws, claws severing flesh and tendon as if there was no resistance whatsoever. How absolutely satisfied I felt being covered in the blood of the new prey.

Watching Torin from land the next day as he sailed over the sea, igniting one of the ships with fire.

A most enticing scent. A familiar one. It called to me as I prowled closer. I could hear the rapid pitter patter of two heartbeats...

"No." I whispered, knowing what was to come.

Evie's face, full of fear. Her beautiful eyes wide with terror as I stood high above her. *Please, Goddess, tell me I didn't slay her as I did so many others.*

She yelled my name. My name. She knew. I remembered how my name from her lips had given me pause. Confused me. Her friend slipped away, and I barely noticed her guard helping Isla to safety.

Mine. Mine. MINE!

My beast seemed to demand I take notice of his claim on this woman. Saliva dripped from my maw as she stared at me. A loud crashing through

the trees shifted my gaze, and I watched as Torin appeared and blasted Evie's guard with fire. In my animal form, I was furious. They were to be my prey. Not. His. So, I attacked him. That's where the memory reel ended, and I searched the room for Torin, finding him with his eyes closed, his own memories still returning. My feet were moving before I was aware, and when my best friend's eyes opened, I was the first thing he saw.

"Dair," he said calmly.

"Did we kill her?" I demanded, going nose to nose with him.

He sighed in frustration at my closeness and stepped back, putting a small amount of space between us. "It wasn't in my memories."

I exhaled, some of the anxiety and dread leaving my body, but I wouldn't feel better until I saw her with my own eyes.

The rest of the room was a mixture of low conversation and men stunned into silence. I'd maimed and slaughtered people from my realm. Something I'd sworn to never do. I was supposed to protect them, and instead, I'd betrayed them.

Torin straightened his jacket and stood tall as he looked around the room. "Gentlemen." Everyone went silent and looked to Torin, waiting for him to speak. "What we've just seen was a shock, to say the least."

"I would have never done something like that!" Taj boomed, angry.

Torin held up his hand. "I know, brother. I don't believe that any of us would have, but we have to listen to what our fathers have said. It wasn't our fault—it is the fault of the sorcerer who placed this curse upon our bloodlines! We were left with no choice but to resort to this... *violence*."

"I'd like to see his head upon a pike!" Ciar ranted, growling low.

"As nobody has seen that traitor since the fall of Sova, that may be difficult to achieve," Alden said, speaking for the first time. I looked at my

brother and found his face devoid of color. For the first time in my life, I questioned the reason why we'd been cursed in the first place. I thought about the four kings who had taught each of us everything we knew. They hadn't been completely truthful with us, so what else hadn't we been told?

Mosi slammed his fists on a table. "Why the women? Why bring us here to choose a wife only to have the potentials slain by our own teeth and claws?!"

The room exploded in discussion, and theories were tossed about with the same speed as the waves of the sea during a storm.

"To ensure loyalty."

Everyone looked at me, and I realized I'd spoken my thought aloud.

"Think about it," I continued. "We're still to choose a wife, but from the remaining women. By orchestrating this Hunt the way they did, we get to pick from the strongest of the pack. The smartest, the most cunning, the ones who have survival skills. All important requirements of a queen."

"Wow," Alden murmured, shaking his head.

"But you said to ensure loyalty. A woman can be all of those things, but that doesn't make her loyal!" another Faolan shouted.

Torin pointed at him. "Exactly. But after what they've been through, would you ever dare be anything but loyal? Knowing what we're capable of?"

My stomach turned. This was the way they'd always done it. I thought of my mother. My kind, strong-willed, loving mother. She survived this exact same nightmare. She'd always seemed so in love with my father. Was it real?

"So, they will fear us. Our wives will be terrified of what lives within each of us. That's what it's come down to?" I couldn't stay silent. I was

getting angry, and anger wasn't an emotion I typically experienced. In fact, I'd been accused more than once of having trouble expressing any emotion. That was not an issue at the moment. I felt as though I could rip heads off.

"All of our parents endured this, Alasdair," Taj chimed in. "Did any of us grow up knowing anything except love?"

None of this felt right. Evie would never be able to look at me the same again... and I didn't blame her. How was I supposed to propose to her now that she'd nearly died at my hands? Her guard, who had ensured her safety through all of this and had likely become her friend, was incinerated by my best friend.

"We will explain this to our chosen women," Torin declared. "We will make them understand. We all have a duty to the realm. They would not have come if they didn't have some level of respect for duty."

"And if they want nothing to do with us?" I argued, curious as to where everyone's thoughts lay on the matter.

The doors opened at that moment, our fathers appearing once more.

"They don't have a choice, Son," my father answered.

Ero nodded and continued. "They've seen too much. Those who remain will either be chosen or they will remain here, on the island. They'll join those who came before them."

The guards stationed here, the maids and cooks. The servants. They were all a part of this in the past?

"They won't return to their families?" Ciar asked.

"They can't," I replied before anyone else could speak. Now that I knew the game, it was all clear to me. An elaborate contest created from the desire for power and glory. "Our gifts are a secret to everyone aside from

those in the royal houses. It would be too much of a risk to let someone go free to tell the tale."

"Astute as always, Alasdair," Ero said appreciatively. His words of praise, which were always meant to make me feel respected, now left a slimy feeling upon my soul. I didn't agree with any of this.

Alden approached our father. "Why didn't it end sooner? Once the first blood was spilled?"

King Cairo answered. "We stopped it as soon as each man had a kill, which is what is required by the curse. We aren't monsters, and we took no pleasure in watching what happened out there. Believe me when I tell you, we ended it the moment we could."

"Which is why you weren't out there for the full three days we allotted for the hunt," King Eamon added.

Their words seemed to appease most of the men as nothing more was said on the topic.

"What's the plan, then?" Taj asked as he pulled his locs into a knot atop his head, securing it with an orange leather band. The colors of our kingdoms were always on display. We'd been raised to be proud of our heritage, and yet, as I looked around the room, I felt as though I was seeing things clearly for the first time.

King Eamon sat down in a brown leather chair, groaning as he did so. He was the eldest of the four rulers, and age was beginning to catch up to him. "Tonight, you will select a wife from the remaining women. Each of you will write down your selections in order of first to last and each list will be tallied in accordance with the scoring. The final pairings will be read aloud by Ero, from lowest score, to highest."

Corvus waved his hand and a stack of papers appeared in his hand. "These are the women eligible for The Choosing Ceremony. Please take one." He handed them off to one of the Ekpen cousins who took one for himself and passed it on.

"What have the women been told? Do they know?" Torin asked, taking a list for himself.

"They were informed that yes, royals are capable of shifting. That they proved their worth and thanks to their bravery, the realm benefits by continuing a strong, royal bloodline." Eamon replied.

I gritted my teeth as Alden passed me a list and kept one for himself before Ciar impatiently took the rest out of his hands. I folded it into a square and stuffed it into my pocket.

Alden shifted his weight and asked, "And did any of them... take issue?"

King Cairo chuckled. "There always is some degree of resistance. It passes."

I thought of Evie. The strength within her that she struggled to stifle during the ball. Oh, there would be resistance, but maybe, I could diffuse some of it. "Will we get to speak with them before the ceremony?"

"There will be a short period between dinner and the ceremony, forty-five minutes, for each of you to mingle with the remaining women. I suggest you make good use of that time. When you're decided, go to the selection booth and write down your order," my father explained. "Everything will happen as it should. Only one of us got our first choice during our Hunt, and in the end, it worked out exactly as it should have. So keep in mind that you may not end up with who you think you will, but as always, we expect everyone to remain civil and grateful." He stared around the room with a stern expression. One that he reserved for me and my brother when we were

younger and misbehaving during lessons or dinner. I could read between the lines.

You get who you get and you won't cause a scene.

"You'll each be collected when it's time for dinner. In the meantime, rest. Refresh yourselves. The Hunt may be over, but this is still just the beginning. The Recurrence is far from over." Ero made his way to the door, stopping when he reached Torin. He extended his hand to his son, and a look passed between them for a split second as Torin slipped his hand into his father's. Father and son shared a moment, one that I knew Torin had never been given until now—his father's approval.

It wasn't until my own father stepped in my line of sight that I realized I'd been caught staring. "Father," I greeted, bowing.

"None of that, Alasdair." He patted my chest with both hands and spoke low. "I know this is difficult, son. I struggled with it, too. It doesn't make you any less of a man. We're kings, and kings must make difficult choices for the good of our people and our families."

"I understand," I replied, even though I didn't. I could see how this Hunt was the answer to the curse, but that did not mean I had to agree with it. I'd been just as much a player in a game with secret rules and consequences, and I didn't appreciate it.

"Good lad," he said. "I am proud of you, and I love you, son." He looked around me and smiled. "I'm going to speak with Alden before I leave. Never forget, Alasdair, one day, you will be a king. This is just the beginning of the hard decisions and situations you will be thrust into. You must keep your head."

I nodded. "I will."

With that, my father walked away while I was left standing alone, looking at friends I'd known since birth. Boys who had grown into men, men who would continue to gain power and respect as time moved forward. They hugged and celebrated together, and had I not had those awful memories returned to me, I may have joined in with them. I'd heard enough though, and I needed some time alone. With that plan, I made my way to the door, only to be halted at the last moment.

"Dair."

I looked back and found Torin standing behind me, looking serious. I lifted a brow in question.

"I have something I need to discuss with you. Perhaps we could talk in your room?"

"I can't right now, Torin. I'm—" I paused, searching for the right excuse but quickly found I really was not feeling well. "tired."

Torin narrowed his eyes as he studied my face. "You do look exhausted. Go and rest while you can. I'll find you later?"

"Later," I replied, already turning back to the exit. Cool air hit my face as I entered the hall, and I immediately felt some relief.

"Lord," the guards standing outside of the door greeted me. I simply acknowledged the greeting with a nod. It was all I could do for fear of opening my mouth and letting out a roar of frustration.

I marched through the halls, eager to clear my head, a feat which seemed impossible at that point. I'd been raised in court, surrounded by nobility. I knew of the games that were played within the sanctions of the royal circles, but up to this point, I never felt as though I was a game piece, one to be moved about without any of my own input. *Betrayed*. That's what I felt.

Our people's gifts, the ability to shift into our animals, were exactly that. Ours. A sacred bond between man and beast. Had I been informed of the requirements to acquire such a “gift”, I would have declined. However, I wasn't given that option. It was assumed by all that we would just accept that this was the way of things.

You nearly killed her.

My breath caught as Evie's panicked face flashed in my mind once again—an image that would haunt me for the rest of my life. It wasn't that I didn't feel guilt for the women and men I had killed, because I did. But none of them faced me, looked me in the eye in their final moments, not like she had. They hadn't called out my name and begged for mercy. I needed to find her. We were all victims to this atrocity, and I feared what the kings might do with her if she rebelled. I knew, out of all of the women, it would be her. Her stubbornness and strong-willed personality weren't something she hid during the ball. My stomach twisted uncomfortably at the ramifications she'd face if she caused a scene.

I changed directions and headed to the third floor, where I knew the women's rooms were. A guard stood at the base of the stairs, startling when he saw me approaching.

"My lord," he said, bowing. "Is there something I could help you with?"

"I need to see one of the women. Immediately."

"Oh, my lord, I am afraid that isn't possible. King Ero has explicitly forbidden unchaperoned meetings between the royals and the wom—"

My hand shot out and grabbed the guard around his neck. I could clearly hear the hammering of his heart as his eyes went wide. How dare he try to keep me from her? I wanted to snap his neck for the disrespect.

I looked down from his rapidly reddening face to the way my hand engulfed his throat and released him as though I'd been burned. I blinked several times, feeling dizzy. *This isn't me.* "Forgive me."

The guard cautiously rubbed his neck and avoided eye contact. "There is nothing to forgive, my lord."

I wiped the beads of sweat from my forehead. "I should not have placed my hands upon you in that manner. I am not... myself at the moment. I apologize, but I really must speak with her."

He slowly gained the courage to meet my eyes before he stepped closer. With a hushed tone, he said, "You didn't hear it from me, but there may have been a group of women who went to the courtyard for some fresh air."

"But the woman I need to talk to—"

"Was the one you danced with at the ball? Who tripped Prince Torin?"

My heart raced at the thought of seeing her, of getting to explain myself. "That is her. How did you know?"

"Many of us picked our favorite pairings, my lord. The two of you were quite popular." I simply blinked at him. He brushed away a piece of lint from his jacket and cleared his throat. "That said, it really would be a happenstance of fate if you were to venture to the courtyard."

"Thank you. I am in your debt," I said as I all but ran toward the stairs. When I reached them, I looked back to the guard. "What is your name, guard?"

"Kazen, lord."

I tipped my chin to Kazen and tore down the stairs like a fire was right behind me. Reaching the ground floor, my shoes clacked against the stone floor as I approached the glass doors that led to the courtyard. Already, I could see women sitting at tables and drinking tea. I was so focused on

searching for Evie that I didn't notice another woman stepping around a corner. We collided, and she squeaked, hitting the floor hard.

"My Goddess," I proclaimed, reaching down to help her up. "I did not see you, my lady. Are you hurt?" I took in her blonde hair and blue eyes, noting her height as I helped her upright. "Belinda, isn't it?"

She smiled and curtsied. "Good morning, my lord. I'm quite alright. It takes more than a bump to take me down."

The weight of her statement hung between us. She meant that she'd survived The Hunt and was made of stronger stuff than the average maiden. Guilt washed over me once again.

"I am—"

Belinda placed her small hand on my forearm. "You are to be a king. You owe me no explanation."

I knew my mouth was open. I was stunned by her acceptance. How could she think such a thing?

"My lord, you don't look so well," Belinda stated, the fine lines on her face appearing as she took in the way my hands shook as I removed the handkerchief from my pocket and dabbed at my forehead.

"I'm fine. I just need—" I stumbled over my words as Belinda's face seemed to blur from one to two. I shook my head and placed a hand against the wall to steady myself.

"Perhaps you should sit." Belinda guided me to a sitting corner, and I didn't resist. I felt incredibly lightheaded as if I couldn't get enough air. Somehow, the woman had supported much of my weight during the short distance to the chair, but that was no small feat. I was a large man. A large man who was close to passing out. The room spun as I spotted the leather

chair, and I all but collapsed into it, taking Belinda with me, and then, there was nothing.

"Alasdair!" A sharp pain in my cheek jolted me back to awareness. My eyes felt heavy as the face before me came into focus. *Belinda?* "You're okay," she cooed, wiping my cheek with her handkerchief as she sat perched upon my lap.

Uncomfortable, I shifted abruptly, trying to sit straighter, which caused the lady on my lap to slide even closer to me. I felt her breasts pressing against my chest as she dabbed at my face. "You really should be still, my lord."

The sound of glass shattering pulled me completely out of my daze. On alert, I leaned away and scanned the room. The face haunting me all morning was now staring back at me. A tray she'd been carrying was at her feet, all of the glassware broken.

"Evie," I gasped.

Her blue eyes pierced me sharper than any blade would be capable of. This was another expression I'd have to add to my collection of shame. Whereas the one I'd been battling was one of fear, this one was a look of disgust. Pure, white-hot hatred. I pushed Belinda up and off my lap, but Evie had already spun around—her deep navy blue skirt was the only thing I caught sight of as she rounded a corner and disappeared.

"She doesn't understand, my lord!" Belinda shouted behind me as I went after Evie.

"Evie!" I bellowed, no longer caring if I was discovered. She was down the hall, about to slip into the kitchens. I'd never find her in there. Not with all of the people and places to hide. I couldn't let her get away. So, I ran. I ran with everything I had, knowing I had to set things right between us. She

heard my quickened steps and looked back once before she, too, began sprinting. "Don't run from me, Evie!"

Excitement suddenly flared within me. Her scent overtook the corridor until she was all I could smell. She didn't reply, just kept up her pace. The good news was she was moving too quickly to slow down to enter the kitchen. She'd risk me catching her if she did that, and I was gaining ground on her. Desperately, her hand shot out as she raced past a coat tree, pulling it down and blocking the hallway.

"Are you insane?!" I cleared the obstacle easily as Evie turned right. My advantage was that I knew this castle while she did not. Goddess, I really wished she would stop running from me. I didn't think I could stop chasing her if I tried. An image of myself catching her and pinning her beneath me flashed in my head and I growled. *No*. I wasn't a beast. I was Alasdair Oberon, crown prince of Naron.

Slowing up, knowing she had no escape, I turned the corner and found her frantically looking for an unlocked door.

"Evie," I rasped, holding out my hands. "I'm not going to harm you. I just want to talk."

She cursed as she tried handle after handle, each failure bringing her closer to the dead end of the corridor.

"Please," I begged. "Do not run from me."

I was less than five feet away when she reached the final door. She twisted the handle, and it opened. Evie didn't hesitate and threw herself into the room, trying to close the door behind her. I was too close now, easily preventing her from locking me out.

"Leave me alone!" she screeched as she scrambled deeper into the room, searching for anything she could use as a weapon.

I stepped through the threshold and shut the door behind me, twisting the lock.

"Evie, stop this." I kept myself between her and the door as I crept closer. A vase came flying at my head, and I stepped aside, letting it smash against the wall instead. We were in someone's office, and Evie rounded the desk, staring me down.

"I want nothing to do with you," she hissed.

Both of our chests heaved from the chase and the emotions that were overtaking us. Locked in a stare down, I noticed her hand move the tiniest fraction. I tracked that movement and spotted the pair of ornate scissors on the corner of the desk. My gaze returned to hers. Time stood still for a split second. Her anger, rage, and despair radiated off her with a force so strong I felt as though I might smother from the sheer intensity of it.

"Don't do—"

I didn't get to finish before she moved, which triggered my instincts. I sprang forward, hurtling myself over the desk. Wrapping my arms around her, I twisted us before we both hit the ground, the scissors clattering across the room. Holding her tightly with both of her arms pinned at her sides, immediately she fought me.

"Let me go! Let me go!" Her legs kicked, searching for any way she might be able to harm me.

"Evie! LISTEN TO ME!" I bellowed, a growl lacing my words, and the woman in my arms went limp. I didn't trust that she wouldn't try something stupid if I released my hold on her, so we remained there. Me, with my back on the floor, and her back to my chest.

"I hate you," she whispered.

My throat tightened at her words.

"I didn't know, Evie."

"I don't believe you. I don't believe a word from anyone in this cursed palace!"

"On my kingdom, I swear it. I was not in control out there. None of us were. We did not know what had been planned. Please," I begged, willing her to understand. It was the first time in my life I'd begged anyone for anything.

"You hunted me down out there, and you just now did the same thing! And you *enjoyed* it."

"I did not enjoy it!"

She scoffed and then wiggled. I assumed she was trying to get free, but I froze when her hips moved against my dick, which was hard as a rock.

"I'm sorry, I didn't notice..." I stammered, horrified that here I was, trying to convince this woman that I had her best interests at heart, all the while, my cock twitching against her ass, telling a completely different story.

"Release me, Alasdair. I want you to look me in the eye when you lie to me," she demanded.

I sighed and removed my hold, pushing us both upright. She sat on the floor next to me and slowly raised her eyes to mine. With her so close now, I could see the evidence of her grief and pain. Puffiness beneath her eyes and the splotches of red upon her face... Broken by the image, I reached for her cheek only to have my hand smacked away.

"Evie, please." I sank my hands into my hair, tugging at the roots in frustration. "Let me explain my side of things."

"I clearly don't have a choice in the matter, so talk." She crossed her arms and stared at the ground.

I shook my head. "Up until an hour ago, I had no idea what that felt like. How horrible it is—to have no say in matters that pertain to you. So, you're wrong. If you really do not wish to hear me, then go. I'll never force you against your will, and I vow to ensure that nobody experiences what I was forced to, ever, again."

The air grew heavy between us as she sat there like a statue. What was she thinking? I supposed I wasn't entitled to that information, but that didn't mean I didn't desperately want to know. I meant what I told her, though. I'd never force her to do anything, and that included marrying me. But she had to believe it. I had to prove it to her. All I could hope was that she would allow me the chance to earn her trust.

And that she'd forgive me.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

He wouldn't force me? I'd just been forced to do countless things for this fucking realm, and he thought he could just... win my trust by saying he wouldn't force me? That wasn't going to happen, but this was the most information I'd gotten since we entered the castle, and I desperately needed answers.

"Absolutely nothing has been my decision!" I fired at him, making him lean back from me. "Not from the moment those guards appeared on my doorstep and told me I had no choice but to answer the call of duty to my realm!"

Dair's face seemed to harden. "Add that to the list of things we were not informed of."

"And what does that mean?"

"That we were under the impression that every woman here *wanted* to be here!"

"And I wonder why that is?! Most of us come from nothing! The promise of a proposal or a payout is more than any of us could've hoped for!" My

chest heaved as I raged at him. I needed to get it all out, and he was here, so he'd have to take it. "Do you even know what you've done!?"

Kael's smiling face appeared in my head, and I clutched my chest as the pain of losing him was renewed.

"Of course, I know!" Dair boomed, startling me. I scooted backward, my fear rising. Would he just turn into a bear whenever he wanted to? I watched as he pinched the bridge of his nose and took several deep breaths. "When we were out there, we had no idea what was happening. Even after we woke, our memories were not whole. The first chance I had, after learning of the horrors that had been committed, I came to find you. Because I do remember now." He paused and glanced up at me. Slowly, he made a fist with his right hand and pounded it slowly three times against his heart, a gesture of respect in Quintaria. "I am so very sorry, Evie."

A sob slipped out, unable to be contained.

"I would never harm my people. I am disgusted. With myself, with the crown, with... all of it."

I fiddled with the hem of my skirt as he spoke since I found it hard to look at him. Honesty was shining through, unable to be denied. If I didn't look, I wouldn't have to accept it.

"After we were rescued," I rolled my eyes, "we were taken to the dining hall and given food and water. King Eamon and Corvus showed up and congratulated us. *Congratulated!*" Dair winced at my tone, but I still couldn't believe the audacity. "They said we'd proven ourselves and that we could be trusted now with the secrets of the royal bloodlines. That we should feel proud and honored to still be in the running for the ceremony."

"Did anybody react..." he searched for a word, but I already knew what he was going to ask.

“Unfavorably?” I finished his question, and he nodded, looking at me knowingly. “No. Nobody caused a scene. We were fucking exhausted, injured, and in shock.”

Dair’s eyes scanned me with concern. “Are you injured? Did you sleep?”

I shook my head. “Just bruises and scrapes. I didn’t think I’d be able to sleep, but once my head hit my pillow, I was out. The thing that ended up waking me was hearing screams from one of the other girls who was having a nightmare. That was early this morning.”

Silence stretched between us, but I knew I had to ask him. Steeling my nerves, I raised my face and stared directly into his deep green eyes. “Why didn’t you kill me?”

“I nearly did. But you— You reached *me* somehow. The man inside of the bear. That hesitation was the only small glimpse of clarity I had the entire time, and it faded fast.”

“I didn't want to believe it, Dair. I didn't want to believe the crazy idea I'd concocted in my brain because it was just that. Crazy. That the royals brought common folk to this secluded island to hunt them for sport, but it became clear that was exactly the truth of it. And then, the animals on the royal crests began appearing, one by one. Including fucking dragons. DRAGONS!” I laughed dryly. “Turns out, when something is as inconceivable as this hunt, the unbelievable becomes the truth.”

“There are no words I can offer that would be enough,” Dair said. “From what I understood from the kings, this is all due to a curse placed on the royal families. We used to be in control of our shifts, but no longer. A curse was cast against every royal house, prohibiting the males in the bloodline from shifting until we were—” He held up one finger, “Over the age of eighteen,” another finger, “during The Recurrence on the first full moon of

the month, and," he lifted a third finger, "human blood must be spilled to solidify the bond between man and beast."

I felt ill and must've shown as much because Dair's normally serious eyes grew soft with concern. "I would not have done this, Evie. Aside from the dances we shared, I know you don't know me, but I felt... this connection." He rubbed his chest and stared into my soul. "With you. I thought that perhaps, you may have felt it also."

"I didn't come here for marriage," I admitted. "I came here for the money, and I nearly died for it. I should have listened to my father."

"Your father?" he asked, puzzled. "What did your father say?"

I laughed. "He was prepared to fight the guard escort that came to bring me here. He forbade me from coming and encouraged me to run. And I would have, but then I saw the money prize. He's getting older and needs medical care, and my school is in shambles. I did what I had to do, for my family and for my village. So, if it's all the same to you, I'd like to collect on that and return to him. Immediately."

He sighed and began to stand up. Once he was up on both feet, he extended a large hand to me. Was he going to help me leave? Guarded, I placed my hand in his and felt the warmth of his body, a temperature that would normally have been alarming in a normal human.

"Are you going to help me?" I asked quietly, hopefully.

"There's no easy way to say this, Evie." My stomach fell. I knew I wasn't going to like whatever he was about to say next. "There is no returning home."

The air whooshed out of my lungs as though it had been stolen. "What?"

"The remaining women will either end up with a proposal of marriage, or they will be sent to the eastern realm. I'm told your families will receive the

money, and they'll be told you secured a marriage with a royal in another realm."

My father needed me. Not return home? No. There was no way that I'd simply accept that.

"Whatever you're thinking, you need to stop."

I'd run. I could sneak out of here tonight, swim for the ships. The magical barrier probably dropped once the royals returned to human form.

I jumped when Dair's palms landed on my shoulder.

"I can protect you, Evie."

My view of the floor wavered as tears welled.

"There was a score being kept, during the hunt," he explained, his voice pained.

"A score?" My body felt numb, like at any moment, I would just collapse in on myself and be reduced to nothing. Then I remembered. "The ravens?"

Dair cleared his throat. "Yes. They were the eyes. I don't know what the point system is, but I can guess. The only good thing that may come out of this is that I believe I scored high. That will determine the order of who gets to choose first."

I shook my head. "B-but, my father—"

Dair took my hands and squeezed them. "That's what I'm trying to tell you, Evie. I choose you, and that way, I will ensure you'll still be able to see your father. Or bring him to the castle to live with you."

A bitter laugh escaped as I pictured my father in a fucking castle. "He'll never agree to it. No, I won't agree to it!" A fresh wave of anger was rising. "I was lured here under false promises! This is complete horse shi—"

"Damnit!" Dair growled, pulling me against him. "Why don't you understand that I am trying to help? Trying to make sure you live to see

your father again?! You're being foolish."

"Me? Foolish?!" I shoved him, which did absolutely nothing. I don't think his skin even felt the force of my push. "You listen to me, you big, hairy, overgrown beast of a man! I will do whatever I have to do in order to get back home. I don't need you. I don't need anyone, do you hear me?!"

I watched as his forest green eyes darkened two shades deeper, making them appear nearly black. A flash of yellow flickered across them, and I yelped. I remembered that shade of yellow all too well.

"I will see you safe, and you will accept that," he said, his voice even and calm. It was terrifying. He was terrifying... and I was an idiot.

"I'll do nothing of the sort. You said you wouldn't force me!"

"Well, that was before I realized how much of a stubborn baby you were."

My mouth dropped at the insult.

"I actually have half a mind to simply throw you over my shoulder this instant and sneak off with you."

I gritted my teeth. "And I have a full mind to kick you right in your balls if you try."

"You're driving me mad! Would you rather be chosen by someone else? Someone who doesn't give a single shit about the murders they committed out in those woods?" He pointed in the direction of the crimes. "Trust me, because there are quite a few who are like that."

After what I had been through, the thought of continuing to play nice with these monsters was nearly impossible to stomach. What they had chosen to do was nothing short of evil. They'd have no problem executing me for any little thing if I became a problem. I did not want to die. I could not die. Not yet, anyway. Not until my father's time had come and gone. I

would not be the cause of his heartbreak, but I was not going to let any of them know what I was thinking.

"I'll consider your... proposition."

Dair blinked in disbelief. "My proposition? It wasn't a proposition!"

I lifted my brows. "Then what was it?"

"I was informing you of my intention to make you my queen."

Me. A queen? I hadn't even processed that part of it yet. A ruler. The woman who provides heirs to continue the royal bloodline for generations to come.

"And what if I don't want it?"

"I suggest you ask yourself and listen to yourself, honestly. Perhaps you don't want *it*—" I glanced up, and my eyes collided with his. "But," he continued, and I held my breath as he stepped closer, "do you want me?"

My mouth opened, and I tried to find words, but he was so close now. I could count the few dark freckles on his nose. They matched the color of his beard.

"Do you, Evie?" His thumb traced my cheekbone before he leaned down, putting his mouth next to my ear. "I want you."

My insides clenched at his words and the feel of his breath on my skin. His head dipped lower, putting his lips against my neck. "I've wanted you since the moment I saw you. I will protect you. Let me."

I cursed my traitorous body when a sigh slipped through my lips at the sensation of his mouth against my skin. Suddenly, he was gone, and my eyes, which had closed at some point, flew open. My skin protested the loss of his touch and I blinked, looking at him in confusion.

He smiled, seeing how he affected me. "I've said what I needed to say, my lady. I'll see you this evening and think of nothing else until then."

He bowed and walked around the desk, straight for the door. His behavior rendered me speechless, so I remained silent and simply watched him slip through the door and out of sight.

"My Goddess," I whispered as I sank into a chair. What sorcery had he just committed against me? My heart was still pounding, and I felt a desperate yearning that I didn't understand.

I felt more confused now than I had the entire time I had been on this damned island. Dair hadn't needed to tell me any of the information he had shared, yet he had. He went out of his way to track me down and tell me what he knew. What reason would he have to lie about it? His words seemed sincere, and I was usually a very good judge of truth and lies. I had to be smart. I owed that to Kael. Throwing my life away and being shipped off would do nothing to avenge his death. In ten years, when the next hunt came around, this cycle would repeat. More innocent women would be slaughtered. I would never be able to bring about change if I ran.

I sank my hands into my dark hair and resisted the urge to yank it all out in frustration. How did I end up here?

Releasing my hair, I stood and smoothed my skirt. Now that I had confirmation that this was nothing but a game, I could choose to either participate willingly, or they would make me do it unwillingly. I needed to change my mindset. The crown was thinking about the here and now, and I was thinking about next week, next month, five years from now. One thing had become clear to me—The Hunt was over, but the game was very much still alive.

And if I also wanted to be alive, I would need to go all in.

Learn the rules. Study the other players.

Only then would I be able to make them pay for what they put us through. What they'd put me through. I would never, ever forget.

"Belinda is telling everyone who will listen that she saved Alasdair's life. That he was unwell, and she revived him," Isla whispered to me when I returned to the table she and Riv were seated at.

I rolled my eyes and swallowed the small pang of jealousy that reared up when I recalled how she had been sitting on him. "She's a fool."

"Aye, agreed. But she's also saying that he ran after you? What happened?" Riv eyed me curiously.

I leaned in and picked up my cup of tea. "I may have learned some things."

Isla's eyes widened. "Oh? Do tell."

I glanced around and saw several of the girls looking my way, and their gazes quickly shifted when they realized they'd been caught. "Not here," I said.

My friends nodded, and Isla stood when Ayla appeared in the courtyard. She had been provided with a cane to ease her walking, but she was still slow moving. The wound hadn't been infected, miraculously. That was thanks to Isla's nursing in the cave.

"Ayla!" Isla shouted, waving at the young woman. "How are you today?"

Ayla smiled. "Getting better. Thank you, again, for your help."

"Nothing to thank me for. I'm just glad it didn't get infected."

Our attention was diverted to the doorway when the sorcerer and head guard appeared. "Good morning, ladies. I am here on behalf of King Ero to inform you that the Choosing Ceremony will be tonight. He has cleared the

second ballroom on the top floor of the castle in order for you all to prepare. The servants will assist you in picking a dress and attend to your needs."

It took everything in me to remain seated. I wanted to lunge at them both—to claw their eyes out for what they put us through. Especially Corvus. He'd watched the entire bloody hunt through the eyes of his ravens and kept score. That's how little our lives meant to him, to the crown.

"Thank you, my lord," Belinda said, her voice breathy and fake. "Shall we go there now?"

"That would be appreciated, my lady," the guard replied, not bothering to be discreet with the way his eyes scanned Belinda's body.

She smiled brightly at him, and I felt warmth in my palms. I glanced down and stared at the blood pooling in my hands, the fingernail marks plain as day.

"Better yer hands than their faces," Rivka whispered, tilting her head to my self-inflicted wounds as she handed me a napkin.

One by one, all of the women stood and began leaving the courtyard, following the guard and Corvus. Watching them all, it felt as though I was stuck in my seat, my body refusing to leave it.

"I know it's hard, Evie," Isla said quietly. "But we have to do this. We just have to get through it. We'll do it together, okay?"

My throat was too tight to respond. I didn't know if I would scream or sob if I tried to speak, so I remained silent and simply nodded.

"Together, no matter what," Riv proclaimed, slipping her arm around my waist and her other around Isla.

As we made our way to the door, I noticed Eliza was still sitting at a table, alone. "Eliza?" Slowly, she shifted her eyes to me and stared blankly. "Are you okay?"

“Is your head bothering you?” Isla asked, already making her way over to check her out. “You took two really nasty hits out there.”

Eliza blinked, her only reaction.

“Let me just take a look at your eyes, okay?” Isla kept her voice low and soothing as she reached out and placed her hand on Eliza’s cheek. Gently, she pulled her face toward her to look into her eyes.

A sense of unease began building in my gut as Eliza remained frozen, like a statue. No expressions on her face, no movement aside from blinking. Isla studied Eliza’s face and then took a seat next to her. Riv and I approached slowly and sat down in the other seats.

“Eliza, you have a serious concussion. I think we should find someone who can help you,” Isla stated, already looking back at the castle.

“Didn’t we already know about the concussion?” Riv asked, frowning at Eliza.

I nodded. When we were brought into the castle last night, a healer came around and examined all of us. “The healer said that yesterday.”

“—no help,” Eliza mumbled.

Concerned, I looked at her. “What did you say?”

Finally, she seemed to emerge from the brain fog she was stuck in. Her blue eyes slammed into mine. “I said *there is no help*.”

Isla chuckled nervously. “Come on, don’t say that. We’re back here now. We’re okay.”

Eliza laughed. Loudly. The three of us glanced at each other, sensing that something was not okay with our friend. Abruptly, she lifted her hands from her lap and slammed them on the table, making me jump.

“Are we, though? Are we okay? Really?” she rambled, shaking her head back and forth.

Riv stiffened next to me in her chair. “Eliza, what are you doing with that knife?”

Knife?

My heart sank when Eliza shook her hand and a silver knife, one from the dining hall, slipped out of her long sleeve and clanked against the table. She wrapped her smooth fingers around the handle and stared down at it, like it was the most fascinating thing she’d ever seen.

“This will never end,” she whispered, almost to herself, as though we weren’t even here. “Her head was caved in, like the watermelon my sister dropped last summer. It landed on a rock. It was just like that. And a *man* did that... And those beasts who slaughtered those women and guards. That wolf... He ran right past me carrying a bloody scalp. Not the whole head.” She shook her head back and forth violently, “Just the scalp and the blood stained hair.”

Isla’s panicked eyes darted to mine, but it wasn’t me who spoke.

“It will end,” Riv said, matter of fact. “Look at me, Eliza.”

My heart hammered as Eliza actually did as Riv asked.

“Those things you’re seeing in yer head? They’re not your fault, and I know that you can’t control when they appear or how they affect you.” She paused and reached out, covering Eliza’s pale hand with her own brown hand, which was a bit sunburnt, thanks to exposure to the elements. “Right now.” Eliza looked puzzled, and Riv continued. “It’s not something you can control right now. It is not a forever thing, I promise. Given time, and with the help of your friends and family, you will regain control of your mind.”

The girl blinked and her tears let loose.

“I’m going to take this now, okay?” Riv asked, referring to the knife.

Eliza startled and gasped, releasing the knife as though she'd been cut by it. "What am I doing? Oh, Goddess!"

Riv snatched the knife, and Isla moved just as fast, wrapping her arms around Eliza and hugging her tightly as she broke down. I looked at Riv in awe. She'd just saved a woman's life.

"Shhh," Isla whispered, running her hand over Eliza's hair. "I've got you."

"What is going on out here?" a guard demanded, making me shoot to my feet.

"Nothing," I lied. "We were just about to go inside."

His eyes assessed me for a moment before sliding over to Isla and Eliza.

"What's her problem?" he nodded at Eliza, still sobbing into Isla's neck.

"She started her cycle," I blurted.

He frowned in disgust. "Well, make sure she doesn't get blood on—"

Blood was the trigger word for the absolute disaster that followed.

Eliza screamed and pushed Isla away from her. She launched herself out of her seat and took off, racing between the other tables when suddenly, she climbed on top of one and batted at things that weren't there.

"GET AWAY FROM ME!" she shrieked, her eyes wild and unseeing reality.

Three more guards appeared in the courtyard and converged on Eliza.

"Just leave her be!" Riv bellowed. "She's afraid! Let me help her!"

"Stay back, Miss. We'll handle this," the original guard ordered.

Hopeless, I stared as they manhandled Eliza. She kicked, scratched, and cursed to no avail.

"Where are you taking her?!" Isla demanded, chasing after them.

“To the healer! She’s clearly unwell!” one of them replied as he wrestled with Eliza’s legs.

“I CAN’T GO BACK! THOSE BEASTS, THE TUNNELS... I WON’T! PLEASE!” she wailed like a banshee, shattering my heart. The sounds of her pain echoed through the castle and reached us long after they disappeared from sight.

Isla sniffled. “Poor Eliza. What do you think they’ll do? Will they help her?”

“She needs rest. A lot of rest,” Riv replied, staring at where they had disappeared. “Exhaustion makes these things worse.”

Would they help her, though? Or would she be considered damaged goods now? A lost cause? I felt sick to my stomach thinking about it.

“Are you three coming?” Becca asked, and we looked up, seeing her face overhead as she leaned over the banister.

“Be right there,” I said, and she nodded, disappearing from sight. “Come on, before we get in trouble.”

Together, we climbed the stairs and spotted Becca waving.

“You were so good with her, Riv,” Isla whispered.

Riv shrugged. “No big deal.”

“How do you know?” I asked. “How do you know she’ll regain control of her mind?”

We reached the room, and Riv reached for the handle, but before she opened it, she looked back at us. “Because I did.”

With that, she pulled it open and walked through, conversation over. Isla and I looked at each other, but there was nothing to say. If Riv wanted to share more with us, she could, and she knew that. My love for her, though, grew to new depths.



image-
placeholder

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The sounds of delighted women surrounded me as we entered the room, and I sighed. This was going to be a long, long day.

"By the stars," Isla exclaimed, looking around the large room that seemed to be covered in silk, satin, tulle, and jewels. Colors and patterns of all assortments assaulted my eyes as I scanned the space. Many of the women were already claiming gowns and accessories. It was challenging to keep my thoughts on anything aside from what was happening right around us. It was chaos.

"We have plenty of gowns for everyone!" a voice shouted over the chatter.

"Who is that?" I asked Riv and Isla as I took in the man who'd just entered the center of the room. With a tape measure slung over his shoulder and a pin cushion in his hand, it was clear what his job was, but this was the first time I had seen him. He was quite tall, with freckles and deep red hair that hung in curls to his shoulders, not one piece out of place.

"My name is Finan, for those of you wondering. I am the royal tailor for the Kingdom Volos. I'm also the one who will be making sure each one of

you looks your absolute best tonight!"

Belinda held up a hand. "Excuse me?"

Finan's light blue eyes seemed to dance as he looked over at my arch enemy. "Yes, darling?"

"I'd love to try this dress." She pointed at a pale yellow gown adorned with silver beading and clear crystals.

His eyebrow lifted. "Mmm, yeah. No, absolutely not." Belinda's mouth dropped open as he strutted over to the gown. His fingers ran over the silky fabric, and he seemed to speak his thoughts aloud, unconcerned with being heard. "Your skin tone with that color would be absolutely tragic. It would be cause for me to lose my title. I'd chop my own head off before sending you out there in this." He shivered like the very idea of it offended him to the point of disgust.

I couldn't hide the laugh. My body once again betrayed me, and several people glared at me, including Belinda. I covered my mouth with my hand and coughed a few times. "Sorry, it's so stuffy up here."

Finan crossed the room, heading right for me. "What is your name?"

"Evie," I answered, curtsying like a good girl.

"Well, Evie. It's your lucky day. I have the perfect gown for you. It's one I just finished." He lifted a long tress of my hair and hummed. "Goddess, with your complexion and this hair..." He clapped loudly, making me jump. "Follow me."

He spun on his heel with a flourish, whipping his cape around dramatically.

"I wish I had half of that," Riv waved her hand up and down in Finan's direction. "Whatever that is. I want it."

"You already have it, Riv," Isla said, her cheeks flushed.

Rivka laughed as we followed Finan. I ignored Belinda's dirty looks. After all we had been through together over the last few days, she still chose to act like a spoiled brat. I shouldn't have been surprised.

"Are you ready to see my most magnificent creation, darlings?" Finan practically squealed as we approached a gown that was covered with a large sheet.

"I can't wait to see it," Isla said, bouncing on her heels.

Finan grabbed the sheet and flung it away, revealing the most beautiful dress I'd ever seen.

I gasped and stood there, frozen. Most of the gown was made of a stunning deep green velvet that I needed to touch. Long sleeves made of intricate black lace came up to the shoulders before it tapered down to the bust, which was velvet. Directly beneath the bust was a row of what looked like emeralds. They had to be fake. They'd never let—

"It's adorned with real emeralds and locally mined crystals." Finan grinned at me as I shook my head.

"I couldn't wear such a thing," I stammered, giving into temptation and trailing my fingers over the soft velvet.

"Nonsense!" he shouted.

"Evie, you must wear it. He's right. It's perfect!"

I backed away. "I'd probably ruin it. I've never worn something so... extravagant."

Finan snorted. "Well, you better get used to it, darling. This is just the beginning. Can you even imagine what royal wedding dresses are like? They're my specialty!"

The gown was breathtaking. The kind of dress someone wore when they wanted to be the center of attention. That was the last thing I wanted.

"I'd be offended if you didn't wear it. It's as though I created it with you in mind." Finan winked at me. "Just try it on? If you hate it, I will find something else."

He was so proud of this dress, and I didn't want to hurt his feelings. "Okay," I said. "But I highly doubt I'm going to hate it."

Three women practically appeared out of thin air and surrounded me, shuffling me off to a small room as Finan carried the gown. I'd never had my clothing stripped off so fast in my life. Hands seemed to come at me from every angle as I was nudged, pushed, prodded, and primped.

"Deep breath," Finan's voice found me beneath the pounds of lace, tulle, and velvet. "Arms up to the sky!"

I inhaled and lifted my arms, grunting as the dress was shimmied down my chest. My breasts put up a fight but ultimately lost the battle, and the gown fell into place, settling around my hips.

"Arms in," Finan ordered, holding out a sleeve.

I slid my arms into the black lace, already loving the way the material looked against my flesh. I frowned when one of the servants began tugging at the bodice behind me. Concerned, I looked down and nearly hit my chin on my boobs. "Uhm, I'm not sure this is going to work."

Finan appeared before me. "Why ever not?"

I pointed at the cleavage.

"Don't fret. They'll be even higher when we are done with this corset."

"Higher?!" I shrieked. "How could they be any higher? I could use them as a pillow during dinner if I fancy a rest!"

Finan and the servants erupted with laughter. I watched him wipe away actual tears.

"Royal bosoms are meant to be high, my lady," one of the women told me between giggles.

I gasped as all the air in my lungs was forced out of my body, courtesy of the damn corset. "Too tight," I whined.

"Can you still breathe?" Finan asked as he fluffed the skirt.

"Yes."

He leaned around the fabric. "Tighter, Delia."

"Tigh— Oof!" This was abuse.

"How about now?"

I shook my head no. I couldn't have even gotten enough air to speak.

"Perfect." He jumped up and studied me. His eyes welled with tears.

"Are... you... okay?" I panted.

He removed his pocket square and dabbed at his cheeks. "You're just an absolute vision."

Speaking of vision, black dots swam in front of his face, and I felt warm. No, *hot*.

"Loosen the laces, Delia! My Goddess, I don't want to waste this gown on a corpse."

The laces gave way, and I sucked in a deep breath while another maid began fanning my face.

"I thought you said it was perfect?" Delia asked quietly.

"Well, not everyone can wear a corset properly," he tsked. "But I think a little wiggle room will be fine."

Delia got back to work, and it felt so much better.

"I told you I've never worn something so nice," I reminded him, feeling somewhat embarrassed.

He waved my comment away. "Don't give it a second thought. Are you ready to see it?"

I nodded, desperate to get out of that tiny room. Following him out, I heard Isla gasp.

"Wow, Eves," Riv said, nodding her approval.

My cheeks burned, and all eyes were on me as I was escorted to the far wall, which was nothing but a mirror from floor to ceiling. A raised platform was in front of it, and I was led right to it. I didn't dare look in the mirror yet. I was afraid to take my eyes off the floor in front of me. The last thing I needed was to trip or stumble. I had just met Finan, but I think he would lose his mind if his gown was destroyed before its debut.

"Step up," he instructed, holding his hand out for me. I slipped mine into his and climbed onto the platform.

"Well?" he demanded. "What do you think?"

I delayed looking, even now. Some part of me knew that once I saw myself in this dress, which happened to be the exact colors of Dair's family crest, there would be no turning back. I was wearing a dress fit for a queen. The one I had worn to the ball was nice, but it was far from this level of exquisiteness.

Slowly, I raised my eyes, taking in the full skirt that flared out at my hips before falling in soft waves to the floor. A strip of lace, maybe two inches wide, spanned my waistline and disappeared beneath the row of emeralds. Swaths of velvet wrapped my bust, which was still obscene but not as bad as it could have been. I finally met my own stare and blinked. I hadn't seen my reflection since before The Hunt. A few red scrapes marked my cheek, but aside from that, my face was unmarred. I looked like me, but not completely. As though the me from before coming was here in terms of

appearance, but the woman staring back at me, the one in the expensive gown and the heart full of rage, she was taking over.

"If only your guard could see you."

I stopped breathing and froze, aside from shifting my eyes in the mirror to the group that had gathered behind me. It didn't take long to find Belinda.

"What did you just say?" I hissed as my eyes narrowed.

She held her hands to her heart. "It's just so sad that he, you know... isn't here to see you like this."

My blood boiled. My heart raced. My soul was ready to rip out of my body and go after her if I didn't do it. I was done with her.

"Eves," Isla said, a hint of warning in her tone.

"Finan?" I called out, keeping my eyes on Belinda. "I love this gown, and I think Prince Alasdair will be thrilled to see me wearing his house colors."

Belinda's face turned so red I thought her head was going to explode.

"You look beautiful, Evie," Becca said. "Green is your color."

I turned around and smiled at Becca. "Thank you. Alasdair agrees."

"Do you have any more green dresses?" Belinda demanded, marching over to Finan.

"No, and even if I did, again—skin tone."

I looped arms with my friends, and we returned to the fitting room. They helped me out of the gown this time since Finan was already helping others pick theirs.

"Do you think he's going to choose you?" Isla asked as she undid my corset.

"He said as much earlier," I whispered, lifting my arms up.

Riv whistled. "That is... well, I'm not sure. I mean, are you happy about it?"

I pushed my hair out of my face after the dress went up and over. "With what I learned earlier, I think it might be the best possible outcome."

"What did you learn?"

"Close that door, and I'll tell you quickly, but don't discuss it again until we're alone later. I don't want anyone else to overhear anything."

Isla raced to the door and softly closed it, and I quietly told them everything Dair had said earlier.

"Well, one thing is for certain," Riv said after I finished filling them in.

I slipped my shoes back on. "What's that?"

"We're not going to let you do this alone."

"We don't have a choice," Isla said.

"No matter what happens tonight, we make a vow right here and now," Rivka explained, pulling both of us closer to her. She lowered her voice. "We vow to each other that no matter where we end up in the kingdom, we will work together to stop this. This hunt will be the last. *Ever*. No other woman will be sacrificed in the name of some evil bloodline trait. We will remain in contact with each other and make it our life's mission to end The Royal Hunt."

"I promise," I said, not needing a single second to think about it. I was already planning to do everything I could, but if my friends ended up in different kingdoms, then we might be able to make more of an impact or at the very least, recruit more allies.

Isla held her fist over her heart. "I promise."

"And I, too, promise," Riv stated.

My mind spun as I weighed Dair's proposal. What if he didn't score as high as he thought? There was a chance that someone else might pick me, and then what? I couldn't live a life as a prisoner. I didn't want to be married

off to anyone, but I also didn't want to be shipped to another realm. The thought of my father living out the remaining years of his life without me, not knowing what happened to me... It was a strong enough vision to make the decision for me. I had to accept Dair's proposal and hope to the Goddess that he was genuine in the words he'd spoken earlier. That he'd still let me see my father, that he'd do something to stop this disgusting tradition.

With Riv and Isla determined to see this through, I felt better than I had in days. I had allies I could count on, so even if Dair wasn't being as honest as I hoped, I knew I wasn't alone. People were in my corner, and I had a purpose. A smile spread across my face that felt like armor.

"Well then," I said, putting my hair behind my ears. "Let's go get ready."

Riv followed me out of the room. "This is just the beginning."

I glanced back at her and Isla. "Yeah. It's the beginning of the end."



image-
placeholder

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I tucked my shirt into my pants as I stared at my reflection in the mirror. My light hair was parted to the side and was a bit shorter now, sitting right at my shoulders. It had been in need of a trim, and I wasn't surprised when Father sent in a group of barbers to get everyone cleaned up. I smiled as I recalled the expression on their faces when they saw the wild heads of hair the Faolan clan sported. They'd had their work cut out for them.

The earlier discussion with my father about breaking the curse weighed heavily on my mind. After the discussion in the study, it seemed we were all of one mind. None of us wanted this to happen again, and the only way we could ensure that was to break the curse. Dair had seemed off when he left the room, though. In all the years I'd known him, I'd never seen him appear anything aside from steady. I remembered a particular time when we were children, and even then, he was never anything other than calm and collected.

"Come on, Dair!" I shouted from the towering tree.

My friend looked up and frowned. "How did you get up there so fast?"

I laughed and pulled myself up higher. "I'm just faster than you are."

"Give me a boost, Dair," Alden said. The little pest had followed us when we ran from the castle after the servants threatened us with baths. Evander hadn't been fast enough, and they'd marched him off to be tortured at the hands of Hildegard. Wily old woman was obsessed with cleanliness and, as our family's head maid, she didn't tolerate filthy pre-teen boys running amuck in her spotless castle.

I looked down and watched as Dair locked his hands together and offered them to Alden. His brother whooped loudly and put his foot into Dair's hands, and a second later, he was propelled up high enough to reach the lowest branch.

"Just be careful," Dair warned as he backed up and ran at the tree. He was the tallest of us all, so it wasn't a great feat to latch onto a branch and hoist himself up.

"I'd prefer just to stay out here forever," I announced, leaning back against the trunk.

Alden laughed. "Right. The Crown Prince of The Volos Kingdom vanished into the woods and set up his own kingdom."

I rolled my eyes. "A man can dream."

"You're fourteen, Tor," Dair said like I'd somehow not known my own age.

I plucked an acorn from a branch and chucked it at my best friend. "Your point?"

The acorn nailed him in the forehead, and he glared at me. "Just that fourteen is hardly a man."

"Well, I'm twelve, and I already have pubic hair," Alden announced, puffing out his chest.

"I'm sorry, you have what?" Dair asked, glancing up at me and trying to hide his smile.

Alden's jaw dropped. "You don't know what pubric hair is? I guess I'm more of a man than either of you!"

I couldn't contain the laughter which set off Dair.

"WHAT?" Alden demanded, getting annoyed.

I wiped my eyes, which were now wet. "We know what pu-bic hair is, you idiot."

His brows pinched together, exactly like his older brother did when he was puzzled. "Is that something different than pubric?"

I howled and held my stomach. "Can't... breathe."

"Alden. It's not pubric. It's pubic. You're saying it wrong," Dair explained.

"I hate you both! I'm going home!" Alden began his descent from the tree and didn't stop despite us asking him to stay.

"We're sorry, brother! I've just never heard it pronounced like that before!" Dair shouted as he began climbing down after him.

"WELL, HERE'S A WORD YOU PROBABLY HAVE HEARD BEFORE! ASSHOLES! YOU'RE BOTH ASSHOLES!"

A snapping sound made all three of us freeze. Alden was still a good seven feet from the forest floor, and the sound definitely came from where he was.

"Don't move, brother," Dair cautioned, and began moving quicker than before. The branch wasn't going to hold much longer, and there weren't any other options for Alden to move to. "Just stay steady, right where you are."

"Dair, he's on the lowest branch. What are you going to do?" I scanned the tree, searching for any viable option. How were any of us going to get

down safely with that branch seconds away from breaking? The next one up was a good five feet higher. It would be a twelve-foot drop.

"I'm going to fall!" Alden shouted, panic in his eyes.

Dair was on the opposite side of the tree now, as low as he could get. "No, you're not. I'm going to jump down, and then I'll catch you and Tor."

"This is a disaster," I stated, halfway down the tree myself now.

"I'm the tallest," Dair said before swinging down, dangling from the branch with both hands.

Alden was crying now. "You're gonna dieeee!"

I couldn't breathe. What if he died? I couldn't live without my best friend. All three of us would die if he died. We'd probably break our necks trying to get out of here without him. And even if we did somehow live, our fathers would kill us for getting Dair killed. Fuck!

"Maybe just wait for someone—"

CREAAAAK.

Dair glanced over to his brother. "I'm going to catch you." And with that, he let go of the branch and hit the ground hard. Thankfully, he'd landed on his feet, but the force of it sent him flailing forward with both arms outstretched.

"ARE YOU OKAY!?" I screamed when he didn't move. He just laid there, flat on his stomach. Oh Goddess. He was dead. Deader than dead. And so was I. I practically slid down the tree, desperate to get to my best friend.

"ALASDAIR!" Alden wailed.

A groan came from his still body, and I sighed in relief. "That's the best sound I've ever heard in my entire damned life."

"Torin, this branch isn't going to hold—" SNAP.

I met Alden's terrified green eyes as the branch finally gave way. Desperate, I held out a hand in a futile attempt to save him. I was too far away. I couldn't look. I clamped my eyes shut and held my breath, waiting for the thud. It never came.

"I told you I'd catch you," Dair's voice penetrated my fear-stricken brain.

My eyes popped open, and I found Alden and Dair on the forest floor, both of them lying on their backs, looking up at me.

"One down, one to go." Dair slowly got up and walked beneath me.

"You're out of your mind," I mumbled, trying not to show how scared I still was.

My friend simply blinked at me, like he was bored and I was holding him up. "Okay, okay." I dropped down and held on with both hands, trying not to think about all the ways this could go wrong.

"Let go, Torin," Dair said. "I'm not gonna let you die today."

"That's good. I'm too pretty and important to die by a tree. I much prefer a warrior's death. An epic bat—"

"Shut up and let go!"

I let go and crashed into Dair a moment later. We both ended up in the dirt. A sharp pain jolted my elbow, and I hissed. I must've hit it on a rock or something. Alden came into view as he hovered over us.

"Are you guys okay?" He extended a hand to me, which I took. Returning to my feet, I offered Dair my good arm. I could bend the other one, but it would definitely be bruised.

"Need the other hand," he said, and I frowned.

"Why?"

He lifted his left arm, and Alden and I both gasped at the weird way his arm seemed to bend just above his wrist.

"Oh fuck," I cursed. "Did I do that to you? I'm so sorry."

He shook his head. "No. It happened when I jumped down."

Alden's eyes slid to mine and then back to his brother. "You mean you still caught us... with your arm snapped like that?" He pointed at the injury. "Goddess, I don't think I can look at it. I think I'm going to vomit." He covered his mouth. "Yes, that's happening." He raced to a bush and puked everywhere. The sounds of his retching made it hard to keep control of my own stomach.

"It's just a broken arm," Dair stated, pushing himself up with his good arm.

Alden wiped his mouth with his shirt. "It's the most unnatural sight I've ever laid eyes on!" Gagging again, he lost more of his dinner in the bushes.

"You could've said something," I murmured to him as I began removing my shirt. "Here, let me wrap that up."

"You two are acting like I broke my neck or something. It'll heal. It's really not that big of a deal."

I huffed. "I'm not returning to the castle without that wrapped. Our asses are already going to be in so much trouble." The very thought of telling my father what we'd done was enough to make me want to disappear within the forest, for real.

Dair was silent as I wrapped his forearm before we began the walk back. "Go on in front, Alden. The path isn't wide enough for three."

We were nearly back, Alden far ahead of us, when Dair spoke. "I'm not going to tell anyone that you and Alden were in the tree."

I abruptly stopped and turned to my friend. "What do you mean?"

"I saw the marks on your back, Torin. I've seen bruises and stuff, ya know, over the years."

My face burned. "I don't know what you mean."

"That's fine. I'm just saying that I've seen it, and even if you don't want to talk to me about it yet, I'll not give that man kindling for the fire."

He spun and took off after his brother, leaving me to stare after them both. When I felt wetness on my face, I looked to the sky, which was completely clear of clouds. Shakily, I brought my hand to my cheek and wiped away a couple of tears.

And he never brought it up again. We didn't speak of the abuse again until two years later when I finally broke down and let it all out in a drunken stupor. But even now, it was not something we would discuss. He has told me I have nothing to feel ashamed about, but I couldn't help that feeling of never being good enough. My father could offer praise to every person he meets, including peasants and strangers, but to give one word of encouragement to his eldest son? Impossible.

Which was why I was so shocked after The Hunt. The way he'd smiled at me and actually said those words I had wanted to hear from him my entire nineteen years. He was proud of me. He finally saw me as a man. As a ruler, as an equal who could be trusted to help him achieve his goals and maintain his legacy. There was no way I could let him down now.

I needed to think about who my top choices were for the ceremony. The ones who stood out to me that I actually remembered from the ball were Eliza, the saucy one who had lured me into the alcove to make-out; Belinda, the beautiful one with the large family and no father; Isla, the smallest woman of the entire group, who was one of Evie's friends; and Evie, of course. The woman who tripped me, talked with her mouth full, and wasn't intimidated by me in the slightest. I'd have to find Dair before the ceremony to talk to him about working together to break the curse anyway, but I

needed to know where his head was with Evie. I still thought they would be a good match, but if he wasn't in agreement, it wouldn't be the end of the world to get paired with her.

I sat on my bed and pulled on my socks, stopping for a second to look at where that knife wound had been. My fingertips traced the completely smooth skin there, and I remembered how it felt when that guard had plunged his knife into my leg. I'd plucked him from the water like a bird snatching a mouse from an open field. The only thought that I'd had was that I had to kill them all. This dark and primal instinct drove me to commit atrocities I never would have as a man. The worst memory, though, was lighting Evie's guard on fire. In the moment, there was no thought. No hesitation. I knew my duty, and my nature as a dragon was demanding death. It was as though the beast was angered at being caged for so long, and the only way he would be sated was with bloodshed.

It was strange, having the memories of what I did being a part of me now. I could see everything through the eyes of my dragon. Hell, I could feel what he had felt. Powerful. Indestructible. Wronged. He had been wronged by this curse and, as an extension, that feeling carried over into me. I still felt it. How dare someone try to restrain our power? All those people—the women, the guards—were the ones who were paying the price, Recurrence after Recurrence, Hunt after Hunt.

No more. With the curse gone, we would be free to shift as we pleased. We could return to the ways of the past when the gifts of our bloodlines weren't a secret. When we could be proud of who we were and what we were capable of.

A knock at the door pulled me from my thoughts. "Enter."

The door swung open, revealing my younger brother. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah, just putting on my shoes. Are you? Have you thought about who you would like to choose?"

His cheeks flushed at the question, and I chuckled. "I have."

"Not going to share with your big brother?" I teased, walking over to Evander and slinging my arm over his shoulder. "Have you gotten taller overnight, dear brother?"

"Maybe you just shrunk," he fired back.

"Mmhmm." We entered the hall and headed for the Great Hall. "You'll need to be smart in who you choose. You're the second in line to the throne until I have an heir. If something should happen to me, you'll need a strong woman at your side."

He huffed. "Like anything would ever happen to you."

I halted our steps. "Hey. This is serious, Van. We've had decades of peace, but who knows what the future holds. We all need to be smart. Think of the future."

"I don't believe I've ever seen you be serious about anything, Tor." I stared at him sternly, holding my ground, and he threw up his hands. "Okay, okay. I got it. It's serious."

"Good lad. Let's get down there. I want to see the future women of our royal houses."

"Dear Goddess, me too. Ever since that shift, I've been out of my mind with the urge to fuck someone."

I chuckled. "You're not alone, brother. I haven't been so out of my mind with lust since I was sixteen."

"Well, don't embarrass yourself by making a mess in your pants during the ceremony," he teased.

"Goddess, could you imagine? Father would behead me right in the middle of the dance floor."

Van tossed me a dirty look. "Don't joke about that."

My siblings knew the wrath our father could deliver, but I did everything I could to make sure they never had to endure it. I had taken more lashings for them than they could ever imagine, and I would never tell them.

"It's going to be a great evening," I said, changing the subject back to lighter things.

We were silent for a few moments, and I glanced at my brother, finding him frowning.

"What are you thinking about?"

He cleared his throat. "All of those things that we did..."

"We were not in control."

"No, I know that. It doesn't change the fact that I can't seem to stop replaying them in my mind. I've never killed someone before, Tor. I always thought it would be an enemy if I had to do that. Life or death kind of thing."

I put my hand on his shoulder. "It was life or death. If we didn't do what we did, we wouldn't be able to shift ever again. Our children wouldn't get the gift passed on to them."

"I just don't understand why someone would curse us like this."

"I know, brother. But mark my words; we will break that damned curse."

He nodded, and my promise seemed to breathe a little life back into him as he stood straighter than before.

"Let's go find us some brides, yeah?" I grinned.

We entered the hall on the upper level, and I whistled low. "Damn, they went all out."

The ball had been extravagant, but this was another level of royal. Oil lamps burned everywhere, suspended from the ceiling at different lengths, while the chains that held them blended into the darkness, making it look as though they were floating above the room. Four massive banners had been rolled out against the back wall, displaying each family crest. Red, green, orange, and gray, all of the colors of our kingdoms—the crests were always on display, but this was the first time that I actually felt something stir within my chest as I looked into the eyes of the dragon. Pride. I felt proud to be a Volos, and tonight, I was going to make the first move in creating my legacy. A raised platform carpeted with a white sheet stood below the covered banners, while a mix of wildflowers was strewn across the floor, along with smaller burning lamps.

As we descended the stairs, I spotted Ciar and Taj chatting at the bar next to a small booth that a guard was monitoring. I spotted Desmond Faolan walking out of the booth and handing a rolled up paper to the guard. I guess he'd already made his mind up about who he wanted to choose. Alden and Mosi were standing near the raised stage, deep in discussion. I scanned the room in search of Dair, but I didn't spot him. We still had about ten minutes until the appointed meeting time, but he was one of those people who thought if you weren't ten minutes early, you were late.

"I'm going to go talk to Alden," Van said. "I'll see ya in a bit."

I nodded and continued looking around for my best friend. It was important that I talked to him before I went in to list my selections. I needed to know where his mind was. Irritation nagged at me. Where the hell was he? He brushed me off earlier, and now he wasn't here.

"Join us for a drink?" Taj called out to me, waving me over.

There was nothing else for me to do right then, not until Dair decided to make his entrance. I'd need all of us on the same page regarding breaking the curse, so I joined Taj and Ciar.

"Gentlemen," I greeted and accepted Ciar's offered glass of dark liquid. "Cheers to marriage."

"Here, here," Ciar said loudly, and we all clinked our glasses together.

Taj placed his now empty glass on the bar and gestured for another. "When do you think they'll bring the women in?"

"Not bloody soon enough," Ciar growled. Like, actually growled.

"What was that?" I asked, raising a brow.

He took a sip of his drink. "Must be the wolf. It's been happening here and there. I just *really* want to see some pretty things, okay?"

Taj snorted. "Perhaps don't refer to our future wives like that to their faces, hmm?"

Ciar waved him off. "It's part of it though, isn't it? These urges?" He gestured to his cock, and we all laughed.

"It's been getting stronger as the day has worn on," Taj agreed. "What are we going to do? It's not like we're immediately marrying them."

"I'm sure our fathers have something planned. They went through it too," I said.

"Probably whores, then?" Ciar questioned, his eyes sparkling.

I shrugged. "Wouldn't surprise me. Have you marked your list yet?"

"Yeah, we both did," Taj replied, grinning. "May luck be in our favor, gents."

I sipped my drink and looked around once more, finally spotting the person I needed to speak with. My friends seemed to be favorably adjusting to the day's revelations, and that was all I needed to know. "If you'll just

excuse me for a moment..." I walked off, following Dair in the direction of the bathroom. Pushing through the heavy curtain, I nearly ran right into him.

"Fucking hell, Torin," he cursed. "What are you doing?"

"What am I doing? You're the one who was late by your own standards. And I told you earlier—I needed to speak to you."

He sighed and pinched his nose. I frowned.

"I'm sorry. Am I bothering you?" The question came out harsher than I'd intended.

He dropped his hand and slipped them both into his jacket pockets as he stood taller. "No. What do you want to talk about?"

I knew we were all working through the events of The Hunt, so I didn't probe further. My priority was that I needed to talk to him. Deciding it was best to bring up the Choosing Ceremony first, I asked, "Have you decided who you'd like to be paired with?"

A hint of a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as he considered my question. "I have."

"Well? Don't keep me in suspense over here," I demanded, already knowing which woman he was going to say, but suddenly, I wasn't sure I wanted to hear it.

"Evie is my first choice. My only choice, if I'm being honest."

I chuckled but didn't really find anything humorous about his answer. "I knew it. I saw the way you laughed with her, and she is beautiful."

Dair crossed his arms and eyed me. "And I saw the way you danced with her."

My brow lifted at the jab. "Oh, please. I danced with many women." I raised my glass and took a sip of my drink.

“And what about you? Have you decided?”

I simply shrugged. “Not one hundred percent. I’ll keep waiting for something to happen. Something that won’t make me second guess what I want.”

“Well, we should probably get back in there, then. Because there’s not a lot of time left for this moment of clarity you’re waiting for to happen.” Dair made to step around me, and I blocked him.

“I still need to talk to you about something.” He lifted a brow, and I cleared my throat, answering his unasked question. “About the curse.”

Dair’s body stiffened at the sudden topic change, and he crossed his arms. “What about the curse?”

“My father has been working on breaking it for years. It would give us the freedom to shift as we please. No more of *this*.” I waved my hands in a sweeping motion.

“No more murdering our people, you mean?”

The air seemed to shift between us, like it had become charged somehow.

I narrowed my eyes. “We did not murder them.”

“Then what do you call what we did, Torin?” he hissed, stepping into me. My dragon did not appreciate the challenge, and I felt my spine roll.

“Necessary,” I spat back at him. “We didn’t have a choice. If anyone is to blame here, it’s that fucking sorcerer! What else were we supposed to do?”

Dair gritted his teeth together as we stared at each other. “Not. Do. It.”

“Not do it? Not do what?”

“The Hunt!”

“That’s preposterous! Do you not understand that we’d have lost our gifts without doing it? Why are you being so fucking dense?”

Dair paused and then plucked my glass out of my hand. Slowly, he drained the entire thing. "What is our number one priority, Torin? Our people! Our kingdoms. From where I'm standing, we just completely dishonored them. And for what? The chance to turn into animals every ten years and run amuck in a forest?"

I narrowed my eyes. "Who am I even looking at? Because it sure as hell isn't my best friend. Do you even hear yourself right now? "

"Do you?" he rebutted. "What would it even look like, Torin? With no curse in place to protect our people from the wreckage and carnage we just proved we're capable of?"

"We'd be able to learn to control it! Repressing the beasts does nothing but turn them absolutely feral when they do get to emerge. Given time, we'd be able to be in control while in our animal forms."

He pointed at me with the hand still wrapped around my empty glass. "And you can ensure that? *You* can guarantee that outcome?"

"Well, it makes sense that—"

"CAN YOU SWEAR IT?" he barked at me, his face now red.

"Do not speak to me like that, Alasdair. We are not equals, and I won't tolerate it."

The air that had been charging between us seemed to explode with a burst of lightning as the glass in Dair's hand shattered under the strength of his grip, severing the bond of friendship and brotherhood that we'd built over the years. Glass shards fell to the floor, little tinkling sounds that sounded more like bombs in the silence that surrounded us.

"Well then, if you'll excuse me, Your Royal Highness, I have a bride to collect," Dair said, his voice devoid of emotion, as though all of it had been channeled into the grip that crushed the glass.

I groaned and ran my hand down my face when I realized Dair was bowing. To me. "Come on, Dair," I pleaded. "I didn't mean that. I'm not—I mean, my mind is all over the place."

His deep green eyes never left mine as he sidestepped me. "Have a pleasant evening, Your Majesty." And he vanished back into the Great Hall, leaving me standing there, alone.

"FUCK!" I shouted.

Why was he being so difficult? Frustration and anger seemed to pulse through my body, two emotions I'd never felt regarding Alasdair. It's not like I took pleasure in knowing what we'd done out there, but what did he expect me to do?

Footsteps approaching made me attempt to compose my annoyance. Good thing too, because my father and Corvus rounded the corner.

"Ahh, Torin, perfect." My father smiled, and I bowed. "The women just joined our ceremony, son. It's time."

He slung his arm over my shoulder, and we walked back into the ballroom together. My eyes immediately landed on the stage where the potential brides were lined up. Their dresses sparkled so much that they seemed to be living treasures, and my dragon wanted to keep them. Such pretty, shiny treasures. From where I stood, there were no obvious physical injuries, almost as though The Hunt had never happened, but there were fewer smiles than the first night here. Some of the men were fast approaching the platform, clearly eager to talk to them. I subtly adjusted myself, already insanely aroused. What the Goddess was going on with me?

Father side-eyed me and chuckled. "It's always like that after a shift. The urge to fuck, to claim."

"Well, we're all feeling it, trust me," I mumbled. "It's torture." I glanced around and spotted Dair, Alden, and Evander heading for the stage. "I suppose I should go speak to them, too." I started to break away and was stopped by a firm hand on my shoulder. I looked at my father questioningly.

"Not yet. Let's see who talks to who. I am curious..."

His eyes were on the trio as they climbed the stairs. Alden and Dair headed right for Evie and her two friends. Isla and Rivka, at least, I thought was her name. Evie was a vision, her dark hair nothing but cascading curls, some of them pinned back to show her face and neck. Her pale skin nearly glowed against the deep green velvet dress. Her much shorter friend, Isla, wore a muted yellow pastel dress that complimented her. She was also beautiful and would look good on any man's arm. Rivka was fidgeting with her dark blue gown and frowning. I hadn't gotten the chance to talk with her, but something about the way she fussed with the long sleeves around her wrists made me feel a bit of a connection to her. She wasn't comfortable in that dress, and as I fiddled with my cufflinks, I knew she and I felt the same at the moment. I'd much rather be out in the woods, flying over the trees, not a piece of restricting clothing in sight.

Movement grabbed my attention, and I let my eyes drift down the line. A servant escorted Eliza to the platform. I frowned, wondering why she was arriving late. I remembered the way I had nearly done very inappropriate things with her the night of the ball. She lifted a hand and waved at me, which had me grinning and waving in response.

"She's very pleasing to the eye," my father commented.

"Yes, she is. I danced with her at the ball."

"Is she a contender?"

I glanced at him, finding him staring at the women. "She is."

"Hmm," he hummed, his expression unchanged.

"What's that mean?"

He waved his hand. "Nothing. I'm just watching. That's what a good king does, Torin. He knows everything that goes on not only with his family but with everyone who has the slightest connection to him. Information is gold in our position. More valuable than the sharpest forged steel blades or the number of men in your army to wield them. It's what you know, not what you have. Any man can obtain material possessions. Land, castles, armies... But it's the man who holds the secrets that is the most powerful. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Ciar's boisterous laugh filled the room, and I watched him twirl one of the women, her own laughter joining with his.

"Who is Ciar spinning around? Do you know her name?"

I searched my brain for the answer but came up short. Her short black hair was pushed back with a crystal band, and then it poofed out around her head, tight curls everywhere. Aside from a few cuts on her arms, her black skin was flawless. The smile on her face was perfect. She looked like she was enjoying herself.

"Tiona," my father answered his own question. "Her name is Tiona."

"That's right. I couldn't remember."

"You need to make every effort to remember, Torin. Names are important, and when greeting people, knowing their names gives you power. It gives the other person the idea that you have a connection with them. That you care enough to learn the simplest of things about them. Their name."

I nodded. "I'll do better."

Evander was now talking to Isla. She seemed to be explaining something to him, animatedly using her hands to emphasize whatever point she was trying to make. Riv stood beside Isla, looking at her friend more than my brother.

"She'd be a nice addition to the Volos family, don't you think?"

I knew he was talking about Isla. "She's soft-spoken and polite."

"Is that a problem?" He lifted a brow.

"No, it kind of makes her a perfect addition."

Father smiled. "My thoughts exactly. For your brother. Not for you."

"Agreed."

My skin prickled, and I felt the weight of someone's stare on me. I hunted the line for the person and slowly smiled when I met Belinda's eyes. She was beautiful, possibly the most beautiful woman of the group, and I knew she had a good heart based on our conversation at the ball.

"Belinda is one I'm considering," I admitted. "We had the chance to speak at the ball, and she certainly has the strength required of a queen."

"You mean because she has provided for her family since her father's death?"

I snapped my head to my father. "How did you know that?"

He smiled coyly. "I know everything, son. That's what I'm trying to teach you." He met my eye and nodded. "I do think she would be a good fit."

I couldn't resist anymore. My focus shifted to Dair. He stood in front of Evie, and she was looking up at him, listening attentively. Suddenly, her chin dipped, and she stared at the ground, her hands fisted at her side. What was he saying to her? My eyes widened as he slipped his finger beneath her chin and tilted her face back up to look at him. When I saw them at the ball together, I saw something between them. A spark. I could see it again in

their exchange now, the tension in her hands releasing and her fists uncurling. The lights danced upon the glow of her face as she looked at my best friend, and that damned emotion, the one I'd been feeling all too much lately when it came to Dair, flared up. *Envy*. I wanted her to look at me like she looked at him.

"Have you spoken to Alasdair regarding the curse?"

I swallowed and ground my molars together. "Yes."

"And what did he say?"

Dair reached out and softly touched Evie's fingers. "He's not onboard with it."

"Hmm. Interesting."

"I'll speak with him again."

"You know, when I had my hunt and had to choose my bride, I didn't end up with who everyone thought I would."

I listened to his words and watched as Evie turned her hand and ever so slightly opened it. Dair traced her palm. Stroking slowly. Back and forth.

"Someone else had their eye on your mother. Someone who I thought was a friend and ally."

Evie's eyes fluttered shut, her chest heaving as she appeared to release a deep sigh.

"Another valuable lesson, son. Don't give anyone the chance to betray you. Oftentimes, when a man takes a stance, it's his first initial reaction that tells you everything you need to know. If he's not loyal to you, then he, at the very least, needs to respect you and your decisions. We all own land and have our own kingdoms, but that doesn't mean we're all equal rulers."

"I know that, Father," I gritted out. I sensed him stepping closer to me, but my eyes were deadlocked on my best friend and the woman he'd

chosen.

"They do make a lovely pair, don't they?" he mused, speaking low in my ear.

I froze when Evie opened her eyes and they landed right on mine. She didn't look away or show a single emotion.

"At some point, all men must know that Volos is the most powerful of the royals. We're dragons. We take what we want, keep it close, and covet it like gold."

Dair realized he'd lost the attention of Evie, following her line of sight to me. I shifted my eyes to his. I searched for anything that might tell me that he would get his head out of his ass and align himself with what needed to be done. Without so much as a nod, my oldest friend turned his back on me, effectively blocking my view of Evie and letting me know once again, where he stood. I wanted to smash his nose.

"Choose carefully, Torin. Every move you make from here on out will not only define your legacy as a ruler but the respect you demand as a future king."

I could feel my face burning with rage. How dare he deny me his help? We'd grown up together. We'd always been there for each other, and now he was what? Going to just abandon that loyalty? Run back to Andaros and marry Evie? Leave me to sort out this mess by myself?

"Simply stunning," Father stated, looking at Evie. Turning to me, he held out his hand. I looked at it and then back at his face. "Good luck tonight, son. I can't wait to meet my future daughter-in-law, officially."

I slipped my hand into his and shook it. Another first. Shaking my father's hand, like a man worthy of the formality. The grip of his hand faded away, and he nodded to Corvus. The two of them walked off, no doubt to

watch more of the dynamics at play. I made to walk over to the women, to talk with them and see where their minds were after the hunt, but instead, I veered off, going for some alcohol. It was time for me to write down my choices.

I knew everything I needed to know.

Another conversation wasn't going to change anything.



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CHAPTER TWENTY

“**Y**ou’re not my savior in this situation,” I whispered to Dair, who had just shifted us so that I could no longer feel the weight of Torin’s stare. “Don’t think I’m some weak girl who needs rescuing.”

Dair’s green eyes had been sparkling beneath the lights from the moment I saw him tonight, but my statement seemed to add a bit more. “If there’s anything I know of you, Miss Evie Quinn, you can certainly take care of yourself.”

My cheeks burned at the way he stared at me, the deepness of his voice, and the way that, once again, he was touching me. His fingertips danced along the intricate lace on the inside of my wrist. I swallowed roughly. “Well, good. Then we’re on the same page.”

“You look beautiful in the Oberon house colors.”

“I’m waiting for the moment I ruin this gown. I warned Finan that I probably would. I’ve never worn anything so expensive,” I rambled. I was still angry about The Hunt, but I couldn’t discuss that with him. Not right now, anyway. There were too many listening ears.

I caught the end of something Belinda was saying, and I frowned. Something about ‘the poor girl.’ I glanced down to where she was speaking with a few of the men.

“It really was a shame. He was a great guard, and while I understand that sacrifices had to be made—” she sighed dramatically. “Evie was *very* close to her guard.”

My jaw dropped as she pivoted slightly and looked right at me, smirking.

“Oh, that is terrible,” Desmond replied. He was the youngest of the Faolans who participated in The Hunt. “Though I do hope it was nothing inappropriate.”

“Everyone knows that fraternizing with guards is scandalous,” Mosi chimed in, looking disgusted as he held his head high.

A few more people were looking in my direction now, and it took everything in me not to tackle Belinda right off the platform.

“Ignore them,” Dair whispered.

“But I thought you were so close to her,” I fired back at him with more heat than I realized I felt. The vision of the two of them sitting together—or rather her, sitting on him—flashed in my mind. That woman had been nothing but mean and petty the entire time she’d been here. Why did she insist on continuing to bring up Kael? He was dead. With each reminder of him, I felt a piece of my heart shrivel up.

“Are you serious?” he asked, his voice hard.

I scoffed and pulled my arms behind my back. Away from his provocative touches. “I saw her on your lap, practically curled around you like a cat.”

“I blacked out, Evie. I’m not questioning the implied accusations about you because I trust you, and one day, I will earn yours.”

“I’m sorry. This is— It’s a lot. And I can’t believe he’s gone,” my voice cracked. My grief seemed to overtake me at any mention of Kael. If I pushed it out of my head, I could function.

Dair’s face softened, and he boldly reached for my hand and enclosed it in both of his. “I know, and I truly am so sorry.”

Belinda sighed loudly, ruining our moment. “It’s terrible. One can’t be sure of a woman’s virtue anymore. So many loose morals. I really think it goes back to the parents.”

My eyes widened in disbelief. Was she really going to stand five feet from me and talk about my father like that? I wouldn’t allow it. Not after everything I’d been through.

I took one step in her direction when a loud bell began ringing, and I gasped as I spotted Eliza. I’d been so distracted I hadn’t even realized she had joined us.

“It’s time,” Dair said, making me focus on him. “Just please, be calm. This will all be over soon. I’m going to go to the selection booth now.”

I nodded at him. “Okay.”

“Please don’t physically assault anyone,” he pleaded, flashing a small smile as he turned and left.

Everything started moving fast. This was the moment everyone had come here for. We traveled from our homes across the realm to this island under false pretenses and survived an unfathomable atrocity. The men filtered past, descending the stairs and congregating in a line in the middle of the room facing us. Notes of a piano filled my ears as the current rulers and other families in attendance stood on either side of them. A cold sweat overtook me, and I suddenly felt very close to vomiting.

We hadn't prepared enough for this. Dair said he'd pick me, but what if someone else did, too? Oh Goddess. No, there was no way. I'd done my best to be undesirable. I tripped Torin. I stepped on feet. I drank and burped without a care in the world. I laughed loudly and without restraint. Not to mention the rumors that Belinda was spreading. To anyone aside from Alasdair, I wasn't fit to be a queen.

"Breathe," Rivka whispered, her hand suddenly gripping mine, grounding me. "We'll be okay."

I inhaled deeply and looked to my other side, finding Isla right there.

"It's almost over, Eves," she said.

I didn't have the heart to tell her I felt that wasn't true. This night was almost over... but the games? Those were just starting. This was probably the last time the three of us would be together for a long time. What if we all got picked by different kingdoms? We might not see each other ever again.

My eyes prickled at the thought, but I forced the tears away. There were twenty men and twenty-five women. Some of us wouldn't be selected. Some of us would be sent away, and the only ones on the stage who knew it were my two friends and me.

"Welcome to The Choosing Ceremony," King Ero announced as Corvus twisted his hands and whispered soft incantations, boosting the king's voice throughout the room. "This tradition has been in the royal families for generations. I would first like to have a moment of respect for the Sova family, who is no longer with us. Each Recurrence since we lost them, we honor them, and we never forget."

Every person brought their right hand against their heart three times while the room remained somberly silent. The sounds of wings fluttering

above had all of us looking at the suspended lights. Ravens were now perched on the chains that held the lanterns.

Corvus raised both of his arms, and the birds took flight, heading for the platform. Right for all of us. A few squeals escaped, and more than a few of us covered our heads, ducking down. At the last moment, the ravens abruptly flew straight up. Above the four kingdom banners, they took hold of a large sheet and worked fluidly to pull it from the stone wall.

The sheet cascaded down, revealing a fifth kingdom banner. The largest of all five, this work of art featured a stunning snow owl in the center. A dark brown tree branch wove through, the owl's talons wrapped around it, allowing the bird to watch over everything. Even though I was standing directly beneath it, I felt as though the owl's yellow eyes were staring right at me. Beautiful blends of snow whites and creams added depth to the body, almost making it appear that it could simply take flight. Rose gold stitching around the edges contrasted perfectly, giving the Sova Kingdom's lack of color just the right amount of flare.

"TO THE SOVA HOUSE!" the King boomed.

"NEVER FORGET!" everyone in the room replied.

"There is one more bit of unfortunate news I must share before we begin. I just received word before coming down to join you here," Ero explained, and my stomach sank. What now? I spotted Dair walking from the back of the room to rejoin the ceremony, his face hard as he listened to Ero's words. "One of the royal families has suffered a great loss."

Gasps and looks of shock passed over the faces of the royals. Hadn't he informed the family before now?

"King Eamon, I am so sorry to have to be the one to share this news."

The wolf pack seemed to circle their leader, more intimidating as a group than as one man—or one wolf.

“Your brother, Ewan, was discovered on a trail just outside of The Pale Forest.”

Howls ripped out of many of their throats, sounding exactly as they had when they’d terrorized us in the forest. Ayla slammed her hands over her ears and whimpered while Becca was beside her, trying to comfort her. Concerned for Eliza, I looked down the line and found her smiling. *Smiling.*

“How did he die?” Faolan demanded.

“He was—” Ero cleared his throat and stepped closer to the fellow ruler. “He was slain.”

A pit of unease was building within me. The place where this had happened... that was the same woods that Kael and I had fled from. Where wolves destroyed the other members of my escort. Where Kael killed the wolf who had been seconds away from killing me.

But that was well before the hunt. How would he have been in that form?

“We will see him avenged,” King Oberon promised.

“Peace be with him,” King Ekpen chimed in. “Death to his murderer!”

The Faolan men seemed to shift their attention from their king to Desmond.

“That’s his only son,” Isla whispered to me.

Ero stepped into the middle of the room. “Keep the Faolan clan in your hearts as they grieve their loss. Let us now move to more pleasant things! The reason we’re all here: The Choosing Ceremony.”

And in the blink of an eye, you’d never have known that the death of a royal had just been announced. Cheers and clapping came from around the room, including some of the women, which I simply didn’t understand.

They were as delusional as the royals who'd hunted us down for sport. Even Eliza was grinning as she clapped with excitement.

"There is a system of sorts for this process. Before we get to that, I'd like to first thank these young women for their dedication and loyalty to the realm. Your bravery and determination will never be in question as you start the next phase of your lives. Your realm thanks you."

I nearly gagged as King Ero bowed. To us. Every man in the room followed him while every woman, which wasn't many, curtsied.

"Bloody hell," Riv cursed under her breath.

The mind games never ceased.

Thank you for coming here, not that you had a choice.

Thank you for risking your lives so our beastly children could hunt you down and rip you to pieces.

Thank you for accepting this proposal, and no, you can't decline.

Thank you for keeping the secrets of our bloodlines so that we can do this again in ten years.

Ero stood tall once again and held out his hand to Corvus, who produced a scroll of parchment.

"My King," he said, placing it in his open hand.

He held it up for the room to see. "This scroll contains the final selections that I will read aloud momentarily. Traditionally, The Hunt is a scored event. I won't bore you all with the details of how the scoring system works, but each royal bachelor's score is what determines which man gets first choice, and so on."

Becca gasped, along with a few others and it gave me some hope that not all of them were under whatever spell seemed to be afoot here. It disgusted me beyond anything I'd ever felt that they actually watched the entire hunt

and gave them points for killing the women they were supposed to one day vow to protect forever.

“The way we will do this will be from lowest score to highest. The men don’t know where they placed nor who they will ultimately be paired with. All will be revealed when I read from this scroll. After you’ve retrieved your bride, please move to stand in front of the platform.” He pointed to my left. They were really going to line us up from first to last. “Let us begin.”

The room broke out in applause as Ero unrolled it, and I fought the urge to act out. To scream about injustice or launch myself at the Volos King and claw his face off in outrage.

“Steady,” Isla whispered, snapping me out of my visions of vengeance. I didn’t dare look at her, but I nodded once, letting her know I wasn’t going to get myself killed in the middle of The Choosing Ceremony.

“Our first pairing of the ceremony; Desmond Faolan has chosen Miss Rebecca Tronter.”

Shouts of praise seemed to come from around the room, congratulating Desmond on such a lovely choice. Several of his clan embraced him emotionally, likely due to the news they’d just received.

I looked at Becca, who looked shocked but not necessarily displeased. I don’t think any of us really knew what we were feeling or thinking. Except maybe Belinda, who was clearly crafted from dark magic and evil. We’d simply been through too much in too short of a time to process anything. That was probably on purpose.

Desmond approached the stage and stood, hand outstretched at the bottom of the stairs.

“My lady, the Faolan kingdom welcomes you. Will you accept my offer of marriage?” Desmond’s cheeks were flushed, though that could’ve been

from the upsetting news he'd just gotten.

"I will," Becca replied, stepping forward and gracefully walking down the three steps, slipping her hand into Desmond's. The pair smiled at each other, and I wondered what Becca was actually thinking.

More clapping and shouts of excitement drowned the room, and when Desmond and Becca made it to their designated spot, everyone quieted down, eager for the next selection.

"Taj Ekpen has chosen Miss Ayla Moreland!"

Ayla had been badly wounded during the attack that happened at the stream on the first day of the hunt; so I wasn't surprised when I heard her suck in a sharp breath, and I wasn't the only one who heard.

Taj was already climbing the steps, something Desmond hadn't done. My heart raced as he passed me and headed for Ayla. Surely he wouldn't harm her? *They all harmed you.*

"My lady, are you well?" Taj asked, looking down at her. "If there's anything you need..."

I was waiting for something to happen. The silence before a thunderclap had arrived, and I struggled to remain still.

Ayla's bottom lip quivered, and my stomach sank. She wasn't going to be able to keep it together. What would they do to her if she caused a scene? I looked back out to the crowd to see Ero's reaction to this, but froze as I locked eyes on Corvus. His lips were moving, but there were no audible words if he was speaking. At least not from where I was standing.

"I'm just so excited!" Ayla blurted out, and my gaze snapped to her just as she launched herself at Taj, wrapping her arms around his torso.

My jaw dropped.

Taj chuckled, along with the rest of the room. “I am, too,” he whispered to her. “But I have to do this formally, so—” He removed her arms and held her hands before him instead, “The Ekpen Kingdom welcomes you. Will you accept my offer of marriage?”

“Yes, yes, of course!” Ayla beamed at him, and he escorted her down the stairs.

What in the Goddess’ name? Something wasn’t right. A voice in the crowd yelled out loudly in congratulations, and I slowly forced my eyes away from the newest pairing and stared ahead, confused. Corvus was mouthing words prior to Ayla’s abrupt change in behavior, but—surely not. However, when I worked up the courage to look behind King Ero, Corvus was there, glaring at me. My lungs didn’t seem to remember that I needed air as they seized in fear. Slowly, his glare morphed into a smug smirk, and I nearly jumped when a voice whispered directly into my ear.

“You may either accept your fate willingly, like a lady, or I will make you. Your choice.”

My choice? That wasn’t a choice, and Corvus knew that. They all knew that. I wanted to look away from his dark gaze but felt physically unable. Like he was holding my focus just to show me he could. Stubbornly, I wiped my sweaty hands on my skirt as the seconds ticked by. He lifted a dark brow, waiting for an actual response from me. Hating myself a little more, I nodded and sucked in a deep breath of air, actually feeling his influence lifting. Averting my eyes to the ground, I tried to slow my heart to a normal pace. It was impossible.

“Ciar Faolan,” Ero’s voice boomed, “has chosen Ms. Tiona Marnsi.”

“YES!” Ciar shouted and jumped in the air. I slyly watched as he proceeded to run to the stage and forego the stairs completely, clearing the

jump in one go. “Hello again,” he waggled his brows at Tiona, who rolled her eyes back with a laugh.

Even Tiona, the girl who was the first to voice her opinion on what was in the woods, was about to accept a proposal of marriage from a wolf. One whose mental stability I questioned.

“The Faolan Kingdom welcomes you. I definitely welcome you,” he said, his voice deep.

“CIAR!” The Faolan king barked.

His eyes danced as he stared at Tiona. “Will you accept my offer of marriage?”

“I will.” She placed her hand into Ciar’s, and he acted like he was going to jump off the stage, but Tiona pulled his arm back. “If you use the stairs like a normal person.”

“Ohhh,” Ciar purred. “Yes, ma’am.” He winked and strutted to the stairs.

Several people laughed, including Isla. Part of me wanted to laugh. I really wanted to, but I couldn’t laugh when Corvus had just thoroughly threatened me. With Ciar being the eldest heir, Tiona had just secured her position as the next Queen of The Faolan Kingdom.

One by one, the number of women on the platform dwindled. I suspected that Mosi Ekpen didn’t get his top choice judging by the look of longing he gave Isla as he proposed to a woman I didn’t know very well. Another queen in the making. Nine of us remained, and only four men left without brides. I searched for Dair in the crowd, finding him easily towering above nearly everybody else. His brother Alden was saying something to him that caused him to smile. His entire face changed when he smiled, as if the weight of his duties washed away into nothingness, giving him a second or two of freedom.

Ero walked around the stone floor like this was a theater and he was putting on a performance worthy of an award. “The next four men displayed levels of cunning, strength, and dedication that warrant acknowledgment. Torin and Evander Volos, and Alasdair and Alden Oberon. Your kingdoms are lucky to have you, as are the women you have chosen to be at your sides.”

Polite applause started, and some of the other guys whooped in celebration, showing their support.

“Evander Volos has chosen Miss Isla Bishop.”

I turned to Isla, who stood frozen, staring straight ahead at Evander, watching him as he approached the stage. Riv was to my left, and I found her with an expression matching Isla’s. Dumbstruck. Heartbroken? I slid my hand into Riv’s and squeezed softly, just letting her know I was there. As though she realized what was happening, her grip clamped down on my hand, and her dark eyes slid to mine.

“Miss Isla, The Volos Kingdom welcomes you. Will you accept my offer of marriage?” Evander asked, his light brown eyes shining hopefully at Isla. He had a much softer look to his face than his older brother, though it was clear they were related.

“I will,” Isla said, stepping forward. As she walked past us, her eyes moved from me to Rivka. To anyone watching, it wouldn’t have been noticed as anything abnormal, but I knew how this must have hurt both of them.

“Alden Oberon has chosen Miss Eliza Simeon.”

Eliza gasped, and Belinda whispered ‘congratulations’ under her breath. Alden stood at the base of the steps, staring right at his chosen. So many of

his mannerisms were exactly like his older brother's. The severity of his gaze, and even the way his hair curled to the left of his head.

"Miss Eliza, The Oberon Kingdom welcomes you. Will you accept my offer of marriage?"

"I will," Eliza replied, already halfway down the steps. She was eager, but I wasn't sure it was for marriage. I think she just wanted to get as far away from this island as possible. She looked up at Alden, her full cheeks and perfect nose a lovely shade of pink.

I think what we all wanted—no, needed—was to feel safe. Unfortunately, that wasn't something we would ever feel in this castle or on this island. I understood now why none of the ruling queens or duchesses were in attendance.

Seven final women remained standing, including Riv and Belinda, and only two royals were left to choose. My hands were shaking, and I felt like my knees might buckle at any second. This had to end.

"We'll do the final two a little differently," King Ero announced, getting everyone's attention. "The man who performed the best during the hunt will go first. Who doesn't enjoy a bit of tension in moments like these?"

Several men laughed and bantered with each other like this was any other night in an ale house and not a life sentence to the women I'd been through absolute hell with. It infuriated me. The moment dragged on, anticipation building so high that my stomach rolled with anxiety, and a bead of sweat ran down my spine.

"Alasdair Oberon," Ero said, looking right at him. Relief flooded me. It was going to be okay. "You will choose last."

The room exploded with applause, and I blinked, trying to process what he'd just said.

“You will choose last.”

Dair didn't win. Torin had.

“This was a very close decision! It came down to something that happened at the very end of The Hunt that put one man above the other. This is why we always teach you to never hesitate! You don't know who could be right behind you—someone who won't pause, someone who wants it more than you.”

I made him hesitate.

By calling Dair out by name, I'd made him hesitate in striking me down. Then Torin showed up and did what he was supposed to do. I did this, but I wouldn't be standing here right now, otherwise. The details about scoring were unclear, so maybe it didn't make a difference. There were too many unknowns.

I looked at Dair, standing tall, right next to his best friend. His fists clenched and unclenched slowly, as though he was close to exploding. He glanced up, meeting my eyes, and I swallowed roughly as they burned me to my core. I wondered if he'd just come to the same conclusion I had. By not killing me, he may end up losing me, regardless. I couldn't tell if he wanted to climb the platform and make me scream in fear, or snatch me and drag me off to somewhere private and make me scream in pleasure.

It could've gone either way, and I hated the way my heart thundered with excitement as I considered both scenarios.

“It'll be okay, Eves,” Riv whispered to me, having noted the quickening of my breaths. “Slow your breathing.”

“Congratulations, son,” Ero said, pulling Torin into a tight hug. After releasing him, he held out the scroll and pointed, showing Torin what was

written. He must have been happy with it because he grinned widely at his father.

It was as though the world had slowed to a crawl, simply to torture me. I stared forward, watching Torin approach Dair. He held out his hand, and Dair took it. The two of them congratulated one another, but as Dair went to drop his hand, Torin pulled him closer into a one-handed hug. A gesture I'd seen boys and men do all the time, except I could see Dair's face.

Torin was saying something nobody could hear, and Dair's eyes snapped to mine. His face turned a deep shade of red, and it could have been the lamps overhead, but I swear I saw a flash of yellow in his eyes. He was livid. Torin released Dair and grinned at him, completely unphased by his best friend's murderous expression.

"Torin Volos, you may go collect your chosen bride," King Ero shouted, riling up the crowd even more.

Belinda was practically vibrating as Torin stared right at her as he sauntered up to us. *Thank the Goddess*. He easily climbed the stairs in one bound and stood before Belinda. The room was silent. I hated that Belinda was about to become a future queen, but relief smothered all other feelings, knowing that Dair would be able to choose me. The moment dragged on as Torin simply studied Belinda like she was some kind of rare jewel that had to pass a clarity test.

"Your Highness?" she whispered, her voice shaky and hopeful.

Torin abruptly looked over his shoulder, back down to where his father was standing, and right behind him, Dair. He lifted a golden brow in question as though asking, "*Well?*" and Dair narrowed his eyes. My heart thundered as they had some kind of earnest, private conversation. The hair

on my arms lifted. Something wasn't right. Dair folded his arms over his chest, "*No.*".

Torin straightened his shoulders, conversation over, and turned his back to Dair. My eyes widened as Dair turned his own back, putting me and the entire ceremony behind him as he stormed to the bar. Whatever discussion had just happened felt final, and I had a horrible feeling that I had no idea what was really going on.

I tore my eyes away from Dair as he downed a glass of liquor, and I looked down at where Torin and Belinda were standing, only to find that Torin's focus wasn't on Belinda.

It was on me.

Torin's pale blue eyes seemed to glitter as he stepped down the line, bypassing Riv, and stood right before me.

Oh no. No, no.

I couldn't marry him. What was he doing?

Torin smirked down at me. "We'll have to get you a dress made exactly like this, only in red."

Riv sucked in a sharp breath beside me as my jaw dropped.

"Miss Evie," he purred.

Ringling started in my ears and my mind felt as though it was melting, the vision of Torin before me seeming to fade in and out. I couldn't... where was Alasdair?

A loud echoing boom exploded in the room, taking all the attention away from me. A few girls screamed at the noise, and guards were already heading to the back of the room, where the huge double doors had been thrown open.

“What is the meaning of this?!” King Ero bellowed, enraged. “This is a sacred ceremony!”

“Forgive me, Your Majesty! I couldn’t stop him!”

Stop who? I stepped around Torin just in time to see the crowd separate and reveal a man I thought I would never see again.

“*Kael?*” I choked.

He was wearing only a torn and charred pair of pants, the ones he’d been wearing out in the woods. His chest was bare, marred with some bruises and dried blood. *But no burns.*

“Hey, Eves,” he replied, using the last of his strength to flash one of his signature smirks, and then he collapsed.

“KAEL!” I shrieked, propelling myself past Torin and down the steps. Isla and Riv met me at the spot where he’d fallen.

“Who the Goddess is this man?!” King Faolan demanded.

“A guard, I think.”

“Oh my stars, Kael. How are you here? How are you alive?” I rambled, rolling him over onto his back. Suddenly, Dair was at my side, assessing my friend.

Kael laughed weakly. “Takes more than dragon fire to take me down. Who knew?”

“I never thought I’d be so happy to see your boyish, cute, infuriating face,” Riv confessed, wiping away a rogue tear.

“You saved me out there, Kael,” Isla cried openly.

“Eh, you would’ve done it for me,” he replied before coughing harshly.

“Water!” I shouted. “He needs water!”

I saw the fancy shoes and the crimson cape, and I didn’t need to look up to confirm that King Ero was now standing directly over Kael. “Here, son.

Drink this.” He plucked a mug from someone and offered it to him. “Did I hear you correctly? You suffered from dragon fire burns?”

“Don’t act like you don’t know!” I snapped without thought, tears blurring my vision. “He was engulfed in them!” My hands shook as I wanted to touch my friend, to prove to myself that he was actually here, lying before me, but there wasn’t any spot on his skin that wasn’t injured or bloody.

Silence fell as Ero glanced over to where the other kings stood. I blinked, and my tears escaped me, giving me a clearer view of the shocked expressions on all of their faces.

“That’s impossible,” Taj piped up. “Dragon fire runs hotter than anything in the realm, and a man can burn himself badly on something as simple as hot tea.”

“It’s true.” Dair stood and positioned himself behind Kael, putting both of his arms beneath my weak friend and hauling him up to his feet. “I saw the entire thing happen. This man should not be alive.”

“So what does it mean?” Ciar asked, looking from Kael to King Ero.

“Can we please get on with this ceremony? I’m hungry,” someone in the crowd complained.

I hadn’t taken my eyes off my best friend. The one I thought I’d lost forever. “Kael,” I whispered, my voice choked up with emotion.

He opened the arm that wasn’t wrapped around Dair for support. “C’mere, Eves.”

I launched myself at him, not thinking about how it would look. Several grumbles of disapproval filled the hall as I wrapped my arms around him and sobbed. “I thought you were dead. I couldn’t handle—”

“Shh, it’s fine now. I’m here.”

“I told you she was *very* close to him,” Belinda’s nasally voice came from behind me, and I went dead still.

Desmond pointed at Kael. “*This* is the guard?”

I pulled back from Kael and looked at Belinda. “It’s not like that, and you KNOW it!”

She shrugged, looking extremely pleased with herself. “It’s not the first time I’m seeing this, and I think everyone else can see what it’s like just fine, *Eves*.”

“That’s cause for severe punishment, soldier,” King Oberon stated, looking at Kael.

“Nothing inappropriate has ever happened between me and Miss Evie. I am simply her guard, the one she trusts with her life.” Kael held his head high, even as his body quaked from fatigue and dehydration.

Torin was suddenly there, eyeing Kael suspiciously. The one who was responsible for Kael’s ‘death. The one who had fucked up everything.

“My lord,” Corvus said. “There is only one explanation for this guard’s survival.”

“I’m aware,” he snapped.

Murmurs rippled through the crowd.

“Well, what is it?” Torin barked, his irritation rolling from him.

Ero sighed. “Only members of the Volos family are immune to dragon fire.”

But that would mean...

“Corvus?” Ero turned to his sorcerer. “Can you perform a blood test?”

Corvus bowed his head. “Of course, Your Majesty. I’ll just need to collect your blood and the young man’s.” I looked up at Kael, who was pale

as snow. Corvus stepped right in front of us and held out his hand. “Your palm, please.”

Kael obliged, holding his hand out, palm up. The whole room seemed to be holding its breath as Corvus waved his free hand and whispered an incantation. I gasped as a jagged dagger appeared out of thin air. The hilt was an intricately designed dragon with garnets for eyes that shimmered as the blade twirled in the air, untouched. Abruptly, the dagger sliced Kael’s palm, and I hissed quietly, knowing how much it had to hurt. Kael, however, didn’t flinch.

The dagger floated between Kael and Corvus, who now used both hands, circling them together before bringing them together and apart like he was playing an invisible accordion. Sparks of light sputtered and flared, earning more than a few shocked gasps from the women who could see what he was doing.

A glass jar materialized, and Corvus raised his arms, while Kael gasped. The blood that had pooled in his palm began to rise in hundreds of droplets, hovering over the jar.

“Sire, your palm?” The sorcerer waved his hand, guiding the dagger to Ero, who held out his own hand. The king didn’t betray any emotion as his palm was sliced, nor when his blood floated up, just like Kael’s had.

Corvus began chanting louder than I had ever heard him. The blood drops merged together, swirling in the air like a cyclone. I slipped my hand into Kael’s, not caring if anyone noticed. When he gripped my hand like I was tethering him to reality, I knew he needed me.

The blood tornado spun at an unnatural speed, causing everyone in the room to wipe their hair from their eyes. Suddenly, the entire thing disappeared into the glass jar that Corvus held.

“So, what now?” Ciar asked, breaking the silence and earning himself a glare from his father.

Corvus placed a lid on the jar and held it out for everyone to see. “In a moment, I will smash this jar on the ground. If the dragon that emerges is silver, this man is your son, Your Majesty. If the dragon is black, he is not your direct blood, but he is related.”

The dragon that emerges? Wait. Did that mean—

Glass shattered as Corvus threw the jar down as hard as he could. I sucked in a breath and stumbled back as the blood seemed to expand on the stone floor. Nothing was happening. I squeezed Kael’s hand. Maybe this was all just a big misun—

“Look!” Alden shouted, pointing at the puddle. My eyes widened as it began growing up from the ground, in a pillar at first, and then morphing into the shape of a dragon. Just like the ones we’d survived in the woods. The beast was made entirely of blood and was just as red. It seemed alive. The way it arched its back and swiveled its massive head around, as if it could see each one of us.

“Bloody hell,” Kael whispered, stunned.

Corvus approached the blood dragon and put two hands against his creation’s head. With a single word, the dragon roared and reared back. Dumbstruck, I stared in disbelief as the dragon’s red color began falling to the ground. Shimmers of silver began to shine through.

“By the Goddess,” I gasped. It was silver.

The sorcerer let his hands fall, and with it, the dragon and the blood vanished, leaving only a tendril of smoke behind. He looked right at King Ero and lifted a brow. “Your Majesty, this man is your son.”

“What?!” Evander shouted.

Riv erupted with laughter, startling me. “Didn’t see that coming.”

“Where are you from?” Ero asked Kael.

I looked between Kael and Ero, to Torin and Kael.

That’s why Torin had seemed familiar to me when I first met him. They had the same eyes. Now that they were practically side by side, the resemblance was undeniable.

“The outskirts of The Final Fields.” Kael faltered on his feet, and I struggled to hold him, fearing I was going down with him. Warmth brushed my arm, and I gasped, looking over to find Dair at Kael’s other side, helping me support his weight. My heart clenched as I was held there, captive within his green stare. His thumb brushed my arm, and the expression on his face was full of longing, but there was a sadness beneath his desire for me. I couldn’t bear to see it, so I severed the connection, pulling my arm from behind Kael’s back to his arm instead. Averting my eyes rid me of the realization that any plans we’d made were futile. Words were being said, but my mind couldn’t process everything that had just happened in this room.

I needed a moment. One moment to breathe. But as I looked up, I realized there was no escape. Torin glared at me, his eyes bouncing from me to Dair. He’d clearly just witnessed our silent conversation, and he wasn’t happy about it.

The king hummed and tapped his chin. “How old are you?”

“I’m twenty-two, Your Majesty.”

Torin’s murderous gaze snapped from me to Kael and then to his father. “This is outrageous, Father. You can’t seriously believe—”

Ero held up his hand to Torin. “Silence.”

Torin was nineteen. Kael was twenty-two. That would mean he would be the next in line for the throne, and since this had all happened very publicly, it wasn't like Ero couldn't claim him, regardless of whatever internal feelings he had on the matter.

The tension in the air was so thick it physically felt hard to take a breath.

"Well then, Kael, is it?" Ero asked, and Kael nodded. "Welcome to the Volos family, Son."

The room exploded with voices. Some angry, some curious.

Ero raised his hand, and the chatter died down. "We'll continue the ceremony. Someone get my son a chair. Can't you see he's close to collapsing again?" A chair was produced in seconds, and Dair helped Kael into it. "Now, we'll continue the ceremony."

"Will he get to participate in the ceremony?" King Ekpen questioned, rubbing his thumb across the coarse stubble of his beard.

King Eamon scoffed. "He didn't meet the requirements! His dragon will fade before we even make it back to the mainland."

"It's true." Corvus stepped closer to Ero. "Without the spilling of blood, the curse will block the gene from taking."

"See? He can't be a true Volos without his beast!" Evander shouted, looking victorious.

I frowned, looking down at Kael. His eyelids were drooping, exhaustion desperately trying to take him under. My brow furrowed as I pushed his curly blond hair off his right shoulder and sucked in a breath. A perfectly shaped, dried, bloody handprint marked his pale skin—like someone had grasped his shoulder.

"Kael?" I asked loudly, interrupting the bickering that was going on.

"Hmm?" he hummed, his head bobbing.

“Where did this come from?” His eyes closed, and I shook him back awake. This was too important. He jerked before his eyes met mine.

“Rude,” he mumbled, blinking rapidly.

“Where did this handprint come from, Kael? It’s important,” I demanded with an urgency that he picked up on because he glanced at where my fingertips rested.

His face morphed from tired to somber. “I ran into someone in the woods. Before I found you and Isla.”

“What happened then?” Riv asked, dropping down to her knees beside his chair. “We have to know, Kael.”

“He had been laying in a puddle of his own blood since the beginning of the hunt.”

Riv wrapped her hand around Kael’s. “Who?”

“A guard,” he replied. “He shouldn’t have survived, but he did. Both of his legs were broken and the sounds he made when he breathed... like he was drowning on land. The entire right side of his body was purple from bruising.” Kael paused, and my heart ached for him. He coughed roughly before another glass of water appeared in his hand, and he took a long drink.

“Anyways, um, he had a moment of lucidity and realized I was there. He begged for my help.”

Someone in the crowd blurted out, “Your help for what? To get him back to the castle?”

Kael shook his head. “No. He knew he was too far gone for that. He asked me to end it. His suffering.”

My eyes were wet once again, and I wondered if I’d ever stop crying.

“Did you?” Corvus asked, studying Kael like he was the most fascinating thing he’d seen.

“Aye,” Kael admitted. “The man was owed the warrior’s death he was robbed of, and I gave it to him.” He held his head high in challenge, unashamed of what he’d done. Slowly, he formed a fist in his right hand and pounded it three times against his heart.

I found myself forming my own fist and bringing it down over my heart. For that guard, for all the lost ones, and as I scanned the room, I found every woman I could see doing the same thing.

“Well then!” King Eamon proclaimed, ending the moment. “The boy is a real dragon, then. Enough delay. I need a jug of ale as soon as possible after this unplanned event!”

So Kael had unknowingly solidified his bond with his dragon, even without shifting. Would he be able to?

King Ero smiled at his friend. “You’re not alone. I may require a barrel of it!” Several people laughed. He turned to Kael. “You’re entitled to a bride. Since you didn’t get to participate in your dragon form and we’re nearly done, you’ll be the last to choose. We’ll talk afterward and see what can be done about shifting.”

“Okay,” Kael replied, not sounding like himself at all. I didn’t blame him. Torin exploded. “This is horse shit!”

With Kael being alive, would that affect the scoring? Hope flared within me and I was about to ask when Alden beat me to it.

“Does this change the outcome of first and second place?”

Every head swiveled in his direction, some with looks of shock on their faces as they clearly had not come to that possibility on their own.

King Cairo stepped forward. “It does not change a thing. The win was not about the kill, but the ability to act.”

My heart sank when the other kings, including Alasdair’s own father, agreed. Torin crossed his arms and glared at Alden, despite still being the victor. He hadn’t shown this side of himself at all during the ball and I wondered what other parts of himself he had kept hidden.

“Everyone, back to your positions. NOW!” King Ero barked, sending people scattering.

The panic I had moments prior to Kael coming back from the dead resurfaced in a rush. Hints of pine and cedar, the underlying aroma of wet earth after the rain invaded my senses, and I knew Dair was right behind me.

“Go with it, Evie.” I dipped my chin, hating the way my skin tingled in response to the rough timbre of his voice. “Trust me.”

Riv took my hand and shot a look over my shoulder, likely at the giant who was lurking there and whispering more lies in my ear. “Come on, Eves.”

I didn’t respond or look back at Dair as we marched to the platform to await our fates.

“Regardless of how you feel, listen to him, Evie. Don’t do anything stupid,” she said softly but sternly. “It’s all a game, remember? Be smart.”

Belinda and Torin were already up there, waiting. Scowling. Each step toward Torin felt like a death sentence. A betrayal. A trap.

I took my place and looked out at the crowd. Kael was drinking more water, and someone had given him a dinner roll, half of which was already missing. Ero looked oddly calm, despite the scandal that had just publicly unfolded. And Dair? I couldn’t look at him. Not now.

Torin stepped before me once again, and I wiped my still wet cheeks and kept my eyes pinned on the floor.

“Miss Evie,” Torin said, more of a growl this time than a purr. “The Volos Kingdom welcomes you. Will you accept my offer of marriage?”

This wasn’t happening. Surely, it was a dream. My heart raced faster than the beating of a hummingbird’s wings. I could deny him... but Riv’s words floated in my head.

“This is a game, be smart.”

And then Corvus’ whispered warning... if I was going to do this, I wanted to be in control of my own mind. I was already being forced, I’d be damned if my last piece of independent thought got stripped, too. I’d be of no use to anyone that way.

Denying him would humiliate him. More than he’d just been at the reveal of a bastard, one who was older than him. He’d be enraged. He’d want revenge.

“Answer me.” His voice cut through my thoughts. A demand with an edge of warning, sharper than any blade. I had to see my father again. I had to do this.

“I will,” I choked out.

Torin grabbed my wrist and wrapped my arm through his, forcing me to let him guide me down. He didn’t speak, just stood beside me as Dair was called upon. I didn’t know if he looked my way as he went to propose to another woman.

“Look at him,” he said, emotionless.

“W-what?”

“I said, look. At. Him.”

I shook my head, and Torin squeezed my hand tightly. I winced.

“You will watch. You will accept this.”

Tears built as I raised my eyes and found Dair standing before Belinda. She smiled at him radiantly. Why didn’t he choose Riv? Or any one of the *four* other options?

“She is for him. You are for me. Do you understand?” Torin whispered into my ear, his voice cold as ice.

Dair escorted Belinda down the stairs and they stood together, a beautiful pair. I didn’t understand why it hurt so badly. Why it felt as though my heart was shattered within my chest. How would we ever be able to put a stop to this now?

“Kael, you must ask one of the ladies. We won’t make you walk up there,” King Ero said for everyone to hear.

“I’ll come to him.” Riv piped up, not waiting for Kael to confirm she was his choice. I loved it. The last four women did not.

Kael looked up at her and reached for her hand, no sign of the bread he’d been eating.

“What do you think, Rivvy baby? Want to marry me?” Kael winked, making Riv laugh.

She held her free hand to her chest and swooned. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Horns began playing the anthem of our realm, one that we all knew. A tune that was supposed to incite feelings of pride and belonging now triggered new emotions for me. Betrayal, fear, and disgust.

“Excellent!” King Ero shouted when the horn carried out the final note. “The Choosing Ceremony is complete. We will begin making travel plans to return to our kingdoms. There are weddings to plan! The evening is yours to enjoy.”

All the kings disappeared from the room in a rush, no doubt to discuss the outcome of the selections and, of course, Kael. I slipped my arm out of Torin's, eager to get away from him. I needed to be alone. To think.

As I passed through the crowd, I saw a few of the new couples getting acquainted. Dancing, hugging, and some even kissing. My face was so warm it was a wonder I hadn't erupted into flames. I took a different route, spotting a doorway in a corner. I had no idea where it led, but that was the least of my concerns.

Pushing through the door, my eyes widened when I entered a room that was really more of a gallery. Plush white carpet and banners from the Sova Kingdom adorned the walls, along with rose gold ornate frames that held intricate paintings.

I jumped when the door opened and revealed my new fiancé.

"What are you doing?" I asked him suspiciously.

He stepped into the room while the door swung shut behind him.

"What? A man can't seek a quiet moment with his future queen?"

I took a step back and frowned when I realized I was against a wall.

"Why did you do it, Torin?"

He advanced on me. "Do what?"

"Pick me?"

Smiling, he trailed his fingers over a white table that held crowns and tiaras. "Because I wanted to. In my world, when you want something, you take it. You don't give someone else the opportunity."

He stood in front of me, his smoky scent with a hint of salty sea waves overwhelmed me until he was all I could see and feel. I sucked in a sharp breath as he traced the lace that framed my breasts.

"Torin," I whispered, my voice shaking.

He raised his finger and pressed it against my lips. “Shh, my little flame.”

I yelped as he bent down and hoisted me up, standing between my legs while pinning me to the wall as though I weighed no more than a pillow.

“I know you felt it between us at the ball, Evie. You can lie to yourself all you want, but on some level, deep down, you do want me.”

“I want to go home. That’s what I want.”

“You have a new home now. Mine.” He shifted us, and I gasped at the pressure I now felt between us. Torin groaned. “You drive me crazy...” His hand slid up my thigh. “I’m not a bad man, Evie. I’m fine with you taking trips to your village.”

Shocked, I pushed him back. “You are?”

He laughed. “Of course. I would never deny my wife.”

“Thank you,” I breathed. I wasn’t expecting that.

“As long as she doesn’t deny me.” I went rigid in his arms. “You wouldn’t deny me, would you?”

He raised his eyebrow and slanted his head. It reminded me so much of the way he’d moved in his dragon form. He wanted me. He wanted to prove a point, whether to himself, his father, Alasdair, or me... he was determined. And I was determined to get revenge on all these evil people and get back to my father.

I closed my eyes and slowly inhaled. “No.”

“I didn’t think so.” He smiled and leaned in, his lips a breath from mine. “Let’s seal our deal with a kiss.”

My mouth opened to say something. Anything. Instead, he pounced. His lips pressed against mine, surprisingly gentle. I gasped when his warm tongue brushed mine, teasing, provoking. I’d never been kissed like this before. I found that I didn’t hate it—I hated that it was with him.

Despite being inexperienced, instinct seemed to kick in, and I swept my tongue against his, earning a deep, rumbling growl. He pulled back, and his eyes flashed orange, the beast inside wide awake.

“Evie,” he moaned, sinking his hand into my hair and pulling my head to the side, stretching my neck in invitation. I nearly shot up the wall at the sensation of his skilled tongue and mouth against my hot skin. “I’ll worship you. I swear it.”

I had so many mixed emotions that were being trampled by lust. What was this? Some form of magic? When his teeth nipped at my collarbone, I whimpered, and my eyes shot open.

“Yes, my little flame. Those noises are for me and me alone. I will have them all.”

My eyes were locked on a massive painting of the Sova family. The King and Queen sitting in the center. They looked happy. Was that possible? Had he hunted her, too? Did she have a choice? I looked at the people who surrounded them. Even they looked happy.

A sleeve slid down my shoulder, quickly replaced with more kisses. I blinked as my brain tried to catch up with my eyes. My arms wrapped around Torin’s shoulders, and I pulled him closer just so that I could get a better look at the face that was staring back at me.

“You feel perfect,” he said, his hands now beneath my skirt, palming my ass.

“Who is that?” I rasped.

“Mmm, who?” he asked, continuing to nibble on my skin.

“That man right there.” I batted his shoulders. “Put me down for a moment.”

He pulled back and looked at me in confusion, but did put me down. The second my feet hit the floor, I raced over to the painting, ignoring Torin's groans of frustration.

"Who the bloody hell is more important at this moment?" He marched over to where I was standing. I pointed at the man positioned behind the king. A face that I'd seen a million times in a million different expressions.

I jumped when spit hit the man square in the face.

"What the hell?!"

"*That,*" Torin pointed at him, "is the man responsible for this entire situation. The royal sorcerer to King Sova. The one who cursed the royal bloodlines. Without him, nobody would've had to die in The Hunt."

There was no stopping it this time. The very walls were closing in on me. The reality of my life was coming at me all at once. It was too much.

He knew. That's why he was adamant that I not come. Why he hated the royals.

So many memories flooded my mind, and the truth became clear as I stumbled. Torin's spit had trailed down far enough, and the last thing I saw before total darkness was my father's face, painted into history.

A secret history that I was never supposed to know, and his words of warning filtered through my hazy thoughts just before I gave into oblivion.

"I'm not worried about animals. It's the beasts I'm worried about..."



Wow. I felt like a real badass there at the end, throwing bombs left and right!

How insane was that ending, though? I knew last summer when this idea came to me I HAD to get it out into the world. The characters morphed and grew into real people who wouldn't let go of me until I did them justice.

I have so many exciting things planned for this series and it is going to be EPIC. As of now, I don't know how many books it will be. There is a ton more story here and I will write until there isn't.

If you're not in my Facebook reader group yet, please come join us! We're an active group and everyone loves discussing all of my stories. I think you'll enjoy it.

I don't have a release date set for book two yet, as I have to get the second demons book finished as soon as possible, but then I will be right back into Cursed Royals and giving it my full attention.

Thank you to all of my fans who stuck with me over the last year as I recovered from burn out and the loss of my Aunt Hap. Your understanding and sympathy know no bounds and I'm forever grateful for it. I couldn't do what I do without each one of you!

To Cassie, Maya Nicole, Leah, Kayla, Robin, and everyone else who had to suffer from getting voice messages from me that only said "BY RRRROYAL DECRRRREE!" for months, thanks for putting up with my shenanigans. You ladies really keep me sane and I know you secretly enjoy my antics.

And last, but not least, my family. Michiel, Parker, Foster, and Hera; you four are the picture of chaos. Seriously, look that word up in the dictionary and there would be a picture of you people. I mean, I'd be there too, so it's perfect. I wouldn't want it any other way. Michiel, thank you for holding down the fort so I could get this book written in the midst of traveling for signings and the day to day adventures of life with three kids.

To my children; Mom loves you and never forget you can do anything you put your mind to. Well, except for beating me at a water balloon fight. I will annihilate you.

Until next time!

-pounds fist against heart three times-

Britt

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