



FEAR THE FLAMES

OLIVIA ROSE DARLING

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VENGEANCE IS A PROMISE SIGNED IN BLOOD.

OLIVIA ROSE DARLING

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Ebook ISBN: 979-8-9864315-0-5

Paperback ISBN: 979-8-9864315-1-2

Hardcover ISBN: 979-8-9864315-2-9

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Cover design by: Sarah Lee

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Formatting by: The Nutty Formatter

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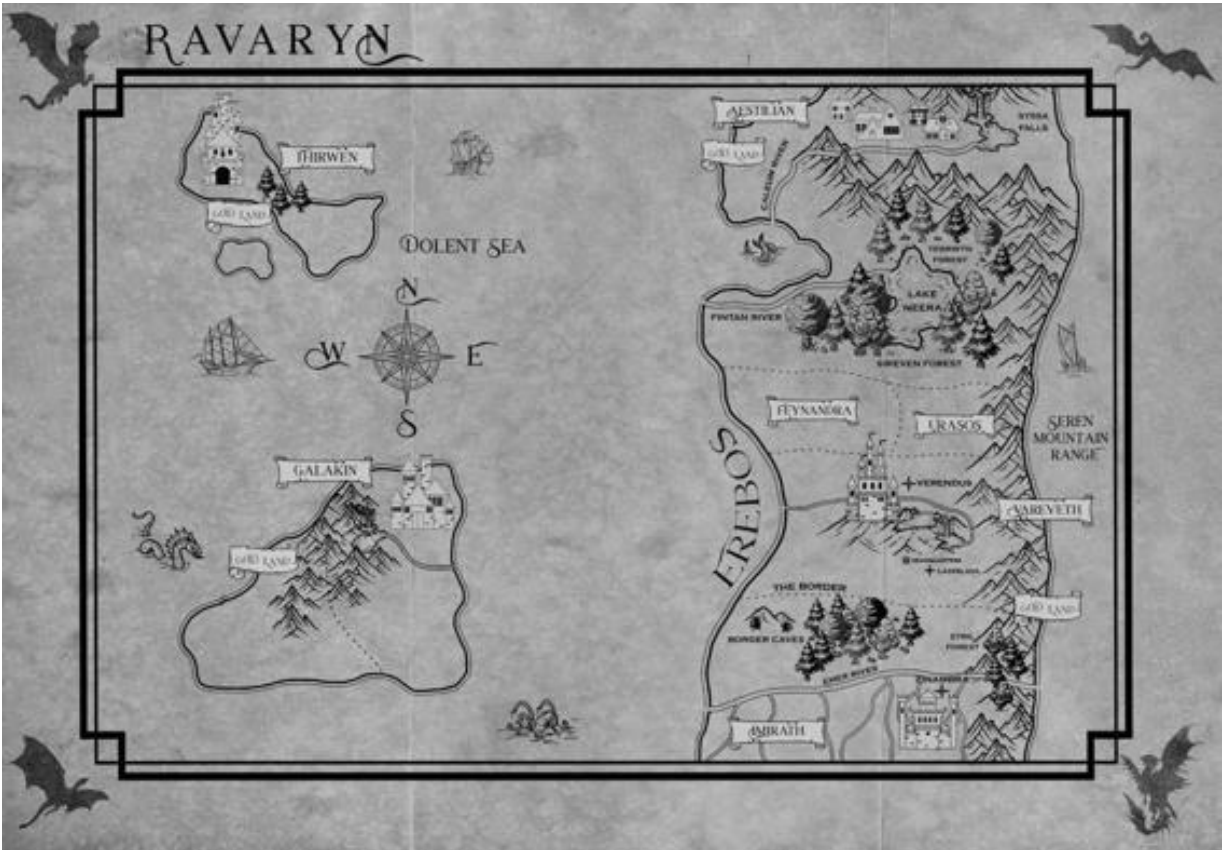
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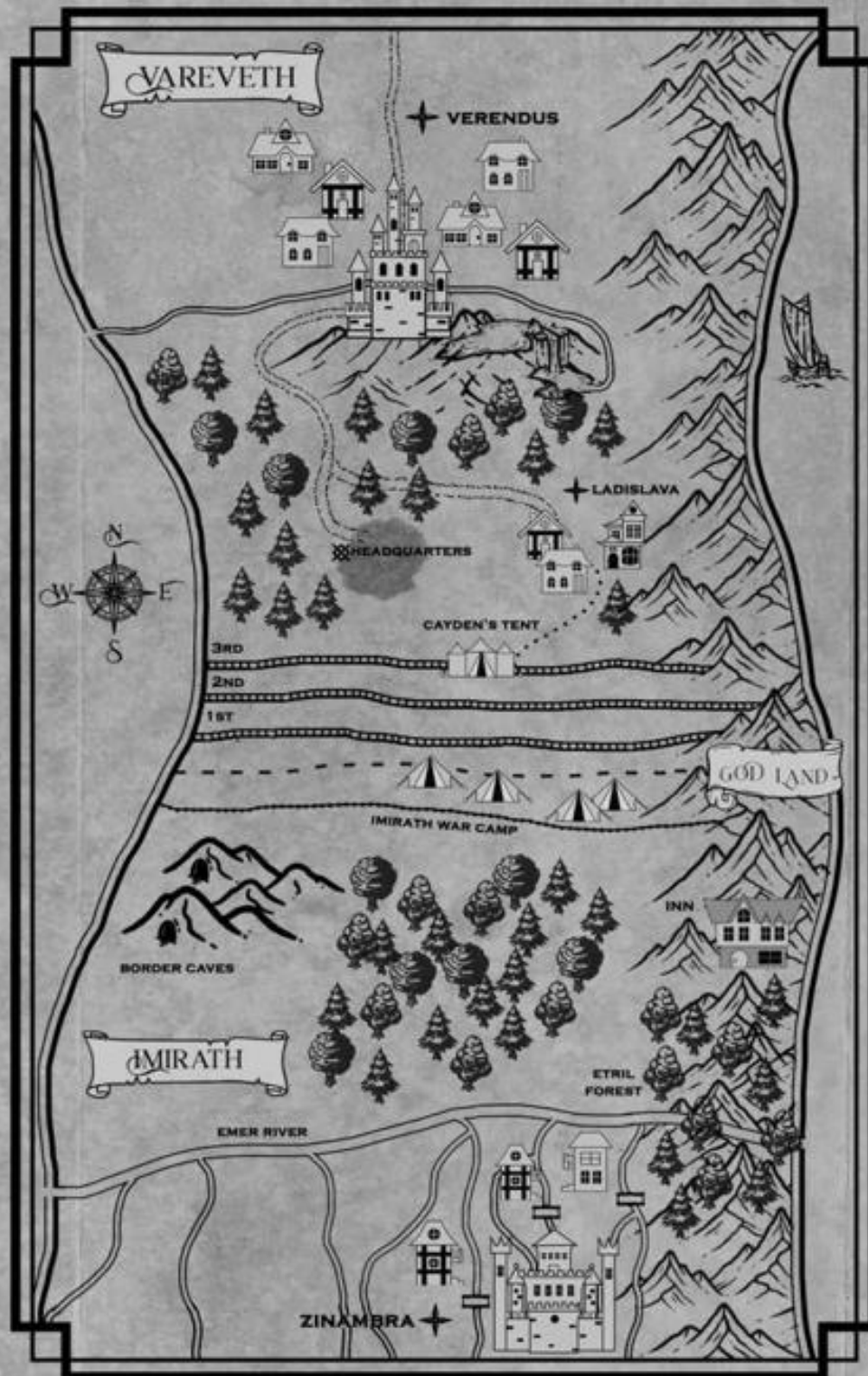
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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Fear the Flames is a New Adult Fantasy-Romance. It contains explicit sex scenes, descriptions of violence, physical abuse, mental abuse, anxiety, and depressive thoughts. This book may be unfit for anyone under the age of 18.

For those that carry the weight of the world with a smile and never stop chasing dreams that others deem unrealistic, too big, or impractical. Every word is for you. Your dreams are alive, and so are dragons.





PART ONE

THE DEAL



CHAPTER ONE



Rain and wind whip against my cheeks as I urge my horse to run faster into the dark forest, with only moonlight and lightning to aid my vision. Thunder rumbles throughout the sky in tandem with the horse hooves pounding the dirt. There are many reasons for a mission that requires you to ride through dangerous conditions—secrecy, desperation, curiosity, revenge, haste, to name a few. I stopped trying to dissect my intermingling emotions years ago while taking on a mission, but I can't deny the overwhelming sense of curiosity that courses through me tonight.

The steep mountainside resembles a maze of fallen trees, uneven paths, and slick rocks. The rain has drenched my cloak and leathers, which now do little to keep the chill from seeping into my bones. My dark hair is soaked, and several strands have ripped free from the braid that falls down my back and stick to my face as if they're coated in syrup. But I'll never pass up an opportunity to gain information about the tension brewing between Imirath and Vareveth.

Imirath.

My father, King Garrick's kingdom.

Hatred coils through me as a grimace contorts my face. The patrol we send out regularly came back to Aestilian with news of Vareveth soldiers crossing the Fintan River. Granted, next to nobody continues the path into the Terrwyn Forest or climbs the Seren Mountains, and for good reason. The Terrwyn Forest is feared for many reasons, the beasts being one of them, but there's also a much more sinister truth to the forest. Not only does it thrive on water, but also on blood. It's one of the most dangerous places

to travel through, but I want to know why Vareveth is here. No kingdoms lie between the Fintan and Aestilian—it's unclaimed godly land.

There are several villages within the Sweven Forest, only nomadic clans and cults roam the Terrwyn, but no king or queen can claim either territory as their own. However, ordinary god-fearing citizens can forge a life within the forest, though it's a treacherous path to take. It's why my father hasn't found me, no matter how many patrols or assassins he has sent. Forging a kingdom on sacred land is seen as mocking the gods. The same gods that forsake humanity and have been asleep for nearly five hundred years. Not to mention the beasts that patrol the forest and the thick mist that coats the air the further you ascend.

Most people fall from cliffs or go mad when they realize they can't see their hands in front of their face. You lose all sense of direction and self-preservation unless you know how to navigate it. The Caleum River flows down the mountainside. You can't see it through the mist, but you'll make your way through if you follow the faint sound of rushing water—if you don't get eaten or fall to your death first. If you keep your wits about you, you'll find Aestilian, my kingdom, hidden in a valley next to the Syssa Falls. A place where those deemed unworthy of society have made a home. It's not an oasis, it's nowhere near perfect, but it's home.

Finnian's horse increases their pace and sprints next to mine, matching her stride. I sneak a glance at him—his ginger curls lay flat against his forehead, and his porcelain skin almost glows through the darkness.

"Are you going to tell me why you ran into the house and dragged me out like a deranged goblin?" he shouts over the storm. Technically I never told Finnian why we left Aestilian, but we stopped clarifying details with each other years ago.

Wherever I go, he goes.

Wherever he goes, I go.

"A deranged goblin?" I laugh and glance over at him again, but now a full-blown smile covers his face.

"Yes." He clears his throat, and I already know he's about to imitate my voice, "*Finnian, come on! Get your ass on a horse! Put that rear in gear!*" His voice cracks on the last word, which only increases my laughter. "Gods, that was so much easier to do when we were younger."

"Your balls have dropped?" I gasp, and he shoots me a look that says he would flick me if we weren't riding.

Finnian came to Aestilian when he was ten, and I was eleven. He lived in a village deep within the Sweven Forest, north of Feynadra, with his parents and three siblings before a clan dispute occurred. Leaving him with a burnt-down home and a family that joined the ashes. It was summer and he had fallen asleep under a tree after chasing fireflies, which is the only reason he wasn't reduced to ash that night. Sometimes I still catch myself whispering words of thankfulness to the bugs when their small bulbs of light break through the darkness on warm summer evenings.

My uncle, Ailliard, sent out a patrol after catching wind of what occurred in the village and brought Finnian and several others back to Aestilian. Finnian was little more than skin and bones when I first saw him, with lanky arms and wobbly legs—he passed out shortly after dismounting the horse with Ailliard. I didn't have a single friend up until that day, it wasn't that there weren't any children in Aestilian, but two factors played into my isolation. The first being that Ailliard always made it a point to remind me I'm a queen. Aestilian was never meant to turn into a kingdom, but it felt cowardly to hide when we had the ability to help people. I never received the mercy of someone grabbing my outstretched hand, but I can hold someone else's.

Though, taking people in isn't entirely selfless. The more people in Aestilian, the more power I have. A larger kingdom equates to a larger army which then equates to becoming a larger threat, and I quite like the idea of being a threat. I haven't tuned my skills or spied from the shadows since I escaped Imirath to never make my move in this game. You can only wrong a person so many times before they let retribution overtake their pain. Every corner of Ravaryn will feel my presence when I rejoin the world. They'll say that the lost princess has come back as a vengeful queen, and they won't be wrong.

Ailliard carried Finnian into the healing house, where I helped nurse him until he was well enough to stand. I hadn't spoken to many people aside from when I had to; I kept to myself most of the time. I was betrayed by the two people in this world that were supposed to protect me more than anyone else, and as a result, I developed an inability to let people in. But Finnian plowed the walls I built around myself into smithereens and became my best friend.

It was late when I received the guard report of Vareveth soldiers crossing the Fintan. Darkness already held the rain-sodden forest in its

clutches. I would have left straight from the guard house, but I knew Finnian would have been upset if I left this late without telling him.

“Vareveth soldiers were spotted at the tavern on the edge of the Terrwyn. They crossed the Fintan.”

Finnian’s orange brows shoot up, and he shakes his head slightly, “Vareveth! You’re sure?”

“Green cloaks, well-groomed horses, and expensive uniforms,” I recite the words from the guard report.

Finnian gnaws on his bottom lip, “They would have had to pass through Feynadra or Urasos to get here.”

“Exactly. It’s a bit of a hike for *just* a pint in a sad excuse of a tavern,” I muse.

We return to silence as the firelit lanterns rise in the distance. We slow our horses while passing through the weather-worn gate, their hooves sloshing in the muddy road. The scent of salt lingers in the air that wafts off the Dolent Sea. I’ve been to this village before, but the dark wood houses, shops, and tavern look even drearier while shrouded in gloom.

My horse follows Finnian through the road, which isn’t as crowded as it usually is despite the overflowing stables and staggering volume of the tavern ahead of us. I dismount my horse after Finnian, and we tie them off on their usual post. We never leave our horses in stables on missions; it’s best to keep them close in case anything goes wrong. Which it usually does to some measure, but I love the unpredictability of these kinds of missions. I was never meant to live an idle life.

I reach into my saddle bag to pull out a dry black cloak and a facemask to cover my nose and mouth. It’s normal to wear a facemask in this part of the continent considering there’s no ruler to hold you accountable, only the law of the gods. If they wake long enough to wipe their godly drool and give me a slap on the wrist, then so be it. I have my knives, and I’m not above stabbing a god. There’s some semblance of government within each village, but it’s nothing you can’t run from if you get into too much trouble. It’s also better that I cover my face since Imirath has been getting restless. There hasn’t been an assassination attempt in a few years, but it’s still best to take precautions when I can.

My fingers tuck the mask on one of my ears and reach down to make sure all my knives are secure on my legs. My black fighting leathers cling to me on a normal day, but the rain has practically turned them into a

second skin. I straighten myself out and brush my knuckles over the two knives secured on my corset before tucking the strands that have fallen from my braid behind my ears. Finnian is also dressed in his black leathers. A sword hangs low on his hips, but the weapon he favors is secured around his chest—a brown bow and a quiver filled with arrows made by his own hands. He brushes his fingers through their feathers and turns to face me.

“Feeling bloodthirsty tonight?” His blue eyes dance with mischief as the lantern light dances across his round, freckle-dusted face.

“Always.” I shrug a shoulder as a smirk lifts the corner of my lips.

He laughs softly, but his humor disappears almost as quickly as it appeared. “Do you think Vareveth will cross the Terrwyn?”

I drum my fingers on the top of my thighs and shake my head. “It’s not as if the risks of the forest are kept a secret.”

Some people, clans and cults included, take their worship farther than others that inhabit our continent, Erebos, and worship the gods on godly land. The places where it’s rumored our lost gods sleep. God land is scattered throughout our world, Ravaryn, and I imagine it’s just as dangerous on any other continent as it is on ours. Temple ruins are scattered throughout the Terrwyn, which has come in handy for a shelter on more than one occasion, but that’s as far as my relationship with the gods goes. Maybe I’ll mutter a prayer or two when my menstrual cramps are obscenely awful, but I’ve learned to make my own fate rather than leave it in the hands of something I can’t see.

“Fair point,” Finnian shrugs his shoulders. “What’s the plan? That is if you have one.”

“Of course, I have a plan.” He brings a hand to his chest and sucks in a dramatic gasp that makes me want to reach up and twist his ear. I level him with a glare and continue, “You stick to the lower levels and see what you can find out from the soldiers that are too deep in their pints. I’ll spy through the floorboards on the higher-ranking soldiers. I fear that if Vareveth is conquered, Garrick will continue pushing north until he controls all of Erebos.”

Finnian nods, unphased by my proclamation. I’ve spoken my fears to him on numerous occasions. I’ve been a queen from the first moment we decided to open up Aestilian to refugees. I must always prioritize my citizens’ safety and wellbeing, even when it puts my own in danger.

“Keep your eyes sharp; I won’t hear the end of it from Ailliard if I bring you back all bloodied up again,” Finnian remarks.

“Me? Reckless? I have no idea what you’re referring to,” I feign confusion.

“Very funny, Elowen.” He crosses his leather-clad arms over his chest. “Mask up,” he winks while walking past me toward the tavern entrance.

CHAPTER TWO



I enter the tavern a few minutes after Finnian. We never stay together on these missions, so it's best if we don't enter anywhere at the same time.

Our strategy has always been to divide and conquer but find our way back to each other if something goes wrong.

The creaky door falls shut behind me, and I'm encompassed in a sea of off-key musicians and raised voices. I've never been a fan of noisy places, but Finnian thrives in them. It's what makes us a good pair. I peer through the crowd and spot him already sitting at the bar, surrounded by several dark green cloaks. His damp ginger hair catches in the lantern light as he throws his head back in a boisterous laugh. I can't hear him from here, but the song of his laughter is a melody that's stitched into my brain.

I steady my footing on the uneven floor while making my way to the dark staircase in the corner of the tavern. Keeping my head down while I weave through the mismatched tables filled with soldiers playing cards or shouting for another round of drinks. Nobody turns toward me; they're all too absorbed in whatever is in front of them. There's a back section to this tavern, a quieter one, where the generals usually gravitate toward. At least, that's how it's always been whenever I've come here to spy on Feynadra or Urasos whenever they've made their way across the Fintan—neither kingdom is as powerful as Vareveth, and usually end their border patrols here.

The tavern is as plain on the inside as it is on the outside. There's no point for fuss and frills when everyone here just comes for a single purpose—to get drunk while passing through. Wooden beams shoot up toward the ceiling to support the second floor. The walls are completely bare, save for

the rusting lanterns nailed in place. Puddles of candle wax have hardened on the floor and only grow larger as time passes. The crowds here often get rowdy and would most likely ruin any form of art after shoving someone into the walls.

Aside from the soldiers Finnian has weaved his way into, the tavern is filled with locals, travelers, merchants, and people who seem far too interested in the table in front of them for me to think they're here to do anything in accordance with godly law. Not that I care, but if you're going to dabble in deviance then at least make an effort to hide it.

My eyes water as I walk through thick clouds of pipe smoke that waft through the small tavern. I stick to the shadows along the wall and take my first step up the rickety staircase. It creaks so loudly that if I hadn't done this ascent countless times, I would think the wood isn't strong enough to hold any kind of weight. But I continue my journey without a second thought, dodging cobwebs along the way.

I pause at the top of the stairs, straining my ears to tune into any signs of movement or breathing, but nothing reaches me. It's an open attic, but it's filled with bags of grain, barrels of wine and ale, dust-filled furniture, and anything else the tavern may need. It's the perfect place to escape to for dalliances in the dark. No candles line the walls. The only light infiltrating the space comes from moonlight trickling through holes in the roof and lantern light rising from cracks in the floorboards.

My steps are light even though nobody in the tavern will be able to hear them over the noise. The last thing I want is some dust raining down into one of their drinks, giving me away before I've even had the chance to acquire any information. I navigate the floor while picturing the layout of the tavern in my mind—traveling to the section where I know the generals sit, furthest away from the fiddles and flutes. The people that sit there are the ones who have the information worthy of squatting in an attic. I cringe while looking down at the dirt and dust-covered floorboard that I'll be pressing my ear to. It's the usual crack I press my ear on, but it's far dirtier than usual. I sigh while sinking to my knees and wipe my cloak over the spot to clean it as best as I can.

I take a knife from my thigh before lying on my stomach and pressing my ear to the small crack. The familiar steel is a welcome presence in my palm. Ever since I escaped Imirath, I've never gone a single day without a knife—even before I knew how to use them. My stomach sours in the

familiar way it does whenever I think of Imirath, but I shake my thoughts to the back of my mind. I close my eyes and let all other noises fall away, zoning in on the conversation that ignorantly drifts into my ears as smoke rises through air.

“Eagor may be a pushover sometimes, but he won’t give up on this,” a deep male voice rumbles.

“He doesn’t have a choice. Cayden won’t let him,” a sharp feminine voice answers.

Cayden.

I’ve heard of him.

They’re talking about their commander, Cayden Veles. He’s both the youngest and most feared warlord on the continent. I don’t know much about him other than the fact he’s the only person with enough guts to take on Imirath. Every other commander before him bargained with the threat to appease Garrick. Cayden Veles is the first and only commander to bring war back to Imirath rather than beg for a bandage on an already bleeding wound.

Whether his decision stems from confidence or arrogance, I don’t care.

“He’s tired of losing soldiers at the border in pointless skirmishes. He needs to make a big move and he knows that. The tension is nearly at a boiling point as is,” the same male voice cuts through the music.

“Yes, but this war will be over before it even begins if Garrick finds a way to control the dragons.” My eyes snap open and shock surges through my body. My heart pounds so rapidly that I worry it’s knocking like a fist against the floor. Garrick doesn’t let anything slip about the dragons. The only reason I know they’re alive is because I would have felt their death. The bond I share with them would have broken, and any text I’ve scoured reassured me that I would feel it—*an excruciating pain*, many of them said. He would be a fool to kill them. The mere threat of the dragons keeps all of Ravaryn from his borders.

My dragons.

The secret my father wishes he could’ve kept but never stood a chance. When I was born, my parents threw a ball in celebration of their heir. All the kingdoms were invited, including Galakin. The queen at the time didn’t think she was doing anything wrong by bringing her court seer. It’s custom for the courts that still utilize magic to bring their seers and offer a piece of good fortune for the guest of honor.

The seer laid five dragon eggs at the foot of my cradle and began tapping into her magic. The prophecy foretold that my soul is forged in flames, which gives me a link to five dragons. She called me *a firestorm made flesh*. The eggs hatched in the ballroom and out sprung five baby dragons that perched around my cradle. Instead of my parents seeing this as leverage for Imirath, my father only saw it as mutiny. He feared I would overthrow him once I grew up, and my link and dragons grew stronger.

I went from being a princess to a prisoner overnight.

Shaking my head, I force myself to refocus on the conversation below me. Now isn't the time to get myself worked up and miss out on information. Ignorance will get me nowhere, and I'll be damned before I let my emotions get in the way of gaining leverage.

"Cayden has a plan for that—you know he's always scheming or plotting," the male voice says.

"Well, let's see if this scheme follows through. Maybe the Atarah heir will be living in a tent somewhere in the forest." A chill creeps up my spine, and I inhale a breath so sharp that my facemask clogs my airways. One of my hands tightens around the hilt of my knife while the other pulls the mask below my chin. The laughter that's shared below me doesn't infiltrate my emotions; my mind and body are buzzing in a mixture of surprise and adrenalin.

Vareveth soldiers are here...because they're looking for me.

"Hear anything interesting, little shadow?" a deep voice drawls from the top of the stairs. My fingers pull my mask up, and I snap my head from the floor before pushing myself to my feet. My eyes peer across the space and take in a large, male figure leaning against the entrance. He kicks off the door frame and slowly walks in my direction, the wood creaking under his heavy footsteps.

"Not really." I shrug while twirling the knife in my hand, letting the silver blade catch moonlight along the edge.

"Do you often gasp at idle gossip?" he asks while coming to a stop a few feet in front of me. His eyes dance over my body, taking in my leathers and knives before flickering back to my face. A shard of moonlight filters through a crack in the roof and dances across one of his angular cheekbones as if it longs to reach out and touch him. A jagged white scar stretches from the corner of his right eye, across his cheek, and ends close to the corner of his lip.

“I saw a spider,” I answer while I continue to take him in. Black armor rests on his broad shoulders and hugs his muscular torso and arms. The same black metallic material hugs his thighs and travels down his calves. His tall frame is clad with weapons; several knives line his legs, two short swords are strapped around his waist, and I spy the handle of a broadsword peaking over his shoulder.

It makes sense for the soldier to be wearing armor. It’s stronger than leathers, and he’s a far distance from Vareveth. He doesn’t need to open his mouth for me to be able to tell where he’s from—the condition of his armor gives his station away.

“Hm,” he muses, the rest of his face still coated in darkness aside from his cheek. “It’s too bad that I know you’re lying, considering I know exactly who you were listening to.”

Damn it.

Maybe he’s more than an infantry soldier.

“Perhaps you should go back to them. Surely, they’re missing you much more than I will,” I suggest in an aloof tone.

“Did you think I wouldn’t notice you?” he asks, ignoring my previous suggestion.

Nobody ever noticed me before.

Even Finnian has commended my ability to move like a ghost through a crowd.

He’s standing in between me and the only exit from the attic. My only other option is to jump from the window. I’ve jumped from higher, but Finnian is still downstairs, and there are too many soldiers between him and the tavern exit. I assess his size, still twirling my knife...I’ve taken down larger.

My hand tightens around the hilt of my knife, and I advance on the man a split second before he advances on me. I slam my fist into his jaw and ignore the throbbing sensation in my knuckles that follows. He hardly even flinches back and grips my wrist before I have the chance to draw my hand back. I shove my leg forward to knee him between his legs, but he senses my move before I make it and shifts away from the hit. He takes advantage of my off-balanced stance and pries the knife from my hand. He tosses it to the side and yanks me toward him, taking my other wrist in his other hand, and slams my back into the wall.

“Now that we got that out of the way, what did you hear?” The light is just strong enough for me to make out an arrogant smirk and the intensity that laces his gaze.

“I think you should have pinned me to a wall in a bigger room. I don’t think it’s large enough to accommodate your ego.” I strain against his hold.

He quirks a dark brow, and his smirk grows. “Knives, spying, and a sharp tongue. You’re playing a dangerous game,” he tsks, “because I’m intrigued.” His eyes dance over my face again but snag on my mask, “May I take that off?”

My heart skips a beat, but I don’t let it show through my eyes, which I narrow into slits. I already know the game he’s playing—if I say no, he’ll know I’m a person that doesn’t want to be found. Which isn’t entirely true. I just want to enter the game on my own terms, and I know he’s part of the soldiers looking for me.

I roll my eyes, “You have me pinned to a wall, and yet you’re asking permission to remove my mask?”

“Chivalry’s not entirely dead.” He presses me further into the wall and angles his head closer to mine. If he thinks I’ll crumble, he’ll find himself mistaken. I’ve faced larger threats than a soldier in an attic. An idea sparks in the back of my mind—he’ll have to hold my wrists in one hand to take my mask off. He’s underestimating me. Probably because of our size difference.

I nod my head and keep still as he slides my left hand against the wall, bringing it closer to my right. His grip on my left wrist loosens, and his index finger brushes against the column of my wrist. I yank forward and rip my left hand free, punching him in the chest. He stumbles back and I take advantage of the situation. My leg flies forward, and I *finally* knee him where the sun doesn’t shine. He lets out a groan of pain as I drop to a squat in front of him and swipe my leg under him. His back slams into the floor with a loud bang.

I really hope nobody heard that.

I climb onto his tall frame and cage his torso between my legs. I grab another knife from my thigh, hold it to his throat, and don’t fight the arrogant smirk that now rises on *my* lips. We’re still shrouded in darkness, but his calculating gaze blazes through the shadows and makes my heart rate increase.

“I much prefer this position.” I place my free hand on his chest and lean forward to hover above his face.

“I can’t complain,” he says in a tone void of any anxiety one might have as a knife is pressing into their neck.

I ignore his comment and continue in my pursuit, “What does your commander want with the Atarah heir, soldier?”

He keeps his face void of any emotion, “Why would I tell you anything my commander wants?”

“You don’t know the Atarah heir, I do. It’s a rather simple concept to grasp if your brain can manage to work that hard.”

He tucks his tongue into the side of his cheek. “The heir could be useful in the upcoming conflict.”

“How?” I demand while pushing the knife further into his skin, but not hard enough to draw blood yet.

“You said you know her?” His right brow rises slightly, and his scar moves with it.

“Yes.”

“Would she be willing to meet with my commander?” A tangled ball of curiosity, anxiety, and excitement clangs through me.

I could have a meeting with the Commander of Vareveth—my father’s rival.

My father’s enemy wants me.

But what if it’s to ransom me?

“Not yet,” I say. His eyes narrow and he waits for me to name my terms. I open my mouth to list them, but I’m cut off by an inhuman growl coming from the roof. It’s a sound I’m unfortunately familiar with.

A netherwraith.

The deadly creature drops into the attic from the largest hole in the corner of the roof. They can smell human blood from five miles away and crave it more than they crave water. It’s a large beast, covered in thick white fur, with blood-red eyes. As the netherwraith grows, so do two curved horns on top of their head, and they’re sharp enough to pierce you if they decide to charge. A forked tongue hangs from its mouth, dripping in a frothy poison. It’s a beast of nightmares, as all the beasts that prowl the Sweven, Terrwyn, and Seren Mountains are. I scramble off the soldier beneath me and press my back into the wall while he rises to his feet. He unsheathes the

broad sword from his back and a throwing knife from his thigh as his predatory gaze tracks the beast.

"Name your terms," he states without taking his eyes off the beast. The netherwraith prowls forward with its sights set on the soldier. I slide against the wall and move closer toward the stairs. I need to get to Finnian.

"There's a clearing where the Fintan River meets Lake Neera. Meet me there tomorrow night with a token of good faith, and we can move forward from there." The beast moves past me, still dead set on the soldier.

"A token of good faith?" he snickers. "My minuscule faith isn't placed in things many would deem *good*."

"I won't send the heir to you only to be ransomed. Show me you're willing to work with her, and I'll be the judge of if you get to meet her or not. I'm not particularly fond of you so bring your charm next time, soldier." I draw my eyes away from the beast and notice how close I am to the exit. I now stand directly behind the netherwraith. It's the diversion I need to leave here without the soldier holding me hostage, but I can't let him die before finding out what Vareveth wants. I throw the knife in my right hand; the beast shrieks as it sinks into its back leg. I turn away from the attic, sprinting the rest of the way toward the stairs.

"There isn't a single place in this world you can hide from me, you understand?" His tone makes me pause at the top of the stairs. I crane my neck in time to see him raise his sword toward the beast as he crouches into a perfect defensive stance. "If you run, I'll find you," he declares, taking one last look at me before swinging his sword at the beast that springs in his direction.

"Come alone!" I call out while rushing from the attic.

CHAPTER
THREE



Everyone must have heard the netherwraith's growl because most occupants are elbowing each other to get to the exit. My head whips around the room, trying to find Finnian through the commotion. It's not the first time I haven't been able to spot him on a mission, but the uneasy feeling that accompanies the absence of his presence never goes away. I elbow my way through the crowd and make my way toward the door. We've agreed to always meet up at our starting point rather than waste time trying to find one another in chaos—only when the missions aren't *that* dangerous. If Finnian is in danger, I'll dive into the heart of chaos weaponless.

My body pushes against the crowd that's moving toward the attic entrance. The soldier must be of high rank if several other soldiers are rushing to his aid. It didn't seem like he would even need aid. He oozed a lethal calm that only seasoned soldiers master after years of fighting. Judging by the size of his weapon and his quick footwork, he's definitely a seasoned soldier.

I lick my dry lips.

If he's a seasoned, high-ranking soldier, then it won't take him long to kill a wounded netherwraith. I must be out of here before he does. I don't want to meet the commander while he's surrounded by other Vareveth soldiers. I'll have to get to the clearing early tomorrow to make sure the soldier arrives alone. I break through the threshold and use my shoulder to cut to the left of the tavern where we tied off the horses. A calming wave washes over my anxiety when I spot Finnian sitting on top of his horse that he already untied. The reins to my horse lay in the palm of his hand.

“I was about to come in and look for you,” he says while dropping the reins once I’m close enough to hear him. “A netherwraith?”

“Yes. A huge one,” I answer while swinging myself up. Thunder booms above us as a growl turns into a whimper, and then the attic goes silent. The soldier killed the netherwraith, and we haven’t even left yet.

“I don’t know if I want to ask this, but how much shit did you get into?” Finnian asks.

“No more than the usual amount.” *Lies*, I think I’ve just gotten myself into an immeasurable amount of shit. I turn my horse toward the gates and nudge her in the side, signaling her to run.

If you run, I’ll find you.

Chills snake up my spine, but this time it’s not from the rain. I don’t turn around, but I swear I can feel the heat of his gaze branding my back through the attic window. We keep pushing our horses through the dark, rain-sodden forest until I’m sure nobody has followed us.

There isn’t a single place in this world you can hide from me, you understand?

Another chill creeps up my spine. That’s impossible. I’ve been in hiding for fourteen years, and nobody has managed to find me. There’s no way a random soldier with no ties to me will be the one to change that. If he was trailing us, it would have to be on horseback to match our pace, and we would hear him riding through the forest. The rain is also heavy enough that it will cover any tracks we make.

No, he’s not coming.

Arrogant prick.

We make it to the edge of the Terrwyn before we slow our horses down. The rushing water of the Caleum River signals the start of our ascent up the mountainside. I dismount from my horse and bring her over for a quick drink after sprinting for the last hour.

I haven’t stopped gnawing on my bottom lip since we left the tavern, and I can taste the coppery blood on my tongue. There are too many thoughts flashing through my head. Too many possible scenarios that could end with me dying, or worse, back in an Imirath cell. I crouch down by the river to splash cool water on my already freezing face before sliding my hands up and tangling them in the roots of my damp hair.

Just breathe.

In and out. In and out.

Find a way to control the situation before it controls you.

I sense Finnian's presence beside me before he opens his mouth. "You're going to need stitches if you keep biting your lip like that."

A halfhearted chuckle falls from my lips, "What did you find out?"

He sighs while sinking into a squat beside me. He takes an arrow from his quiver and runs his fingers through the feathers. "Their commander is making them look for something. They don't know what," Finnian says. That confirms the soldier is a high-ranking one, maybe even a general since he knows what the army is looking for.

"They're looking for me, Finnian," I whisper. The arrow slips from his hands and he sinks his fingers into the muddy riverbank to keep himself from toppling over. I force myself to turn my head and look at him. Disbelief and confusion cloud his features.

"No," he whispers, shaking his head. "Most of the continent, *the world*, thinks you're dead."

"Most," I reason. Some still believe I'm alive because nothing has ever happened to the dragons. Though, how could anything ever happen to them? They're prisoners in Garrick's castle... just as I was.

"Did you learn that from spying, or was someone in the attic with you?" he questions. I have to be careful with my words. It's not that I don't want to tell Finnian or that I can't; I just don't want him to get worked up over something that might not even happen. I would rather shield him from uncertainty until I've gained some semblance of certainty.

"A soldier followed me. I think he's a high-ranking soldier."

"Does he know *you're* the heir?" Finnian demands, shooting up and towering over me.

"No," I say while getting to my feet next to him. He still towers over me, but Finnian towers over everyone. I've never met anyone as tall as him, but the soldier from the attic was close. We used to be the same height when we were younger, but he shot straight up like a tree when he was fourteen. I'm average, which helps me blend in with a crowd, but Finnian is staggeringly tall.

"All I got out of him is that Vareveth is looking for the Atarah heir. The netherwraith cut the meeting short before I could acquire the exact purpose," I say in a calming tone. Finnian visibly relaxes at my clarification. Guilt eats at me for keeping tomorrow's meeting hidden from him. I know it's stupid to go alone, but I can't put Finnian at risk of an

ambush. I don't trust the soldier; therefore, I won't bring Finnian around him. It's dumb but simple logic. "What else did you learn from the soldiers on the lower level?" I ask, both out of curiosity and to take the attention away from me.

"Vareveth is set on war. They're tired of making attempts at peace."

"They finally have a commander that knows you can't make peace with a tyrant. Good for them," sarcasm drips from every word. Though, it benefits me that they don't want peace. It's less of a chance Vareveth wants me for ransom.

Finnian continues while I walk over to where the horses nuzzle against each other, "They'll be in this part of the continent for about two more weeks. Their commander is with them—apparently, he's got a scar on his face that gives him away."

My blood chills and I swear I stop breathing for a moment. My jaw hangs open while my heart pounds like a war drum at the center of my chest, much like it did against the floorboards. I don't have to keep the shock from my face since my back is to Finnian, a small blessing.

I was face to face with the Commander of Vareveth.

I held a knife to his throat in a dusty attic.

Oh gods, I kneed the most feared warlord on the continent in the balls.

I suppress the deranged laugh that bubbles in my throat and resort to softly snickering as I grab the reins of Finnian's horse. I shouldn't laugh, but how can I not? The person that is scouring the continent for me had me in his clutches, and I pinned him on his back. My feet pivot in the mud, and I turn back toward Finnian, doing my best to keep my face neutral. I can't wait till this is all over and I can tell Finnian the truth about what happened in the attic. He'll probably fall to the floor in one of his full belly laughs.

"The army is also pissed at King Eagor for not doing something sooner," Finnian adds. My lips press together, and I nod, leading the horses over to him while I form my next sentence in my head. I stop a few feet in front of him and mentally prepare for how he'll react to the next thing I must bring up. It's something we've discussed briefly but never in-depth since we never had a proper solution.

"I have to do something about the food supply in Aestilian." His blue eyes grow stormy when he registers what I'm saying. Vareveth is a well-established kingdom; if I strike a deal with them, I can include sending food to Aestilian as one of the terms.

“We can find another way,” Finnian reasons.

“We’re out of time. Once the first frost hits, people are going to starve to death. The rations are already dwindling.” We send out raids every so often to bring supplies back to Aestilian. I only allow the raids to take from smugglers that are already traveling with stolen goods, but it’s never guaranteed what we’ll get. We also have hunting groups but there is too much snow in the winter for them to get out of Aestilian safely. The population continues to grow, and every day that passes by is another nail in the coffin of my sanity.

“Once you make yourself known, your father will never stop until he kills you.”

“I can’t hide forever either. Tonight made that apparent,” I state.

“They haven’t found Aestilian,” Finnian counters as his cheeks redden in anger.

“No, but there’s a chance they might.” My mind flashes to the sight only my nightmares have conjured, but it’s a sight that always has the possibility of becoming a reality. Houses and stores burned to the ground. Grief-stricken faces. My people fighting for their lives against an army with far more skill and weapons than them. Children screaming for their parents. Parents screaming for their children. “I won’t wait until someone drags me from Aestilian. I’ll leave on my own terms after I’ve bargained for a deal I want,” my voice rises to match his.

“I won’t lose another sibling!” Finnian shouts. His hands shake at his sides, and his nostrils flare. His eyes blink rapidly, fighting to keep his tears back.

My temper dwindles the longer I take in his emotions. Finnian and I can scream at each other, loud enough to wake a sleeping god, but once one of us cracks—it’s over. My hands drop the reins, and I rush toward him, wrapping my arms around his torso and placing my cheek on the slick leather that covers his chest. His chin rests on the top of my head while he wraps his arms around me, pulling me closer. Finnian rarely talks about the family he had before he came to Aestilian, just as I rarely talk about what happened to me in Imirath. But, sometimes, when the darkness of night conjured up memories without our consent, we were always there to hold the broken pieces of each other together.

“You won’t lose me,” I mutter into his chest.

He sharply snuffles above me, “You’ve never been the Atarah heir to me.”

That’s why I love you.

“But that’s who I am,” I softly state.

“No. You’re the girl that squishes fruit in the kitchen to make jam and gets excited over romance books,” Finnian mumbles while giving me a squeeze. I laugh softly into his chest. “I won’t watch you get locked up again.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. “I won’t let them,” I swear while pulling my head away from where it rests and looking into his stormy eyes that have calmed slightly. My teeth sink into the inside of my cheek to keep my emotions at bay; I don’t want to worry him more than he already is.

I must go to the meeting.

I won’t watch Aestilian burn to the ground.

I won’t be a prisoner again.

I won’t let Finnian starve.

I want too much out of this life and have too much resting on my shoulders to cower in the dark. I may keep to the shadows, but I wield them.

“Come on,” I poke him in the chest. “Let’s get home.”

CHAPTER FOUR



The heels of my palms dig into my tired eyes before I turn over and groan into my pillow. My face stays buried here for a few seconds to avoid the light that's streaming through my windows. I hardly slept last night, which isn't out of the ordinary, but fatigue weighs on my tired bones and strained muscles.

Every time I dozed off, a pair of harsh eyes would bore into mine behind my eyelids. I'm meeting with the Commander of Vareveth tonight. Cayden Veles wants me, and I have no idea why. I couldn't properly make out his features last night, so the only picture I have in my mind is a scarred shadowy face—I suppose that'll change tonight. The clearing will have enough light for me to see him and for him to see me.

I flop onto my back and kick my covers off, tucking my feet into my red slippers before they have the chance to touch the cold wooden floor. I threw on an oversized knit sweater after I bathed last night, but I still miss the warmth of my covers as I shuffle over to the bathroom. My fingers tug the cream sleeves up to my elbows before cupping my hands under the faucet; the cold water will help me wake up. I splash it onto my face before staring into my reflection. Finnian always tells me I look intimidating to approach until I smile, then my entire face brightens up.

My tired, honey brown eyes stare back at me. I pinch my narrow cheeks to bring some color into them before reaching into my cupboard and pulling out a light rouge to dab onto my pale skin, missing the color my skin turns in the summer months. I'm still light, but the summer glow makes me feel more confident. Finnian's always been jealous, considering he burns as soon as he steps outside, no matter how much lotion he lathers himself with.

I apply some tinted balm onto my plump lips to match my cheeks. Pulling the dark brown strands free of my braid, I idly run my fingers through the tangled waves. Once I'm satisfied, I grab my toothbrush to finish off my morning routine. I usually brush before breakfast since I never know if I'll be pulled away to do something—coffee still in hand.

We didn't always have running water here; most places on the continent have it, but for a makeshift kingdom like Aestilian? It's a rarity. The tavern we went to last night doesn't have running water, and neither do most of the villages in the Sweven Forest. You can always tell by the smell of the crowds. Nessa, one of the guards that helped me escape from Imirath, led the project to implement running water in Aestilian. She's as skilled with a hammer and blueprints as she is with a sword. It took years to acquire the proper materials. But since then, it's been a blissful five years of running water. No more heating buckets above a fire or bathing once a week.

I leave the bathroom and walk over to my nightstand to grab the dead flowers from a vase and toss them in the bin, making a mental note to replace them. It's a simple room, but it's mine. I never had things of my own before coming to Aestilian, let alone an actual room. I had a cell with no windows. I leave my curtains open on bad nights, when the memories choke my brain.

Aside from my bed, dresser, and cupboard—the only piece of furniture I have is a big plush dark brown chair by the fireplace, accompanied by a small table and footrest. A green knit blanket rests in the middle of it. Books are piled in stacks against the wall, mostly romance, even though I'll never tell anyone. The only person that knows is Finnian, and that's only because he looked over my shoulder when he said I looked like I wanted to physically eat my book during a...particular chapter.

Still in my sweater and slippers, I head out of my room and toward the kitchen. I pass Finnian's closed door. He hates mornings with a passion, so I usually let him sleep in unless we need to be somewhere. I'm fine after I have my coffee, but before coffee, I'm a grouchy goblin. I'm an unapologetic caffeine fiend.

Our housekeeper, Althea, must have been here already because there's a steaming cup of coffee with two pieces of toast smothered in butter and raspberry jam waiting for me. There's a plate with an egg and cheese omelet and a much darker cup of coffee across from me. I'll wake Finnian before his breakfast gets cold. I take a seat and prop my feet up on the chair

across from me, taking the mug into my hands and inhaling the delectable scent. The hint of vanilla dances on my tongue while I take a big sip. I always take my coffee with a hint of vanilla; without it, something just feels missing.

The sunlight passes through the windows and warms my cheeks as I munch on my toast. When I first came to Aestilian, before it was even Aestilian, I lived here with Ailliard and the four guards that helped me escape Imirath—Nessa, Esmeralla, Lycus, and Zander. They've all taken up quarters in the guard house, but Finnian and I chose to stay here. I'm welcome to stay in the guard house if I want to, but I need a break from social interactions by the end of most days. This place is also the first and only home I've ever had, so I suppose I'm attached. I glance over to the wall next to the fireplace where Finnian and I kept track of how much we've grown over the years.

I wish I could say I feel content, but I don't. The wave of uneasiness that washed over me last night hasn't washed away. I'm submerged, drowning in it. I rub my hand on the back of my neck and lean my head against the chair. The urge to make a move is eating me alive. Nobody has found Aestilian yet. A few assassins found me when I traveled outside of the borders, but they never made it back to Imirath to inform my father that I was alive because they no longer are. But just because nobody has found this place yet doesn't mean they never will. We're a young kingdom, the people that have made lives here are bound to have children, and their children may want to leave, and what then? I tell them no? Absolutely not. I refuse to be someone's jailer. I never want to be the person that makes others forget they're the forger of their own fate.

A deep groan that resembles a mother bear talking to her cubs sounds from down the hall, pulling me from my thoughts. I laugh into my cup as a sleep-stricken Finnian, with curls jutting in all directions and puffy eyes, trudges into the room. I remove my feet from the chair across from me just before he flings himself into it.

"Go back into hibernation, papa bear," I joke before taking another sip of coffee.

"I didn't want you to talk to Ailliard without me," he mutters while bringing his mug to his lips and digging his fork into his omelet.

I shrug, "I don't plan on talking to him today. The coffee is strong, so a patrol probably did a raid while we were gone. He'll have enough work

sorting through the goods and adding them into the supplies ledger.”

He pins me with sleepy eyes, “Do you really think this is something you should keep from him?”

“I’m not,” I raise my palms in the air. “I just want to soak it in before I tell him. It still doesn’t feel real.” My breakfast threatens to make a second appearance as the lies twist my stomach. I hate lying to him. I hardly ever do it, not even little white lies. I don’t have a problem with lying to anyone else. In fact, I’m fluent in it when I need to be. But Finnian is different. He’s my second, so lying to him is also counterproductive, along with it just being wrong.

The real reason I don’t want to talk to Ailliard today is because he’ll be on higher alert if I tell him Vareveth is looking for me. He’ll want to send out more soldiers to the border, which will make sneaking around harder, and I need to get to that meeting tonight. I need to leave slightly past midday to make it to the clearing before...Cayden Veles. It feels strange to put a name to the shadowed face in my mind. He seemed more a figment of darkness than an actual man.

I rest my hands on my lower abdomen and suck in a sharp breath, which draws Finnian’s sleepy eyes in my direction. His brows shoot up, and he’s instantly more awake, “Period cramps?”

“Mhmm.” I press my lips together and give my best pained expression. Gods, I hate doing this, but it’s for his protection. Finnian knows I have horrible menstrual pain. Even with the tonic I take on the first of every month to stop ovulation, it’s still awful. I don’t get it every month, but that doesn’t lessen the pain when I do. Sometimes it’s so bad I can’t even walk on the first day without limping. My body flips from chills, to a cold sweat, to actually sweating, all accompanied by a splitting migraine and severe nausea.

His eyes fill with concern. “Do you need my help getting upstairs?” I make a mental note to buy him something from a bakery when all of this is over, or maybe new arrows.

“I’ll be okay.” I manage a small smile while channeling my inner emotional turmoil to present itself as physical pain. “I think I’m just going to stay in my room for the rest of the day. Do you have plans?”

He shakes his head, “I was going to head down to the tavern later, but I can stay if you want me here.”

“No!” I shoot out, probably too quickly. “I’ve been dealing with this for years. Have fun tonight. Don’t worry about me. I’m just going to sleep and read,” I add to cover up my outburst.

“Alright,” he says after a few moments, regarding me with suspicious eyes. It’s better if he’s not here when I’m gone. “Just tell me if you need anything,”

“I will.”

“No, you won’t.” His lips pinch in the corner. I can’t help it; I just don’t want to be a burden.

“Okay, fine. But I promise I’ll be perfectly content to sit in my chair and read by the fire,” I say while finishing off my coffee and staying at the table until he’s done with his breakfast.

CHAPTER FIVE



The sun sets behind me as I break through the mist of the Seren Mountains, painting the sky in an orange and pink hue. After Finnian finished his breakfast, I fake hobbled to my room and *technically* read a chapter from one of my books, so I didn't completely lie to him. I didn't absorb a single word, but the effort was there.

My horse continues at a steady pace as we make our way down the steep cliffside. There's no sense in pushing the pace only to slide off the side of the mountain. I left early enough to get there before Commander Veles. We make it to somewhat flat ground and pass the place along the Caleum River where Finnian and I stopped last night. My boot nudges my horse in the side, urging him to move faster. This horse is younger than the horse I rode last night and navigates the terrain with grace. We take off in a sprint and keep this pace until we near the edge of the Terrwyn, thankfully with no bloody encounters. I cut my horse's path to the left and ride along the Fintan River. The forest floor is still muddy from the storm last night, but the treetops are dense, so the forest is always some degree of damp.

The sun is shining the last of its rays by the time I spy the crisp blue water of Lake Neera through the trees. I slow my horse and ease my way into the clearing while unsheathing the sword from my belt. I'm wearing another set of black leathers with silver armored accents, thigh and arm guards, and a black cloak secured around my neck. Ten knives are strapped around my thighs, as they usually are, and I left my facemask at home.

I wait by the edge of the clearing, listening for any signs of noise—a twig crunching, leaves rustling, but nothing other than the steady flow of

the Fintan drifts my way. My eyes scan the edges of the clearing, but once again, I don't see any signs of the commander.

I slide off the back of the midnight black colt and walk him behind a moss-covered boulder a few feet away from the clearing, close to a well-covered cave opening. If there's an ambush, I can take my horse and hide in there. There are symbols above the opening dedicated to the Goddess of Water, so I know none of the forest beasts will hide in there. They never nest anywhere godly symbols are engraved—it's one of the only reasons that make me question if maybe I should say a few extra prayers here and there.

I set my sword against the boulder to secure the thick leather reins around a tree before picking up my sword again and walking closer to the edge of the clearing. A dull ache has formed in my thighs from all the riding I've done in the past two days. The knuckles of my sword hand rest against the rough bark of a tree, and I kick my foot up behind me, pulling it into my lower back. The muscle pain is inevitable, but maybe I can attempt to do future me a favor by taking some time to stretch. Darkness now bathes the forest, with only the moon and stars left to illuminate the clearing. Finishing the stretch, my foot drifts toward the ground when a strong grip pulls me back, throwing my balance off. My sword catches in the moonlight as I flip it in my hand and aim it behind me, but a large hand wraps around my wrist, stopping my assault while twisting both of my arms behind me. My foot shoots backward and collides with an armor-covered shin.

"Relax, little shadow. It's me," a familiar voice drifts from behind me as a rope is secured around my wrists.

"Oh, lovely," anger bubbles in my veins, "that makes being tied up in a dark forest all the more enjoyable."

"You held a knife to my neck in our last meeting before running away," he finishes off the knot and spins me to face him, "consider this a precautionary measure."

My breathing catches in my throat when I tilt my chin up to take in his features. The hood of his black cloak is pulled down, and strands of chocolate brown hair brush against his forehead. His hair is shorter on the sides and longer on top. My eyes drift to the white scar that runs along the right side of his angular face, but not before I notice the hazel eyes that seem to glow in the moonlight as they dance across my features. He's a

harsh kind of handsome, something akin to jagged snow-covered mountain peaks.

“You didn’t seem to mind,” I bite out.

“I never said I did,” he says while taking a step to the side to wrap the rest of the rope around a tree, securing me in place like a rabid animal.

My wrists strain against the rough ropes, but like any skilled soldier, he knows how to secure a prisoner. Sweat gathers on the back of my neck at the feeling of something like shackles around my wrists. I take in long, drawn-out breaths to keep myself calm. If he wanted to kill me, then he wouldn’t waste time securing me to a tree. He said the Atarah heir could be useful, that *I* could be useful.

“Did you bring what I asked?” I demand.

He moves from behind the tree after securing my hands and saunters into my vision, stopping a few feet in front of me. “I am a man of my word,” he says while holding up a long clear vial filled with shimmering black liquid. “It’s an elixir to generate crop growth on infertile soil.”

I fist my hands behind me and bite the inside of my cheeks to keep from making a face. “How did you know I would want that?” It is something I want, but it’s unnerving how well he guessed.

“If you live anywhere around here,” he waves a hand through the air, gesturing around the general landscape, “you won’t be able to grow much.”

He takes a steady step forward, followed by another. My eyes stay glued to his with every inch he covers. My nails dig into the palms of my hands for a sense of crescent-shaped clarity as his domineering presence fully enters my space, standing toe to toe with me. The corner of his lips turns upward after I narrow my eyes at him, changing the shape of his scar. His fingers graze the top of my thigh in a whisper-light touch as he carefully tucks the vial into my thigh guard.

“Satisfactory?” he asks, tucking his thumbs into his pockets and treading a few steps backward, putting some much-needed space between the two of us. I purse my lips while my eyes rake over his body, taking their time to examine every inch of his impressive build. He’s wearing the same armor and weapons as last night, but he manages to look even more threatening while cloaked in moonlight as opposed to shadow.

“Average,” I say while flashing my eyes up to his once again. He snickers. “What do you want with the Atarah heir, *Veles*?”

He quirks a brow, “Done your research, *Atarah*?” My stomach twists and turns as shock tingles my nerves. If I dig my nails any further into my palms, I’ll draw blood; I may have already.

“How do you know who I am?”

“Call it a hunch,” he shrugs.

My anger only increases as the ropes dig into my skin. “You said I could be useful. Next time you open your mouth, say something useful.”

He lets out a low whistle while shifting on the balls of his feet, “You definitely have the prissy royal attitude mastered.”

“You tied me to a tree!”

“Because I don’t want you running away or pulling a knife on me mid-conversation, *Elowen*.”

“Don’t give me a reason to, *Cayden*,” I remark while pulling against the ropes again. “And don’t act innocent, you pinned me to a wall.”

He shrugs his broad shoulders as if to say *fair point* before moving on, “Have you ever thought about getting your dragons back?” His drastic subject change stampedes into me, and I would have stumbled if I wasn’t bound in place.

Every day.

I’ve thought about finding my way back to them every single day.

Guilt eats at my soul with every hour that goes by, knowing they’re still locked in the castle. Whenever I wake up with a sore throat, all I can remember is the night I escaped Imirath. I tried to throw myself off Ailliard’s horse while we rode away from the castle, screaming and crying until I couldn’t utter another noise. The castle should have been my home, but it was nothing more than a prison with pretty walls on the outside. I wanted to go back for them, no matter the cost. But I was a starved child fighting against the build of a soldier that knew turning around would have resulted in an inevitable death. It didn’t matter that Ailliard was my uncle. My father would have killed him slowly and painfully.

“You can’t bargain with madness,” I say. Attempting to bargain with Garrick is a fool’s errand.

“I don’t plan on it.” Cayden brushes a thumb over his bottom lip before clasping his hands behind his back. “Why would I bargain for something I can take?”

“A heist?” I tentatively ask while blinking through the confusion. “You want to partner up with me to free five dragons?”

“Precisely, angel.” I’m so overcome by his plans that the use of a pet name brushes off my shoulders. A heist. Commander Cayden Veles of Vareveth wants to go into enemy territory to take my dragons from my father, King Garrick. The Commander of Bloodshed, as some call him, wants to ally ourselves against a common enemy.

No, this is too easy.

“What’s the catch?” I inquire while forcing my head down from the clouds, but I can’t derail the hope that already swirls in my chest. Hope is a dangerous emotion. It’s one of the emotions that renders us blind to logic.

“You stay in Vareveth after the heist is complete and use the dragons against Imirath in the upcoming war.” His statement is final. One of my hands closes over the other, and I squeeze as hard as I can. The worst part about anxiety is being unable to hide it when you desperately want to. Shivers rack up and down my body, but I force myself to keep my tone even.

“That’s it? That’s all you want?” I have no qualms about taking place in the upcoming war; in fact, I prefer it. My decision was made the second I told him to meet me here last night, even if I didn’t realize it. I deserve more out of this life than hiding away somewhere that’s momentarily safe. I love Aestilian, and I always will. But love shouldn’t cripple you; it should flourish with you.

“You’ll have to sign a formal alliance treaty, but yes,” he says with a definitive nod.

“What about King Eagor and Queen Valia? I need to know where they stand in all of this.” They’re the rulers of Vareveth; surely they have a say in this.

“They won’t be informed about the heist if that’s what you’re asking.”

“How is that possible?” I scrunch my brows together.

He pauses, weighing his words, “Vareveth is different from most kingdoms, this is a militaristic motivated heist; therefore, I don’t have to clear it with either of them.”

“Okay,” I say slowly, trying to wrap my head around everything. “What will they think I’m in Vareveth for?”

“Eagor thinks it may sway other kingdoms in our favor if you’re in Vareveth. As of right now, everyone has remained neutral. You’re next in line to the Imirath throne. Aligning with Vareveth would look good for us and bad for Garrick,” Cayden states. My shaky nerves settle the more he

talks. I can see why he attained his position at a young age. He looks to be around my age, probably a few years older, but his mind is beyond his years. I've also gathered that Cayden Veles isn't the type of person that people cross; he crosses them. He's talking about his own king and queen as if they're nothing more than pawns in *his* game.

"I won't be a figurehead for Eagor to parade around in hopes of appeasing other kingdoms," I retort. I want to take this deal, but I won't compromise my worth for anyone—let alone some king I've never met. I won't come out of hiding just to stand behind someone.

Cayden barks out a sharp, humorless laugh, "I think we're far past downplaying your skill set. I wouldn't make a deal with you if I didn't think you could handle it, and you wouldn't be tied to a tree if I remained ignorant to how well you fight. I'm your primary ally. Yes, you'll have to put on a face every so often as all rulers do, even me. But we'll be focusing on the heist as soon as the treaty is signed."

The silence hangs heavy in the space between us.

"Untie me," I demand, needing time to collect my thoughts. Cayden complies, taking long strides to the back of the tree, and begins loosening the knot. I don't think Finnian will react well, but Ailliard will be even worse. Finnian, I can reason with, but Ailliard? He has tunnel vision when it comes to my safety. But I can't keep living for everyone else. It shouldn't be seen as selfish to know what you deserve and to go out and take it for yourself.

No more hiding.

No more being a ghost.

"You'll be coming on the heist with me?" I ask, bringing my hands forward and running my fingers over my irritated wrists.

"Attached already?" he questions while stepping from behind the tree.

"You'd make a very good shield," I muse while summoning the anger I felt when he first tied me up. His face snaps to the side after I slam my fist into his cheek. I would have gone for his stomach, but he's wearing armor, and I don't feel like busting my knuckles. "Don't tie me up again, prick." He slowly turns his head toward me and looks shocked? Intrigued? I think it's both.

"Yes, I will be coming with you on the heist, angel," Cayden smirks. I roll my eyes at the use of that term again. Whatever. I've been called worse. If he thinks I'm angelic while punching him in the face, then so be it.

“Who else will know about the heist, *soldier*?” If the nickname that undermines his rank bothers him, he doesn’t let on. In fact, his eyes flare in challenge.

“My First General Ryder Neredras and Head of Intelligence Saskia Neredras,” he states. Good. I’m glad he’s not informing an entire regiment of soldiers. Something like this must be kept quiet, or else the consequences could be substantial.

“Siblings or married?” I quirk a brow; it’ll be easier to deal with the first.

“Siblings,” he confirms. “Who will you tell?”

“Technically, I haven’t agreed to anything yet. There’s still more we need to discuss,” I pause, fidgeting with the bottom of my braid. This isn’t something I can gamble. I can’t tell Ailliard, the person that got me out of Imirath, that I’m going back there on my own accord for a heist. Especially knowing he hates my dragons since they killed my mother, his sister—Queen Isira. I’ve brought up getting my dragons back before, and it never goes in my favor.

When I was ten, my father attempted to physically break the bond between myself and the dragons with the assistance of a mage—it didn’t end well. I remember the burning hot, excruciating pain I felt in my chest while the mage continued his chant. The spell rebounded, and the dragons went crazy, blowing fire in every direction. One of my father’s soldiers dragged me back to the dungeon using the chains that were shackled around my wrists and ankles, which only increased the dragon’s anger. Several people died that night, Queen Isira being one of them. I wish I could say I felt her loss, but I never knew her. The longest time I spent in a room with her was when I would have to sit in front of my parents’ thrones in chains while I was hit with a cane. The interrogator would scream at me to tell them how to break my bond with the dragons, but even if I wanted to—it’s unbreakable. The bond is as much a part of me as my lungs and heart are.

She wasn’t as cruel as my father, but she did nothing to stop him.

Nobody did.

“If I agree, I’ll tell one other person. Finnian Eira, my Head Advisor.” Finnian will understand. I don’t know when I’ll tell him, probably after I break the news of the alliance, but he’ll know before the heist happens.

“What else do you want to know?” Cayden asks.

“I have people to take care of. I need more of the elixir you gave me and a steady supply of food going back to Aestilian. I won’t leave my people to starve.”

“Aestilian?”

“It’s my kingdom.” I leave it at that. He doesn’t need any more information other than the need for food and the name. “That has to be taken care of before the heist.”

“Plan on dying in Imirath?”

“If I do, then I promise to drag you down with me,” I say while flashing a smile.

He fights back a smirk, “I can guarantee the elixir, but Eagor controls the food supply. I’ll talk to him about it, but it won’t be a problem. What else?” The elixir alone is a good enough bandage for now, it’s more than what I had before I left home this afternoon.

“It’s about the dragon bond.” A tingling sensation pokes at my palms; I never talk about the bond. Cayden’s eyes spark in a mixture of curiosity and fascination. “I left Imirath when I was ten and haven’t seen the dragons in fourteen years. We’re going to need to read up on the dragons and how the bond may have weakened over the years before going into Imirath. It hasn’t broken, but it’s not as strong as it used to be,” I state.

“Hm,” he contemplates for a moment, “do you know where the texts are?”

“The Cult of the Goddess of Fire has them, they use the scripture in their ceremonies. But it’s in an ancient language, I don’t know how to read it,” I confess. I’ve looked for ciphers, translations, anything to help me decipher the words. I snuck into their camp one night to get a look at the text myself, but not a single archive I’ve been in has had anything to help me understand the language.

“We can talk about the rest on the way,” he declares while walking over to my horse, beginning to untie the reins from around the tree.

I let out a short laugh, “I didn’t mean I would go with you. I’ll take people from Aestilian.” People I can trust.

“There’s no point,” he says while walking my horse over to me. “I want you in Vareveth within a week, and I’m here right now. We’ll be working together for months, if not years to come, so we may as well start now.”

Gods.

I hate that he makes sense.

But this is still so sudden.

“Forgive me, but if I had parents, I’m sure they would tell me to not go traipsing around forests with complete strangers,” I argue.

“You’re no use to me dead,” he states while reaching for the hilt of his broadsword and pulling the sharp silver blade free. I move to inch back, but he sets his sword horizontally in front of him, laying the long blade flat against his open palms. “Elowen Atarah, Queen of Aestilian and Princess of Imirath. I, Cayden Veles, Commander of the Vareveth Army, vow from this day until my last to protect you from harm.” His eyes briefly glance down to my parted lips before making their way up to my wide brown eyes. “Your enemies are my enemies. My sword is yours,” he finishes, sheathing his sword and waiting for me to answer.

My throat tightens as I soak in his vow. I can’t trust him, I don’t like him, but I can work with him. He needs me to accomplish his goals just as much as I need him to accomplish mine. It’s a codependent, vengeance-based alliance, but it’s still an alliance.

I’ll have a steady food supply for Aestilian.

I’ll have a chance to get my dragons.

I’ll have a chance to stand against Imirath.

It’s everything I never allowed myself to dream about.

I reach down to my thigh guards and take out two long knives, holding them in both of my upturned palms. “Cayden Veles, Commander of the Vareveth Army. I, Elowen Atarah, Queen of Aestilian and Princess of Imirath, vow to fight beside you in the upcoming war as a true ally. My knives and dragon fire are yours,” I vow before tucking the twin blades back into their sheaths without removing my gaze from his.

Our breath mingles in the space between us, but we say nothing. The only sounds to be heard are the rushing current of the Fintan, owls hooting in the distance, and the rustle of leaves being carried by the wind. I wonder if he’s thinking the same thing as me. How in this world are two people that haven’t had a good interaction yet, going to work together to pull off the most complex heist in the known history of this world?

“A book is easier than dragons. Consider this practice, soldier.” I use the nickname again before turning my back on him and swinging myself onto my horse.

CHAPTER

SIX



“You say you’re a man of your word, and yet you’ll lie to your king on behalf of the heist,” I tsk. “Doesn’t seem very logical to me.”

I watch him roll his eyes from the corner of mine as he rides next to me, “You mistake my word to coincide with being morally sound, Elowen. I never gave Eagor my word that I would never go on a heist; I gave him my word I would do what’s best for Vareveth. I believe getting the dragons out of Imirath and aligning myself with the one person who can control them is the best option for us.”

I hate his logic because it sounds similar to the way I think. It’s the same thing I tell myself whenever I gather information and release it on my own terms—it’s not lying if you’re not saying anything.

“Before we get too close, what else do we need to discuss?” he asks while slowing his horse down. All the religious cults travel by the phases of the moon so they don’t accidentally run into each other. There’s bad blood between all of them. Their rivalries reflect whatever rivalries the gods had.

“Where do you want to meet me before we ride to Vareveth?” I begin. “I assume we’ll be traveling into your kingdom together considering I would have to pass through Feynadra or Urasos.”

“I’ll escort you directly from Aestilian with several of my best soldiers,” he states as if it’s the most obvious thing.

“No,” I shoot out.

“No?” he questions, dumbfounded.

“Yes,” I agree.

“So, yes?”

“No! You’re not coming to Aestilian.”

“Elowen,” he starts while pinching the bridge of his straight nose. The sound of my name on his lips—I can’t tell if it’s unfamiliar or if it feels like he’s spoken it hundreds of times rather than a handful. Nobody outside of Aestilian has spoken my name since I left Imirath. Outside the safety of my borders, I’ve always given people the first name that pops into my head. “I vowed to protect you, and that includes your people.”

Yes, but when his vow stops benefiting him, he’ll find a way out of it.

Just as I will.

“Some of my people come from Vareveth, they made it safely to Aestilian, and I won’t harm their mental states further by bringing in a reminder of where they fled after I vowed to protect them. I have vows too, Cayden, and I won’t go back on them just because it’s inconvenient for you,” I snarl.

Cayden grinds his teeth and grips his reins tighter, “Will you at least tell me where it is?”

“Not a chance,” I state. He rubs a hand over his sharp jawline and looks like he wants to challenge me but doesn’t.

“Do you know where the temple ruins for the God of Earth are?” he asks. Knowing where the temples are is vital to surviving a night in the Terrwyn or Sweven Forest. I nod in confirmation. “My soldiers and I will meet you there.”

It’s close to Aestilian; it’s the temple closest to the tavern where we met. Which means it’ll be a fairly short ride. I want to argue with him to choose a temple further away from Aestilian, but I don’t want to raise suspicion.

This is also the first of many battles between the war of our clashing personalities.

Compromising sucks.

“Fine,” I resign. “You said you want to be in Vareveth within the week?”

“I’ll move my soldiers to the temple tomorrow morning. Come on whatever day you wish before the week is over. My soldiers will serve as your guards while you’re in Vareveth and anywhere else we go, so you don’t have to trouble yourself with assembling a group to come with you.” His eyes rest heavily on my profile, and I twist my head to meet his gaze. The relief I feel is locked away, far from any emotion he could gage from me. Leaving Aestilian is something I want, but I won’t assume anyone else wants to ride headfirst into war and political conflict. The only one I can

guarantee is Finnian and probably Ailliard. Ailliard will be annoyed, but I highly doubt he'll stay in Aestilian if I'm not there. He'll be an awful grump, but he'll be there. I'll need him to attend political meetings.

Still, I ask, "Why should I trust that your soldiers will protect me?"

"Because I will personally punish those that defy my orders." He gives me a pointed look, which translates to *nobody wants to be on the receiving end of his wrath*. "You're the only person standing between my army being burned alive if the dragon link dies with you or transfers to someone else in your bloodline—and I have no intention of dying before I see this war through." A scowl mars his face, and he looks like a man hellbent on revenge. I wonder what's motivating him so much. I would ask, but I don't want him prodding into my reasons either. We can have a truce in silence. If I know his reasons, he'll seem more...human. I don't want to know him like that.

I tear my eyes away from him and face forward again; a slight tremor travels through my hands—the image of his scowl is burned into my brain. If Finnian thinks my resting face is intimidating, then Cayden's is murderous. What an inviting pair we make. Maybe we can find some common ground considering we both hate the same person. But even imagining finding common ground with Cayden feels like reaching my hand into complete darkness, unaware of what I'm supposed to be holding.

We're allies of some sort, not friends.

"I won't enter Vareveth before signing a formal agreement. I know the alliance papers can't be drawn up on such short notice, but I want our vows written and signed with witnesses," I say. The sound of drums floats our way from beyond the stretch of my vision. Leather slides against leather as we drop to the forest floor beside each other. I jump back when his arm brushes against mine. Physical touch is something I like to see coming, if I'm in the mood for it, but I'm shocked when he also quickly takes a step away from me.

Another truce to share in silence.

"My word is as good as a blood oath, but I'll give you your fancy paper and signatures if that's what you wish, Queen Elowen." The easy arrogance infiltrates his tone again, covering up what just transpired between us. For once, I'm thankful for it. I still want to punch him, though.

I let out a humorous laugh while crossing my arms over my chest, "I would be a fool to take your word at face value, soldier. You either prove it

to me, or I'm out."

"You're out?" he quirks a brow.

"I've lived as a ghost for fourteen years; I can easily slip back into the shadows. You'll never hear of me or see me again."

"As I told you before, I will find you in any corner of this world." He takes a step forward, eyes blazing with unrelenting promise and challenge.

"Don't let it come to pass, and you'll never have to fail." I tilt my chin up, not backing down. "Does arrogance taint every word you speak?"

"It's not arrogance when I always follow through. Besides," his eyes dance over my face, "you won't leave."

"Your presence is quite insufferable," I challenge, taking a step closer to him. We're a breath away from being chest to chest. "That's enough motivation to run."

"Yes, and you're just a ray of sunshine, angel," he shakes his head. "You won't leave because I can see on your face that you want revenge just as badly as I do. You want your dragons, and I'm the only person willing to help you get them." I force my lip not to curl at the mention of him helping me. I hate asking for or receiving help. I'd rather suffer in silence. It makes me feel like a burden, but with Cayden, it makes me feel inadequate.

"You may be the only person that can help me, but I'm also the only person that can help you," I state. Our faces are merely a few inches apart, neither of us retreat.

"You're not the only person that can *help me*," he bites out the last two words. Clearly, he's also not fond of help. "You're the only one that's worth it."

His words steal whatever retort I mentally prepared, and I become acutely aware of just how close he is to me. I fight the urge to step away from him and stay rooted in place. I don't have it in me to retreat with grace; I relish in my stubbornness. We stay like this, face to face; the only sounds to be heard over the roar of my pulse are our mingling breaths and the distant drums. He takes a slow step back after lingering in front of me for a few prolonged seconds, keeping his eyes on me.

"Do you remember what the book looks like?" he asks.

"Yes," I confirm. "But I told you that I don't know how to translate it."

He waves a dismissive hand through the air before tying the reins of his horse around a tree trunk. "My head of intelligence can find a way."

One of the three others that will know about the heist. Saskia, he said her name is. It's a foreign feeling to hand off work to someone else; usually, I'll fuel myself with caffeine and find a way to figure out whatever I must. But, if she's the head of intelligence, then she probably has skills that I don't—ways to decipher details that take years of thoughtful tuning. I would only be crippling the mission by keeping the book to myself. The sense of failure that swarms my emotions makes me want to scream.

"They keep the book with the high priestess. They only use it at the beginning of their rituals, so the book should be in her tent by now," I say to distract myself from my raging emotions. "Oh, and let's try not to kill anyone." Cayden falls into step beside me as we walk in the direction of the drums.

"I won't unless I have to," he mutters. I *almost* snicker but keep it to myself. "Do you have any qualms with punching? How about kneeing? I know you enjoy kneeing."

"My only qualm is you," I say while giving him a cutting stare.

"Ah, but you have to think of me in order to dislike me," he whispers as we make our way to the edge of the camp. Tattered tents peak between the trees, and flickers from a large bonfire illuminate the dark forest. Around fifty people, maybe more, surround the bonfire in a large circle.

Leaning over, I inch my face closer to his, but I'm careful not to touch him after noticing how he also reacts to unprompted touch. "Murderous, blood-drenched thoughts," I whisper before sinking to my knees beside him and pulling back some branches of a thick bush.

"My favorite kind," he winks at me and turns his head, mirroring my actions and scanning the camp.

The high priestess stands on a large rock, elevating her above the rest of the crowd. She chants a prayer in an ancient language while holding a chalice above her head. Her red robes slide down her arms and bunch around her shoulders before she drops them and splashes something into the fire, sending the flames blazing high into the sky, taller than any fire I've ever seen. The scent of burning embers mixed with incense filters our way. She holds her upturned palms to the sky while bowing her head toward the flames.

"Goddess, hear us!" she shouts as embers begin to crackle at the base of the fire. I lean further into the bush, eager to get a closer look at what's happening.

I jolt back when a blinding orange light illuminates the fire and smack a hand over my mouth to muffle a shriek. My eyes stay glued to the flames, something is forming in there; I can see it from here. It looks like...a flapping wing. The priestess raises her voice in a powerful scream, and the rest of the cult sits back on their heels, eyes drawn to the sky. A flame shoots upward, followed by four others. The flames morphed into the image of five small dragons. Their fire-filled bodies flap around the bonfire, circling high over the prayer circle.

"That tent has the triple flame symbol, none of the others do," Cayden says beside me.

"Okay," I reply, still looking at the sky. I know we need to move, but I can't look away from the magnificent display of red and orange figures the priestess conjured.

"We should move quickly; I don't know how much longer this ceremony is going to last," he adds. My eyes drift away from the flames and follow his finger. Sure enough, at the center of the other tents stands the tent of the high priestess.

I get to my feet and follow him along the shadowed tree line. Cayden unsheathes the broadsword from his back and my fingers close around the handles of twin daggers. We continue our path in the shadows until we're directly behind the cluster of tents. I can't see the ritual as clear from here, only bits and pieces of it from between the cluster of tents. They aren't organized in neat lines; it's more like a mixture of tattered linen wherever people decided to set up their shelter.

We break the tree line with steps so light I can't even hear them pat against the grass. I press my back into the first tent we come upon, and the reality of what I'm doing finally sets in. I feel the pressure of hysterical laughter building in my chest as I stand side by side with Cayden. I'm stealing a book I can't even read, with information about dragon links, with someone I don't even trust. I press my lips together so I don't crack at the absurdity of it all. Cayden gestures for me to follow after he's sure the coast is clear. We keep this pattern, each of us taking turns to listen before advancing further into the camp. It seems like every inhabitant is at the ritual.

We come upon the back of the priestess's tent and slip inside after Cayden peeks through the flaps. It's darker than I anticipated; the decent size space is only illuminated by a few candles. A floor bed lays at the

center of the tent, topped with linen and wool blankets. That's the only real piece of furniture in here, other than the prayer table by the entrance and a few trunks strewn throughout the area.

"Keep watch," I command while hurrying over to the display. I remember the title from the last time I snuck in here, *The Flames of the Dragon*. It was the only thing I could translate... mainly because there was a picture of flames and a dragon on the cover.

I should be a scholar.

Cayden uses his index finger to peer out the front of the tent. I flip the book on the table shut, careful not to disturb any of her crystals or incense.

It's the wrong book.

I whip around, taking in the space again—the trunks. It must be in one of those.

"Everything okay?" Cayden asks from the entrance.

"Just peachy." I kneel in front of the first trunk. "Fucking gods," I mutter while gripping the iron lock in my fingers. My hand reaches for the smallest knife on my calf and insert it into the keyhole, twisting and prodding until I hear the click. I slip the lock from the hinge and swing the trunk open—more crystals. I groan, swinging the trunk shut and locking it again. I move on to the next one, repeating the same motions. I slip the lock off and swing the trunk open...books!

"The ritual is over. I'm starting to see people," Cayden states.

"The book on the table isn't the book we need," I shoot out while holding a candle closer to the neatly lined books. "You're sure Saskia can translate it?" I ask while hooking my index finger on *The Flames of the Dragon* and placing it on the floor next to me before locking the trunk again.

"If anyone can, she can," Cayden confirms while hurrying over to me, grabbing the book from the floor, wrapping his arm around my back, and bringing me to my feet. He urges me toward the back of the tent, "Run!"

Shoving the tent flaps open, we sprint into the night. The crisp air burns my throat. We cut sharp corners and make our way to the safety of the shadows. We're just about to cross into the tree line when I stop dead in my tracks. Cayden flies past me, not realizing I've stopped.

"Elowen Atarah," the wind whispers my name. Goosebumps rise on my skin.

“What are you doing?” Cayden looks back at me like I’m insane while taking a few steps toward me, drawing his sword, and staring beyond me.

“Queen of Flames,” the same cool voice drifts my way. Cayden’s head snaps in my direction, and I know he hears it too. I turn in place and face the camp again. Members of the cult stand by their tents, heads bowed, while the high priestess walks in front of them. My senses are telling me to turn around and bolt, but my mind forces me to stay in place. She knows who I am, and it seems like she has something to say.

“If any of you touch her, you die,” Cayden declares while stretching his broadsword in front of me, “and I promise to make it painful.” I’m taken back by the defensiveness of his tone. I look over at him and find a menacing scowl claiming his features, banishing the cool arrogance I’m accustomed to. I unsheathe my knives again, sharpening my senses and zoning in on my targets as I always do before a fight.

“We won’t harm her.” The high priestess continues her slow walk to close the distance between us. Her hood covers her face, so I’m unable to make out her features. “I saw you in the fire.”

“She saw us stealing a book in the fire?” I ask Cayden from the corner of my mouth.

“Top tier security,” he mutters back. I may not be a believer, but something about a high priestess watching me steal something through a vision just seems blasphemous. She stops a few feet in front of us, keeping the hood pulled over her eyes.

“The Dragon Queen reborn from the ashes. I have waited a long time to meet you,” she says while reaching into the pocket of her robes. Cayden shifts closer to me, angling his body in a more defensive position.

The high priestess holds up an amulet by a gold chain; it’s beautiful. A diamond-shaped ruby dangles at the bottom with gold branches jutting out and tangling together, making an even larger diamond shape. “Hold out your hand,” she instructs.

“I couldn’t,” I say, feeling guilty for stealing a book from her. The crowd standing along the edge of the camp is also unnerving, but at least they’ve pulled their hoods back; seeing actual human faces makes the situation slightly less eerie.

“It was made for you.” She takes another step closer. I sheath a dagger and reach my hand out to lower Cayden’s sword. He complies but keeps it at the ready should anything change. “It is vital,” she adds.

“Vital in what way?” I reach my hand out, and she gently sets the amulet in my palm.

“When you’re ready, you’ll be able to put it on. Let it guide you,” she answers. I wait for her to continue, but she doesn’t.

“Ready?” I scrunch my brows together and waver uneasily on my feet. “What if I put it on before I’m...ready?”

“The fire your soul was forged in will reclaim you, and to dust, you shall return.”

Oh, *just* death. Why would it be anything less than that? The amulet feels heavy in my hand. Cayden reaches over to take it from me, safely tucking it into his pocket.

“Thank you for the death jewelry, but we really must be on our way,” Cayden states, guiding my stunned body away from the high priestess.

My heavy steps crunch the strewn about twigs and leaves as we finally cross the tree line. Over my shoulder, I hear her say, “Make them fear the flames of a queen.” She pauses for a moment, “We will meet again, Queen of Fire.”

I step away from Cayden and tuck my arms around me as we walk further away from the camp. The more distance we put between ourselves and the priestess, the better I feel.

“Maybe she’ll give me a soul-burning ring next time. I’d really like to be wearing a matching set when I meet my maker,” I remark.

“Are you a fan of matching sets, angel?” Judging by his tone, we’ve moved on from talking about jewelry.

“Yes,” I say and turn my face just enough to see his eyes shimmer in surprise before surging forward to untie my horse. “I adore them.”

Cayden clears his throat behind me, and a smirk rises on my lips. “We should each take one thing. I’ll keep the amulet,” he states.

“Why are you voluntarily taking the death jewelry? The reaper rock? Oh!” I clap my hands together in front of me, “the assassination amulet!”

Cayden blinks slowly while holding the book tightly to his side. He reaches up to run his free hand over his face, but not before I see the corners of his mouth turn upward. When he drops his hand, his face is blank again.

Ha! He thinks I’m funny.

“I’m taking *the assassination amulet* because I don’t want to scour the continent for you and find a pile of ashes,” he says, stepping forward to hand me the book. I don’t argue for him to change his mind and hand me

the amulet. It gives me the creeps. I wouldn't be a pile of ashes because Finnian would put me in a pretty box and place me on a bookshelf, surrounded by all my favorites. It would be like an altar with offerings. I tuck the book into my saddle bag and place my foot in the stirrup to swing myself up. "You truly won't let me escort you home?"

"Careful, soldier. You're beginning to sound like you'll miss me." I nudge my horse in the side, signaling him to start moving.

"Not likely," Cayden calls out behind me. I don't turn around, just raise my middle finger in the air high enough for him to see.

CHAPTER SEVEN



The sound of the crackling fire mixes with my feet pattering against the floor as I pace the living room. I peeked into Finnian's room last night, eager to talk to him, but his snores had already infiltrated the space. He didn't stir when I propped him on his side, bordering him with pillows just in case he drank too much. I didn't feel right leaving him considering I didn't know how much he drank, so I slept on his floor, and my back is paying the price.

I soaked in a hot bath an hour ago, but the mixture of floorboards and riding has given me the aches of an eighty-year-old. I'm so on edge I barely register getting dressed. Do I even match? I look down and take in my red tunic, brown waist corset, and brown leggings. It's the standard outfit I wear when I know I won't be leaving our borders. In the summer, I prefer dresses, but it's too cold for them now.

"I see the pillow!" Finnian exclaims. My heart lodges in my throat when I hear his door crack open, and my hands immediately reach for the ends of my hair, twirling them between my fingers. "Darling, how many times have I told you, though I love you, you don't have to sleep on my—" Finnian's footsteps halt when he gets to the end of the hall. "What happened?" he asks, taking in my nervous state. I build up the courage to turn toward him, but his bright blue eyes fixate on the elixir and book I placed on the coffee table. "You went somewhere last night?"

I clasp my clammy hands in front of me, "Just let me explain." He doesn't say anything, doesn't even look at me, just walks across the room to sit on the soft leather couch. He places his elbows on his knees and props his chin on his fists while staring down at the items. "I met the Commander

of Vareveth last night,” I continue. He covers his face with his hands, and my heart clenches in my chest. “I made a deal with him.”

His hands drop away from his face, and he finally looks at me, porcelain cheeks flushed more than usual and wide wild eyes. “Elowen, tell me you didn’t! Tell me this is a prank, and you spent the night in your room.”

He knows I can’t. The evidence of my nighttime endeavors is displayed in front of him.

“You and I both know Aestilian can’t stay hidden forever. We’re already several times larger than I ever imagined. I needed to find a solution for the food shortage, and Cayden offered one,” I desperately try to reason with him. I need to talk to Ailliard after this, and it’ll be much easier if I have Finnian on my side.

He wrinkles his button nose before leaning his head against the back of the couch, letting out a deep sigh, “Tell me everything. Starting from the moment you left here.”

The crease between his brows eases as I rattle off more details. I inform him of what transpired in the attic, meeting Cayden in the forest, participating in the war, the cult, the creepy amulet, the dragon book—though, I tell him that’s because we want to make sure the link doesn’t pass within my bloodline. I tell him everything other than the heist. I’ll tell him about it, but not right now. Though he’s much calmer, I worry that he’ll blow up if I fan the flames of his temper. No concrete plans about the dragons have been discussed. There’s no point in telling him about the heist when I have no information to offer when he inevitably asks questions.

I don’t keep things from Finnian; I just think there’s a time and place of when to reveal things, and now isn’t that time. If he directly asks me if I’m doing anything to get the dragons back, I won’t lie to him. But, as of right now, I just want to find the right time. It’s not easy adjusting to the world when you’ve hidden from it for so long, and I want to make the transition as easy as possible for him—if he chooses to come.

Finnian’s leg bounces up and down, pursing his pale pink lips while leaning forward. His expression is unreadable; he’s void of any hints about what’s going on in his head, “You deserve a life where you don’t have to constantly stick your neck out.”

“I’m not,” I murmur.

“You are,” he sighs.

“You don’t have to come to Vareveth. I promise I won’t be upset if you choose to stay here. I got myself into this deal, I know exactly what I agreed to.” I won’t force him, make him feel guilty, or look at him any differently if he chooses not to come. I’ll miss him terribly, but his happiness and safety mean more to me than any alliance ever could. “But I will really appreciate it if you support me when I break the news to Ailliard,” I add.

He looks at me as if I’ve grown three heads, “Of course, I’ll support you. You know that this outburst is reserved only for you. I don’t disapprove of the alliance. I actually think it’s a good move; I just wish you weren’t the person that Vareveth wants.”

I snicker, “It’s strange they want me, isn’t it?” After years of the world believing I either died or vaporized into thin air, one person changed that narrative.

“No, it would be strange if they *didn’t* want you. But I think it’s less of *them* and more of *him*.” I open my mouth to shoot his statement down, but he holds his hand up, silencing me, “Why did you lie to me? I would have gone with you. You’ve told me you wanted an opportunity like this for years.” An opportunity to get revenge and an opportunity to benefit Aestilian.

“I didn’t know if Cayden would ambush me, and I didn’t want to drag you down with me. I wanted to know that you were safe if something happened to me,” I confess.

“Fucking gods, you make it so hard to be upset with you,” he whines.

“It’s my natural charm,” I wink at him.

He pauses, “You really held a knife to the Commander of Vareveth’s neck?” A smile teases at the corner of his lips as he rises from the couch and crosses the room to stand in front of me.

“Yes,” a smile teases my own lips as I recall the moment, the brief look of surprise before he covered it up.

“That’s my girl,” Finnian says while wrapping his arms around me and bringing me into his chest. His heart is pounding against his ribs. “I’m coming with you.”

“You don’t have—”

“It’s not up for discussion,” he cuts me off, but I don’t miss the nerves in his tone. “You know you always have me, witty remarks, arrows in necks, the whole package.” I don’t respond because emotion clogs my

throat; I just hug him tighter. We stay like this, locked together in silence until I calm myself down and ease out of his arms.

“Let’s hope Ailliard takes it well,” I mutter while shoving my feet into my brown leather boots. My black boots are still soaked from the past two days.

“He’ll get over it,” he sighs while tying a dark blue cloak around his neck.

Finnian shuts the door behind us, and we begin our walk to the guard house. The town is alive, as it always is when the sun comes up. The shutters that were closed last night are now wide open. Familiar faces are hanging laundry or picking the last herbs of the season from their window beds. The amount of progress we made in the past fourteen years still shocks me sometimes. Aestilian wasn’t even Aestilian when I first came here. It was just a valley my guards deemed substantial enough to build a long-lasting structure. But now, there’s so much more to Aestilian than just one structure. It’s a small kingdom, but a kingdom in its own right. There are houses and shops made of dark wood with peaked roofs. Built with iron and resilience by the hands of myself and my people. There is now vibrancy where there once wasn’t any life. I smile and wave at anyone I pass on the street, greeting them by their first names.

“Do you have a plan?” Finnian asks beside me.

“I believe the tactic of improvising is one of my greatest weapons.” I lightly shove him after he scoffs, stumbling to the side and exasperatedly throwing his hands in the air before falling into step with me again. The truth is that I have a very vague, extremely cloudy, sort of semblance of a plan. Which is to tell Ailliard and brace for the second freakout of the day.

I should have had another cup of coffee.

Walking the path to the guard house doesn’t bring me the same kind of peace as it used to. The past few months, years even, have been plagued with an overwhelming sense of anxiety brought on by the rising tension on the continent as well as our rising population and dwindling food supply. I haven’t been able to be as mentally present as I used to be. I always do my job, healing or bleeding alongside everyone else, but how can it be enough when I have factors I can’t control weighing on me every day?

The guard house is the largest building in Aestilian, followed by the orphanage. It’s constantly being expanded upon; you can tell by the mismatched wood that makes up the structure. Some pieces are more sun-

bleached and weather-worn than others. Mismatched shutters border imperfect window cutouts, but somehow it makes it feel more like home. Aestilian is a home, but it just hasn't felt like my home in the past few years. It feels wrong to want more, but ambition shouldn't be frowned upon; it should be encouraged.

I'm a few steps into the building when I hear a loud thump, followed by a curse. I spin on my heels to face my best friend, who's now rubbing a hand on his reddened forehead. "How do you manage to hit your head every time we come here?"

"I don't hit it every time," Finnian argues. I scoff and roll my eyes because he does hit his head every time, on the exact same beam. "Not all of us can be under six-foot."

I would stay and bicker with him further, but Ailliard's office is close, and I don't want to put this off any longer. After turning a few more corners, I raise my fist to the door of his office.

"I could hear the two of you from the second you walked into the building," a raspy voice says through the wood before my fist can make contact.

"How does he always do that?" Finnian bends down to whisper in my ear.

"Maybe he's a wizard," I whisper back. "Or maybe he heard your head smacking into a doorway," I tease while pushing the door open and slipping into the office before Finnian can say anything else.

Ailliard turns away from the window and gestures for us to take a seat in the two chairs he keeps in front of his desk. He may be a blood relative, but the resemblance between us is slim to none. His sky blue eyes are a stark contrast to my honey brown. He shaved his head a few years ago when he told me he was tired of watching his hair fall out, but a thick gray beard hugs his jawline. The office is cluttered, but that's mostly because I handed off the ledgers after I was done going through them. His desk takes up most of the room, but cabinets filled with guard reports, financial records, population records, crop records, etc., line the walls.

"How was the raid?" Finnian asks, sinking into the seat beside me, probably knowing I need a minute to gather myself.

"We've had better," Ailliard sighs, taking a seat behind his desk. "How was the midnight ride?" Either of us could answer the question, but I know it's directed at me. Ailliard stopped getting mad at me for leaving Aestilian

a few years ago. Not because he enjoys the idea of me leaving, but because he knows he can't stop me.

"It was," I take a moment to weigh my next word, "informative."

"Informative?" Ailliard's gray brows shoot up, deepening the wrinkles on his forehead. "Please, enlighten me."

Instead of twiddling with the ends of my hair, my clammy fingers grip the teardrop-shaped moonstone pendant I wear daily, moving it back and forth on the chain a few times before dropping them into my lap again. "Did you get the guard report I left on your desk?" I ask.

"The one about Vareveth soldiers crossing the Fintan?" Ailliard inquires.

"That would be the one," Finnian answers for me.

"Finnian and I rode to the tavern they were at. I wanted to spy on them." My nerves may be causing an earthquake inside my bones, but my even tone reveals nothing.

"Spy on them?" Ailliard echoes. "Elowen, you are aware of the tension between Vareveth and Imirath, yes?" My anxiety slowly morphs into irritation when the slight hint of patronization enters his tone. I can ignore a lot of things but being spoken down to is not one of them.

"No, actually. It seems I'm the only person on the continent blissfully unaware that my father is a war-mongering bitch." He opens his mouth to speak, but I hold my hand up to silence him; the words die on his tongue, and his nostrils flare. "It's *because* of the tension that I wanted to find out why they're here," I add.

"Did you?" his cheeks redden in anger.

"Yes," I answer, squaring my shoulders and leaning back in the chair. "I've made a deal with the Commander of Vareveth, Cayden Veles."

"A deal with the Commander of Vareveth." Ailliard scrubs his hands over his face before laying them flat on his desk, taking in several breaths. "We can still get out of this. You don't have to adhere to the terms."

"I will not be going back on my word," I state. I made a vow and I intend to keep it, even if Cayden was the only one to witness it.

"Elowen, please see reason," Ailliard pleads.

"You don't have to agree with my choices, but you will respect my decision," I hiss through a clenched jaw.

"You didn't make a deal. You bartered your soul away," he shakes his head.

I let out a mocking laugh, “I bartered my soul for a blade many years ago, and I have no regrets.”

“What’s the deal?” The heel of his boot taps nervously against the floor.

I take slight pity on him. Ailliard was the one that broke into my cell and got me out of Imirath. He swaddled my small frame in blankets and rode into the Etril Forest, one of the most dangerous places on the continent due to the freezing temperatures. I can’t imagine how much worse the abuse would have gotten after the dragons burned my mother alive. Not because Garrick loved my mother, Queen Isira, but because I burned his queen in his castle. He’s a man obsessed with power but couldn’t protect her in the one place he’s supposed to have absolute power. Ailliard never forgave Garrick for putting Isira in harm’s way; he used to be close with her. Ailliard lost a sister that night, but I gained freedom through death, and I don’t know what that says about my life.

“Vareveth will provide Aestilian with food. Commander Veles gave me an elixir to enable crop growth in rocky soil, and Vareveth will supply us with crops through the winter,” I say.

“What do they get?” Ailliard asks tightly.

“I will travel to Vareveth with Commander Veles after signing a protection agreement prior to the formal alliance treaty. King Eager believes my presence in Vareveth will have a positive influence on swaying other kingdoms to align with them. I will also be staying for the war between Imirath and Vareveth.” My eyes cut to Finnian, and he subtly nods in encouragement which helps.

Ailliard’s eyes are glued to the wall next to us. My heart beats in tandem with his foot vigorously tapping against the floor. “I’ve wanted you to give up the idea of revenge since you were a child,” he sighs, sounding defeated.

I grip the sides of my chair so tightly my knuckles turn white. “Instead of chastising me for seeking revenge, perhaps you should lament over why I seek it.” The sound of a cane slapping against my skin echoes in my mind, the sound of chains rattling against the floor while my wrists were shackled, the sharp pangs of hunger that twisted my insides until I cried, the fresh sting of a slap delivered by a fully grown soldier to my seven-year-old face.

The humiliation.

The degradation.

The shame.

It all rushes back to me. I blink my eyes rapidly and drop them to my lap. Finnian shifts in his chair and stretches his hand across the space between us, waiting for me to grasp it. But I shake my head no. I can't. When those memories resurge, it's hard to find comfort in physical touch. I feel like the clothes on me are too tight. I feel like everything about me is wrong. Physical touch is something I had to learn to view in a positive light, and I still battle with it sometimes.

"We can organize more raids—" Ailliard tries to change the subject.

"We don't need more raids; we need a long-term solution," I cut him off, lifting my eyes from my lap after locking down the memories. "What happens when people here begin to have children and their children leave? What happens if someone decides to send a patrol into the Seren Mountains?" I slowly rise and place my hands on his desk. "What happens if someone learns how to navigate the mist? What happens when winter comes and the snow is too thick to even send raids out? What happens when my people start dying and there's not a single fucking thing we can do? Do you want to help people bury their loved ones knowing that we could have done something to prevent it?" I stare down my nose at him. My chest is heaving, and my blood is pumping in my ears by the time I finish.

"Elowen," Ailliard sounds slightly remorseful, but his eyes are still lit with anger. "I just want to make sure you know what you're going up against. Your father is not a threat to be taken lightly."

"Neither am I," I darkly state.

Finnian rises from his chair behind me, "I stand with Elowen in this decision. I'm going to Vareveth with her not only because she's my best friend, but she's also my queen. I'm aware your emotions come from a place of caring, as did mine when she first told me, but I suggest the next time you speak to her on this matter, you convey your feelings with more respect." Finnian places a hand on my shoulder, easing me away from the desk. He continues speaking after I'm standing upright, "Take the day to cool off."

Finnian gently tugs on my shoulder in an attempt to move me from where I stand rooted in place. I dig my nails into my palms and say my parting words to my uncle, "You can either stand against the tide or let it drag you under. I've made my decision, make yours."

This time, I don't resist Finnian's tug. He guides me outside the office and slams the door shut behind us. We walk in silence out of the guard

house and over to the target field. Hay bales are lined up, evenly spaced out, with targets tied onto them. I need to focus on something other than the emotions raging inside of me, making me want to run into an open field and scream until my throat is raw. I'm only wearing four knives on my thighs today, but I'll make them count. Finnian stands at the target next to me and locks an arrow in his bow. I unsheathe my first knife, closing my eyes and centering myself. The familiar weight of my blade reassures me—this skill is something that can never be taken away from me.

Ailliard gave me my first knife on my eleventh birthday; it was my first birthday in Aestilian and the first one I ever celebrated. On that night, I made a vow to myself with only the stars as my witness that I would never be helpless again. The memory of Garrick's guards screaming at me to tell them how to break my bond with the dragons while they beat me threatens to resurface. They knew I didn't know how, my father was mad, but they didn't care. They just liked the power they had over me.

Never again.

I throw my first knife; it sails through the air and sinks into the center of the target. I drop my shaky hand to my thigh and pull the next knife free, squaring my shoulders and staring down the line toward the knife I just threw.

My eyes drift toward the sky, where the treetops sway in the wind. The first time I ever left the castle walls was the night Ailliard took me from my cell. I never knew what sunlight warming my face felt like. I never knew what it felt like to crane my neck back and spill my secrets to the moon. I never knew what it felt like to spread my arms wide and let rain pour onto me. The only time I got a glimpse of the outside world was when I huddled in the corner of my cell, where a crack between stones gave me a sliver of a hint to what lay beyond the castle.

I throw the next knife.

It lands an inch above the one I previously threw.

Years of dedication have enabled me to throw as well as I do. I've never been a gifted person; any skill I have has required me to spend time learning the craft. But even when everything else feels like a hurricane of chaos, I have my blades to guide me through the storm. I've always pushed myself to be better, to throw one more knife, to be stronger, to get ahead of threats, to outrun my demons.

I throw the next knife.

It lands an inch under the first knife I threw.

I will survive this war just as I've survived everything else. Cayden Veles made a deal with me, but he doesn't need to tell me I'm worth it—I know I am.

I throw the last knife, finishing off the perfect line I created.

My hands have stopped shaking, my breathing is even, and I don't feel the need to scream even though I'm still upset. I see Finnian walking over to me from the corner of my eye.

"Thank you for saying what you did," I say, recalling his final words to Ailliard.

"I hate how he speaks to you when he's upset," he answers.

"I know," I mutter.

"It's not right." I glance at him, and he must see the mixed emotions in my eyes. I know I'm worth an alliance, but I've always struggled with accepting the fact that Ailliard shouldn't speak to me in the way Finnian hates. "It's not," Finnian reaffirms.

I nod, pressing my lips together while facing my target again. I inhale a steady breath, "Ailliard has a flaw in his logic."

"Which flaw are you referring to?"

"The entire time, he just kept worrying about Imirath coming for me," I drag my eyes up and down the perfect line of knives, "but Imirath has no idea what's coming for them."

CHAPTER EIGHT



I should move, but the sun feels too good. After the chaos the past few days have entailed, a slow moment is exactly what I need. We're having one of those random warm days before fully switching over to winter. Finnian left a few hours ago to spend some time working with the town blacksmith, Blade. It's a nickname, but he insists everyone calls him that. A man dedicated to his trade. Blade took Finnian under his wing when he was fifteen, and Finnian has loved the craft ever since. For my eighteenth birthday, Finnian gifted me twin dragon daggers—curved blades with dragon-shaped hilts. For my twentieth birthday, he gifted me a gold crown that resembles tree branches twining together. I would be lying if I said I didn't shed a few tears when I received both gifts.

I look around at my dying garden and feel a pang of sadness—I won't be here for the next bloom. I'm sure Vareveth has gardens, much more extravagant than mine, but nothing that will bring me the same sense of peace. I originally took up gardening because I had to. Growing any kind of seeds that I could get my hands on, berries, vegetables, herbs. Sometimes I would even uproot plants and bring them back here.

Now, I garden because I enjoy it. I still need the food I harvest, but I also grow flowers, and other unsavory plants in the corner of the garden... hemlock, bloodroot, nightshade, and snakeroot, to name a few. I think it's ironic that poisonous plants often grow the prettiest flowers. Always underestimated by onlookers until they feel the deadly sting.

My head is tilted back on the cushioned wicker chair when I hear footsteps approaching, not Finnian's footsteps. They wouldn't be as tentative. "Ailliard," I greet without opening my eyes. It was good to have

the target practice and time to cool off. My anger is still ripe, but I've tucked it into a neat little box and can open it as I please.

His footsteps speed up slightly after I acknowledge him, and the chair beside mine squeaks as he sinks into it. Ailliard isn't a father figure, he's an uncle, but he did help raise me. I've learned to come to terms with the fact he must have known what Garrick ordered. He's never confirmed it, but as a queen's guard, how could he not know what was happening to me in the castle? I've never had the courage to ask him because I don't know how to move on if he confirms it. He knows why I hate Garrick, but he was never present for any of my beatings. I've only told him some of what happened, but that's not because I don't trust him; I just don't like reliving the memories. Talking can't change what happened to me.

"I—" he begins before cutting himself off. I tilt my head forward and glance at him; a crease forms between his brows, and his lips press into a thin line. "I regret the way yesterday went," he finishes.

Don't know what you're talking about. I think it went great, dies on my tongue. I keep my mouth shut; my lips serve as a dungeon to my sarcastic comments. I have two forms of defense other than fighting—sarcasm, and humor.

"It got too heated. I spoke from a place of fear; I let it transform into anger and didn't give you a chance." He drums his fingers against the chair. "If it's alright with you, I would like to try again. To discuss it without lashing out."

Or condescending me like I'm a child, I wish to reply, but don't. "That's fine with me," I agree. I don't tell him it's okay because it isn't. I just want to move on. This isn't a battle that needs to be dragged out.

He blows out a low breath, "Is the Commander of Vareveth blackmailing you in any way? Because if he is—"

"He's not," I shoot out. White hot anger presses against the box I locked it in. With more effort than it should take, I rein it back in. There's just something about Ailliard already forming an opinion of Cayden without him being here to defend himself that annoys me. Cayden may be infuriating, but he was never condescending.

If any of you touch her, you die...and I promise to make it painful.

Oh yes, that creeps back into my mind. The finality and protectiveness in his tone cause goosebumps to rise on my arms. *No*, it must be the wind causing that. Cayden just did the friendly thing. It's the ally thing to do, to

defend each other. It's like giving your neighbor some extra sugar. I shift in my seat, physically forcing his voice out of my mind.

"Okay," Ailliard says slowly. "I just want to make sure you know what you're getting yourself into by leaving Aestilian. Assassins will come. Your father will use all his power to get to you."

"I did not spend years sharpening my skills, only for them to dull with time. Besides, I'll have an army between us. I used to only have a few floors to protect me from him, and we both know how well that turned out," I state in a cold tone. "I may not have all the answers, but I won't sit by and continue to do nothing."

"Elowen," Ailliard blanches, "you think this is nothing?" He spreads his hands wide, gesturing to the town that lies beyond my house. "You've given people a home."

"It's not only me."

"No, but you're the backbone."

I wave my hands through the air, brushing past this subject. "I won't wait for a move to be made on me, which it will, and lose my chance at an advantage. That's what Commander Veles offers me."

"How are you so sure a move will be made on us?" he asks without judgment, just curiosity.

"Power-hungry rulers don't just give up, they focus on the largest threat, and Garrick's largest threat is Vareveth. But, if Vareveth loses the war and Imirath invades—who's to say his focus won't shift to me?"

"What if Garrick gives up because he thinks you're dead?" Ailliard counters.

I shake my head, "A ruler that doesn't think of every possibility is a ruler that won't have a crown for very long. Also, why should I wait to see if he'll make a move when an opportunity for myself to make one is right in front of me?"

"We have the mist to keep us hidden," Ailliard offers.

"You can't guarantee that the mist won't clear one day, and if we figured out how to navigate the mountains, so can someone else."

"You never were the patient type," Ailliard muses. "I've been patient enough. It's not that I don't support you, I just want the best for you, and I want you to be safe."

Only I can define what's best for me.

Right now, that's Vareveth.

“I’m tired of being a bystander in my own life,” I admit as the tension eases between us. “Just because I outgrow something doesn’t mean I love it any less. I love Aestilian, which is why I want to protect it. But I can’t stay here forever, imagining what it would have been like to take a chance on myself.”

“I think I always knew this day would come, even if I didn’t want to admit it to myself. Even when you were a girl, you always had that fire in you,” Ailliard nods his head while stroking his beard. “It’s why I taught you all the dances and protocol of court. Whatever I taught you, there was always a *just in case* at the back of my mind.” A sad smile crosses his face.

“I do appreciate you teaching me all of those things,” I offer him a small smile, and his shoulders loosen at the sight of it. It’s normal for us to butt heads. He has a short fuse, and sometimes I feed into it.

“I never thought I would be going out into the world again.” Ailliard takes place in hunts and raids on occasion, but he never believed he would rejoin society.

“You don’t have to come,” I offer. “Finnian already said he would accompany me, and Commander Veles is handpicking guards for me.”

“I’m coming,” he says, though I note the slight tremor in his voice.

“How about you just ride with me to meet Vareveth? We’re meeting at the God of Earth’s temple.” Guilt from watching Ailliard visibly battle with his nerves makes me want to reach out to him, but I don’t feel comfortable enough to do that.

“No,” he states more definitively. “I brought you out of Imirath, and I’ll be with you when you ride into Vareveth. I’ve watched you become the queen you are, and I’m not missing a moment more. Besides, you’ll need more than Finnian to deal with Vareveth’s advisors while the treaty is drawn up, and I won’t let you get a bad deal. I’ve seen enough treaties drawn up to be able to recognize hidden clauses.”

I hadn’t realized just how tight my shoulders were until they loosen. Ailliard has practically committed our ledgers to memory. I’ll have to focus on the heist, which means spending more time with Cayden and less with King Eagor and Queen Valia. It’s good that Finnian won’t be alone if I can’t attend a meeting with him. He can handle himself, but I’d prefer for him to have backup in case it gets too overwhelming. This is new territory for Finnian and me, but Ailliard knows what it’s like to be in a castle and deal with advisors.

“I won’t lie, I’m relieved you’re coming,” I confess.

The wrinkles by his eyes deepen as he smiles at me, “You’ll be even more relieved to know I acquired some fabric this morning and handed it off to the tailor.”

“Really?” I shoot up from the chair, which causes Ailliard to chuckle. I spend most of my days in armor, leathers, or leggings, but I adore new gowns. Putting on a new, perfectly fitting gown feels like a breath of fresh air or the beginning of a new season. I love the way the skirts flow around me and swish as I walk, how they hug me in the right places. Gowns make me feel a different kind of power.

“It’s why I didn’t come to you sooner,” he laughs. “I only gave her enough fabric for two, but I’ve also set aside money for a wardrobe for both you and Finnian when we get to Vareveth.”

“What about you?” I inquire, my excitement halting for a moment.

He waves his hand through the air while getting to his feet, “The two of you are young. You deserve to indulge.” He outstretches his arms, and even though I’m not in the mood to be touched, I walk into them. It has nothing to do with Ailliard, I’ve moved past our argument; there are just some moments where I would find more comfort in kind parting words than someone wrapping their arms around me.

I step away after a quick squeeze, “Thank you again.” I’ve never had a royal wardrobe. I envision the gems, embroidery, and vibrant shades of fabric it entails.

“She still has your measurements but stop by her shop tomorrow morning to make sure everything is on track,” he says while walking toward the road. “I’m going to grab a pint because I feel old.”

CHAPTER
NINE



Pots and dishes clang together as Nyrinn tries to find the serving dish she insists we use. The past four days have been a whirlwind of packing, organizing a group to escort me to the temple, and drafting a raid schedule and ration plan to ensure everyone will have enough food for the next few months. Part of me was too scared to dream a day like today would come...it's odd to be scared to dream, but they have power. Dreams have the power to guide us out of our darkest moments, offering nothing more than the comfort of hope, but dreams also have the power to break us.

Nyrinn caught me while walking home last night to make plans to see me before I leave. She's always so busy with healing people that I only planned on stopping by, but she pushed back the opening of her shop today so we could spend some time together without shoving needles into people with blood smeared on our foreheads like we usually do. She taught me everything I know about healing and gave me helpful gardening tips whenever she could.

Her shop, along with every other shop and cart in Aestilian, is made of brown wood. But she and I painted her shutters bright yellow to frame her window beds. The scent of lavender and chamomile linger in the breeze whenever you walk past. My favorite part of her shop is the several bouquets of dried herbs and flowers that hang from her ceiling. It makes it feel like an enchanted forest, like I'll catch a fairy flying between the petals. There was always something pretty to look at whenever I was up to my elbows in blood, sticking a needle into flesh.

Nyrinn flicks her short raven braid over her shoulder while setting a tray of pears and berries on the table. The sweet scent of fruit mixes with the

rosemary that wafts through the air. Rosemary and yarrow are the two herbs we use most, and the scent usually lingers on my hands for days, not that I mind.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do without you here,” Nyrinn sighs while taking the chair across from me and popping a berry in her mouth.

I groan, “You know I feel guilty.”

“I’m joking,” she laughs. “I imagine several others are succeeding in their attempt to make you feel that way.” She looks me over with calculating eyes, and the pear juice turns sour in my mouth. “Idiots, the lot of them,” she adds when I don’t respond. Part of the reason I love talking to her is because she’s so unapologetic with her opinions, never failing to supply them. It makes me feel like I can talk without tiptoeing.

“I think everyone got comfortable with the idea of me staying here forever,” I say, not disagreeing with her.

“That’s their own fault. You never chose to come here; you had to come here. It’s your choice if you want to leave. I, for one, am excited to hear about you taking on the courts.” Satisfaction grips me at her words. The news about the alliance spread through Aestilian faster than a plague. I could tell most people were excited about the guaranteed food supply, but I also caught a lingering sense of fear. The Queen of Aestilian must leave Aestilian to keep it safe, it doesn’t make sense, and yet it makes perfect sense.

“Who was it you met in the forest?” Nyrinn asks. “I’ve only heard bits and pieces.”

My throat tightens at the mention of him, “The Commander of Vareveth, Cayden Veles.” I take a sip of tea to relax my throat muscles. “Have you heard anything about him?” It feels weird to talk about Cayden. In some parts of my mind, everything feels like a hallucination. I don’t think it will feel real until I leave tonight.

“Not much,” she purses her lips, emphasizing her cupid’s bow. Nyrinn is the best person to ask about any information I don’t have. She comes off as harsh to some but transforms into something entirely different while healing. “We don’t get a lot of people from Vareveth, as you know. Most come from Feynadra or Urasos,” she frowns while naming the last kingdom; it’s where she’s from. Magic is frowned upon in some kingdoms; some people think that you’re invoking the god’s wrath if you use magic by pretending to be a god. Nyrinn never used magic while healing; she was

just too skilled for her village to wrap their heads around. Even her former fiancé didn't say anything when they banished her. He just went along with everyone else. Ever since then, she's been on a self-imposed man hiatus. Her raven hair reached her hips when she first got here, but I helped her cut it to her shoulders after she told me it was her fiancé's favorite feature she had.

His favorite feature should have been her mind.

She told me his name when she was deep in her cups one night but made me swear not to hurt him. I didn't. But I did go to his house, steal several valuables, and trade them for new healing supplies and some clothes for Nyrinn since she left all her supplies and most of her clothes behind.

"It's fine, I was only curious," I say while placing the mug back on the table.

Recollection clears her features, and anticipation slides through me. "When I was stitching someone's head...maybe a year ago, they were quite talkative. I kept inquiring for more information since I know it helps you out," she winks a dark brown iris in my direction. "They said Commander Veles is...cold, harsh, maybe even reserved. I don't remember the conversation fully because I didn't think it was important. He just seems like the person whose bad side is the last place you want to be."

"Hm," I muse while drumming my fingers on the table. Those aren't the first words I would use to describe him; arrogant, cunning, *handsome*. Thank the gods the mug is back on the table, or else I would have spilled it. I want to smack myself when the last word flashes in my mind. Fine, he's handsome, but he's still so damn annoying. "Did they say if he was cruel or unfair?"

"Not that I recall," she replies, taking a sip from her mug. "Though I imagine a man like that would be to his enemies. Perhaps the two of you have something in common," she points out while getting up from the table. "Let's finish this outside." She doesn't wait for me to rise before slipping out of the back door. Perhaps Cayden and I do have something in common. Would that be so bad? It just makes us a better pair. I stand from the table, ignoring my inner turmoil; it won't kill me to ignore it this once.

Nyrinn is already stretched across one of the patio chairs, her face upturned toward the sun, illuminating her deep brown skin and amplifying the golden hue. The steady rush of the Syssa Falls draws my eyes to the lake. It's where I spend most of my mornings in the summer before

everyone else gets there. I wake up early enough so it's just me and nature, no obligations, no hassle. Finnian and I taught ourselves how to swim by trial and error in that lake. One of us got in the lake while the other stayed on dry land and held the rope that was tied around the swimmer's torso. If we went under for too long, the person on land would use the rope to drag the swimmer to shore. Foolproof. I mean, it got the job done with the bonus of severe rope burn.

"You better not trust their healers or court physicians," Nyrinn remarks while I take a seat on the chair next to her. "I trained you better than any of them."

I laugh softly, "Do you honestly think I would let any of them give me a tonic? I don't even ask you."

"Fair point." She taps a long finger against her cheek, "I wonder when you'll stop feeling guilty for asking for things."

"When I stop having to ask for things," I answer.

She bends forward while giggling and reaches under her chair, "Good thing you didn't have to *ask* for this then." She tosses a dark leather satchel into my lap. My hands pause in the air, and I blink down at the satchel.

"I didn't get you anything," I say slowly, already feeling guilty.

"I didn't want you to. Go on, open it," she prods.

I lower my hands, running my fingers against the supple material, unlacing the string from around the button, and flipping the flap open. My jaw drops when I take in the contents; several fresh herbs, even more dried herbs, new bandages, stitching needles, string, disinfectant, tonics, and salves. My heart sputters at the gesture. A strong sense of appreciation and gratitude weaves inside of me. Her snort of laughter breaks me out of my shocked state.

"Nyrinn," I say while shaking my head, "how did you get all this? You should keep it."

"Absolutely not." She reaches her hand over and encloses it over mine, "I called in a favor with one of the guards, they went out and got it for me two days ago." I can't restrain the broad smile that spreads across my face, but it falls slightly when I realize how much I'll miss her. I would take her with me if she had plans to leave Aestilian, but she has told me before that her shop gives her a sense of pride that nothing else could.

"Which guard?" I ask through the premature feeling of homesickness.

“They’re all in my debt.” The corner of her mouth tilts up, looking very much like a spider watching flies getting tangled in her web. “You should be calling in the favors too. They can be such babies when getting stitched up.”

“Maybe I’ll start when I get back.” There’s no missing the way her smile and eyes dull at my words. She presses her lips together, suddenly looking serious.

“Remember what I said about not trusting their healers. You know more than them,” she states.

I smooth my palms over my thighs, “I don’t think trust is something I’ll find in Vareveth.”

She huffs, “That’s a good mentality to have, keep it. I imagine all courts are the same—they smile at your face and stab you in the back.”

“Well, at least I have new bandages.” I knock my knee into hers, but her eyes have a glossy sheen over them when I glance back at her face. “What’s wrong?”

“You’ll take care of yourself, right? The world,” she cuts herself off to clear her throat, “it’s not a kind place.” Her hardened eyes stare into the distance, but I know she’s not looking at the lake. She’s recalling the events of her past.

“I will, I always do,” I assure her.

She blinks, and her vulnerability disappears just as quickly as it came, “No, you stick out your neck for everyone else and say you’re fine until you’re bleeding puddles on my floor—puddles I’ve had to cover with rugs.”

“I’ll be far away from your pretty floors,” I jest. She reaches over and smacks her palm against the back of my head.

“Don’t get sassy with me. I didn’t train you just for you to bleed out in some foreign kingdom,” she declares while getting to her feet. “Come on, you’ll have to get going soon.” Her throat works on a swallow.

I follow her into the shop, taking one last look around and soaking in every detail I can. The chips in the paint, the tonics in glass vials on top of the fireplace, the half-finished cups of tea on her counter. She halts her footsteps by the front door and slowly turns to face me. I stay quiet, I know this is hard for her, and I want to give her whatever time she needs to formulate whatever she needs to say.

“Never let anyone make you feel guilty for letting yourself choose how you want to live your life,” she blinks her eyes rapidly, “and give those

bastards the hell they deserve.” She reaches behind her to open the door, and I step forward to squeeze her hand, offering as much comfort as I can.

“I will.” She takes her hand from the brass knob to vigorously swipe tears away from her cheeks, hardening her features once again, with much more effort than earlier. “For both of us,” I promise.

She gives me a confident nod as I turn away from her, leaving her shop. The door shuts behind me, but I keep my eyes focused ahead of me. I don’t stray from the path my eyes have on my house; I don’t want to see any more afflicted faces. If I look at them, I’ll try to fix them. I’m sure everyone will be much happier when they see a cart filled with food rolling into Aestilian. I keep that image burned in my mind as I enter my house. I don’t think of anything else while I finish packing my trunk with everything I need. I only remove my satchel when I strip off my sweater and put on my black fighting gear.

I glance around my room, and a knot forms in my throat while I take in the horrendously painted flowers, mountains, moon, and stars I painted when I was bored. My eyes dance toward my reading chair and book wall, which has slightly fewer books because some books are undoubtedly essential. My knuckles graze over the handles of my silver knives that line my thighs, which always bring me a sense of comfort.

“You ready?” Finnian asks in a thick voice behind me. Inhaling a hard breath and lifting my chin, I turn on my heels to face him. He’s wearing his black fighting gear, a bow already strapped across his chest and a sword at his waist. His eyes are misty but filled with strength.

“Always,” I reply, shutting the door to my room behind me. My confidence builds with every step I take toward the front door. “You?”

“Absolutely,” he answers.

I take in all the details of our home while making my way to the door. Our height chart, the playing cards on the coffee table, the various blankets we covered ourselves in when we pulled all-nighters. On the wall beside each other hangs the first knife I ever threw and the first arrow Finnian ever fired that hit the center of a target.

Drawing my eyes away from everything, I whip the front door open and am greeted by the sound of cheers, hundreds of them. The people of Aestilian line the road, clapping and hollering. Some even wave from the upper windows of shops along the main road. A drum sounds in the distance, and my heart beats in tandem with the loud booms. Finnian and I

stand side by side on the porch of our home. He holds his arm out to me, and I loop mine through his.

He leans down to speak over the cheers. "You were the first face I saw when I woke up in Aestilian; let me be the last face you see before you leave," his voice wavers with emotion.

The knot in my throat grows tighter when I remember Finnian first arriving here. I don't know who I would be without him. The first time I ever laughed in my entire life was with Finnian. My home isn't the place we stand in front of; my home is standing beside me with his arm looped through mine.

"Together," I say, giving his bicep a loving squeeze before he guides us down the center of the crowd.

For once in my life, I know I'm doing exactly what I need to do. I'm going exactly where I need to go. I can feel it in my soul. Yes, I want revenge, and I want my dragons; I'll never deny that. The wicked side of me is not a side I can easily suppress. My blades call for payment in blood. But I'm not only doing this for me. I'm doing this for the people that had their worth stripped away from them. The people who have only received hatred at the hand of someone that should have loved them. The people that have been shoved into darkness and clawed their way out with the sheer willpower to survive. Imirath wants me dead, but I still stand. Only now, I stand with knives drawn and a crown on my head.

I wave to my people, reaching my hand out to anyone I pass, and brand this memory into my brain. I keep my hand tight on Finnian's arm until we make our way through the cheering crowd. A few tears slip from my eyes when I mount my horse, but I wipe them away before anyone can see. My horse leads me into the mist, and I don't look back to Aestilian as the cheers fade behind me.

CHAPTER TEN



A twig snaps next to me and I jolt awake, knife in hand. Finnian is beside me with an arrow locked in his bow. Both of us immediately prepared for the threat. But my body sags and my hand falls in my lap as soon as my vision clears, registering the sight of Ailliard standing in front of us with his palms raised.

“Knock next time,” Finnian grumbles before falling onto his back again. He drags me down with him, and the back of my head lands on his chest. It’s where I spent the night. I jolted awake every time I dozed off, thinking bugs were crawling in my hair, ears, nose, and mouth. Eventually, he got tired of watching me flop around like a fish out of water and told me to lay on him.

“We’re outside, Finnian,” Ailliard points out.

“Knock on a tree,” I suggest while rubbing the ache in my neck. Why am I always aching?

Ailliard cuts me a look that translates to, *really? Could you just not join in for once?* His eyes flash between us, “I was just coming to tell the both of you that we need to get moving soon. Didn’t realize you’d wake up ready to murder.”

“That’s our morning routine,” Finnian says, his voice still thick with sleep.

“Wake up, coffee, stab someone, brush teeth,” I add.

“Adorable,” Ailliard mutters before turning on his heels to rejoin the rest of the group.

Finnian’s groan vibrates the back of my head, “We don’t have coffee.”

“Maybe we could just die, at least then we’d be able to sleep,” I grumble.

“That sounds more inviting than it should,” he whines.

I slowly sit up again, squinting into the sunlight that bathes the forest. The sun is my enemy. I almost swat the sunlight before retracting my hands. No need to look as disturbed as I feel.

The group agreed it would be best to make camp close to the temple ruins. We left Aestilian under cover of darkness, taking an extra step to ensure that it stays hidden. Fatigue weighed on everyone after riding for two hours. It’s practically a death sentence to travel through the Terrwyn if you don’t have your wits about you, especially at night. We’re probably less than an hour away. But after Jarek almost fell off his horse, one of the guards Ailliard chose to escort us, we decided rest was the most sensible option rather than pushing forward. I’d hoped Ailliard would have chosen one of the guards that helped me escape Imirath, but they’re already taking on responsibilities in our absence. With the tasks divided up, it wasn’t worth the risk.

The guards he chose aren’t terrible, they’re actually the best guards we have; I just can’t stand Jarek. He’s the type of person to tell you that you’re wrong if the words he said made you angry. With his wavy shoulder-length dark blonde hair, gray eyes, and broad shoulders—he loves wielding his looks. They’ve never worked on me, though. His personality makes me dryer than a desert. Dusting the dirt from my pants and redoing my braid, I move to rejoin the group.

My skin prickles with surprise when the sharp sound of a shooting arrow infiltrates my senses. I drop to a squat, unsheathing two daggers as the arrow flies over my head.

“Attack!” a voice shouts behind a large boulder.

War cries fill the air and at least thirty clan members hop over the rocks. The blood that stains their raggedy clothing hints toward them being one of the more violent clans. Wonderful. Who needs caffeine when someone is so graciously trying to kill you mere moments after you wake up?

“Shoot straight,” I say to Finnian.

“Throw true,” he finishes off our signature pre-battle ritual.

My guards rush to my side but don’t bother getting in front of me. My pulse pounds in my ears, and my chest feels alive with the anticipation of

battle. I whirl my knives in their direction while Finnian fires arrows, both of us charging side by side. We've taken down four before our groups clash.

I don't have the advantage of size, but I do have the advantage of my mind. I've taken down people larger than me just by timing my moves correctly. Scanning their footwork and calling their moves before they make them.

The woman I'm charging raises her ax high in the air, but I drop down, sliding in the leaves, and shove my knee into her shin. She falls forward, unable to maneuver herself to protect her neck from my knife. Her warm blood coats my hand while I stand, getting myself ready for my next target. I unsheathe the sword at my hip and smirk when his eyes flash toward my blood-covered hand. These are the kinds of clans that killed Finnian's family. They travel through the Terrwyn and Sweven, burning villages in service to the gods, thinking the gods will find them superior if they kill the people that settled on their land. A cocky smile stretches across his cracked lips—so many men have worn the same smile before taking their last breaths in my presence. The only thing I love about being underestimated is proving people wrong every single time.

"I don't want to hurt you, pretty." He licks his lips, and I internally gag. "I can make you feel really good if you put the sword down." The shimmer in his eyes gives away that he thinks he's making me the offer of a lifetime.

I laugh in his face, watching his cocky smile melt away. "Killing you is the only pleasure I'll take from you."

I block the first swipe of his sword; the metal clashes together and vibrates my fingers. His eyes move before his sword does. Ramming my sword into his and knocking his to the side, I shoot my fist forward and pound it into his nose. If the skirmish wasn't raging around us, I would have heard the crunch of bone. He flinches backward, crimson blood leaking from his nostrils. He's unable to stop the tears that fall from his eyes.

"My gods don't like violent women." He spits blood in my direction, but it falls short of my boots.

"Well, they sound quite boring," I shrug. He acts out of anger, rushing forward without anticipating how slippery his blood made the handle of his sword. I knock the sword free from his hand and shove mine deep in his gut. "My blade is my god," I state before pulling the sword free. He crumples to the ground at the same time an ear-piercing shriek sounds

through the area, followed by water splashing. Ten purple tentacles with poison spikes shoot out of the small pond our horses were drinking from.

A vextree.

I've only heard of them, never encountered one.

The monster's long, slug-like body springs to the shore. Another high-pitched shriek emanates from its circular mouth—its entire face opens to display rows upon rows of teeth that travel far into its throat. The battle continues, but everyone is constantly looking over their shoulder, waiting to see if the monster will move further than the shoreline. Time stops when I see a flash of orange from the corner of my eye. A sharp stabbing sensation twists my gut because I realize that's not just a flash of orange; it's Finnian being dragged across the ground by a tentacle wrapped around his ankle. I'm too far to throw knives.

"Finnian!" I shout, hating the helplessness that worms its way through me. We're separated by so many people. We never separate in moments like this. "Finnian!" I yell again, charging forward without a second thought.

I'm so caught up in my emotions that I don't notice the person charging at me from the side. My feet pivot in their direction, and I attempt to raise my sword in time to block them, but I'm too late. They got the upper hand while my eyes were on Finnian. I brace myself for the impact, but it never comes because an arrow shoots from behind me. Flying so close to my head that I'm fairly certain the feathers brush against my ear. It sinks right between their eyes, cutting so deep into their skull that the arrow makes it halfway through before they fall to the ground.

Who was that? Only Finnian's aim is that good.

I turn in place, giving a slow, disbelieving shake of my head. My eyes blink rapidly, but the vision is real. There, on top of his horse, sits Cayden Veles, looking every inch the feared Commander of Vareveth that the world knows him to be. Empty bow hanging in the air, his hand still drawn back from the arrow he fired. *The arrow he fired for me.* His eyes meet mine from across the battlefield, blazing in anger. He shouts orders to his soldiers while charging forward. Swinging his sword and never taking his eyes off me. Spinning on my heels, I rush toward the edge of the pond. Finnian fires arrows while the vextree continues to drag him toward the water.

"Elowen, stop!" Cayden shouts behind me, but I keep pushing forward. There are too many people between us for him to catch up, and there's no way I'd let someone stand between Finnian and me.

“No!” I scream when the monster shoves Finnian under the surface. My fingers twist around the hilt of my knife while I push myself to move faster. A growl rattles in my chest when I make it to the edge of the pond, kick off the rocks along the shore, and sail through the air. The vextree notices me too late. I jam my knife into its throat, dragging it down as I slide toward the water. Thick black blood pours out of the deep slit, burning my hands, but I keep going. Bringing my sword forward, I jam it into its belly, twisting and turning. I use my sword to hold myself up while I stab my knife over and over again. Arrows fly into the monster’s head and eyes now that I’m halfway down its body. The vextree flails its slimy body, but it hurt Finnian, which can only be remedied with death.

With one final mountain-shaking cry, the monster collapses into the water. I take my blades out and push off the front of the monster, falling into the murky water below. I angle my fall so that I’m closer to the shore. My boots fill with water as soon as the pond closes over me, but I kick off the slimy pond floor and walk along the bottom until I breach the shore, sword and knife still in my burning hands.

The battle is on the cusp of finishing. Bodies litter the forest floor, but the thing I zone in on is pale fingers clawing their way through the thick mud. Finnian is propelling himself forward with his head tilted to the side. I drop my weapons and sprint toward him.

No. No. No.

“Finnian!” I flip him onto his back; his eyes are glossy and zone in and out as he fights to stay awake. I shove my hands under his arms and begin dragging him away from the edge of the pond. “Don’t you dare shut your fucking eyes!” I shriek; the panic in my voice is evident. Fucking gods, my hands slip from his underarms. His soaked clothes make him heavier than usual. I lunge for him again, but an arm wraps around my waist, hauling me away from him. Another feral growl rumbles from inside of me, and I thrash against the hold. My captor groans when I elbow them hard enough that they can feel it through their leathers and armor.

“He’s with me,” Cayden says while coming into view, tucking his hands into Finnian’s armpits and moving him further up the shore with ease. I cease the punch I was about to deliver to his groin, and this time, the man lets me out of his hold.

“I’ll be right back.” Without giving Cayden or the man the chance to protest, I sprint toward my horse and grab the satchel from my saddle bag. I

feel Cayden's eyes on me, but I don't look anywhere other than my mud-covered best friend. My knees sink into the mud next to Finnian. A poison spike juts out from his shin; the skin around the spike bubbles and blisters as the poison seeps into him. I swallow the bile that shoots up my throat and cut off his pants below his knee.

"What do you need us to do?" Cayden asks.

"Hold him down," I plead with my eyes while reaching into my satchel, pulling out a tonic to stop the poison and a fresh roll of bandages.

"Ryder take his shoulders; I'll take his ankles," Cayden commands. I briefly remember him mentioning the name Ryder before, but my mind is too focused on Finnian to look up or recall the moment fully. Both take their positions while I set my supplies aside, taking Finnian's face in my hands.

"Ellie," he weakly groans the childhood nickname he gave me; his blue eyes have a thick film over them, and I know he's fighting against the poison.

"Yes, it's me. I'm right here. I'm going to take care of you, Finny." I blink back my tears, now isn't the time to lose it. I place the leather strap of the satchel between his teeth, "Bite down whenever you need to."

Facing the wound again, I pull the spike from his leg. He thrashes against the hold Cayden and Ryder have on him, but they keep him pinned to the ground with their combined strength. Placing my hands on the wound, I squeeze the poison from the hole left behind by the spike. Vextree poison clumps together under your skin and moves toward your heart, which is why it's important to squeeze it out before it has the chance to slip away from the surface and mobilize.

After squeezing a substantial amount from his leg, I sprinkle a few droplets of the tonic on his wound. Cayden tightens his hold so I can apply it more accurately. My lips press together to suppress the whimper that threatens to escape when Finnian's pained screams meet my ears. He bites down on the leather, but it does little to muffle the proof of his pain. My eyes sneak a glance at his face, and I instantly wish they didn't. A sob breaks free while I watch his head helplessly thrash side to side, teeth bared around the leather, while tears leave trails on his mud-splattered cheeks.

"I'm so sorry," I whisper.

"Look at me," Cayden states beside me, but I can't. I can't take my eyes off Finnian. I've bandaged Finnian countless times, but he's never gotten

this hurt. He's never had to be pinned down. I've never made him wail in pain. "Elowen, look at me," Cayden demands. My eyes involuntarily follow his command. I have a feeling that's the voice he uses to command his soldiers. It's steady, confident, and full of assertiveness. Our faces are inches apart once again. I note the color of his eyes, taking in the rims of brown that surround his pupils and bleed into a sea of moss green. "This isn't your fault, and you have nothing to be sorry for. You're saving him. Now, keep going, and he can sleep off the pain when we get back to the ruins. He's going to be fine."

My eyes stare into his, letting his confidence wash over me and steady me. My hand reaches behind me to grab the bandages. "Okay," I nod, still in a trance. "Okay," I say more definitively while unraveling the bandages and wrapping Finnian's wound. The tonic is working; he's already dozing off. His body needs rest in order to recover fully. Once the bandage is tied off, I place my hands flat against the mud. The cool texture feels good on my burned skin. My hands are covered in Finnian's blood, so I can't assess the damage yet, not that it makes a difference. The only thing I'm focusing on is taking in several measured breaths to still my nerves.

"Thank you," I finally manage to say, lifting my head and meeting Cayden's stare. Has he been looking at me this entire time? I swallow through my tight throat and face the person that was holding Finnian's shoulders. "Thank you both for doing that. I wouldn't have been able to hold him down."

"Elowen, may I present my First General, Ryder Neredras." I remember Cayden mentioning him; his sister is head of intelligence. My eyes scan over his features; obsidian eyes, black tight coiling curls cut close to his head, prominent cheekbones, and a nose that widens toward the bottom. By the gods, is everyone in Vareveth good-looking? Is that a stipulation before you can gain entry?

Ryder stretches a dark umber hand toward me and lets it hover in the air between us. I reach for it but pause before I make contact with his skin, jerking back. "I'll take that handshake after I wash my hands," I say with a small smile.

His full lips tilt upward, "Deal."

"Also, I apologize for elbowing you in the stomach and for almost punching you...in your... you know," I finish, feeling incredibly awkward.

I would probably rub the back of my neck or fiddle with my necklace if my hands weren't filthy.

He breaks into a full smile, and my lips mimic his. He raises his hand in an attempt to stifle a laugh, which he miserably fails at. "I can appreciate a good punch."

"You never apologized for punching me," Cayden remarks, a smirk making its way to his lips again. "In multiple places, on multiple occasions."

"That's because you deserved them." I smile sweetly at him, and Ryder's laughter increases.

"Oh yes, she's exactly how you described," Ryder comments. I don't miss the daggers Cayden shoots in Ryder's direction. The general raises his hands in surrender while getting to his feet.

Eager to change the subject to stop the burning in my cheeks that rivals my hands, "Why were you riding so close to here?" I ask.

"Hunting for food," Cayden says. "Hopefully, some other patrol was more successful, unless you're in the mood for vextree."

I jokingly gag, causing the pair to chuckle softly. The battle has ceased around us, and everyone is regrouping. We should head out soon before someone, or something is attracted to the scent of blood that lingers.

"I'm going to go wash my hands off," I say while walking away from our small group. The pair of them hoist Finnian and wrap an arm around each of their broad shoulders. It's a good thing they're both around the same height, Cayden is probably an inch or two taller, but it's not a big enough difference to impair their efforts.

I find a section of the pond where the vextree blood hasn't infiltrated and bend down to wash my hands off. The water causes the pain to heighten, but it'll only get worse if I don't clean the burns. I feel a set of eyes on my back the entire time I face the pond, but when I turn around, there is nobody looking at me.

Ailliard jogs over, assessing me with his eyes to make sure I'm alright. I hide my hands behind my back; there's no need for him to worry over some irritated skin. "Those are the Vareveth soldiers we're supposed to be meeting?"

"Commander Veles and First General Neredras are helping Finnian to the horses. I haven't met any of the others yet," I name them while jutting my chin in their direction.

“I’m glad Finnian will be alright, but you need to be smarter about the decisions you make. You charged a fully grown vextree.”

“I’m fully aware of what I did, and I was fully aware of the consequences,” I say, cutting him off before he can add onto his critique and heighten the sting of his words. I would have taken on an entire army of vextrees if they had Finnian. “Were any of the guards hurt?”

“Not fatally. They’re wrapping wounds now,” Ailliard confirms.

I’m relieved to hear nobody died in the ambush. “We should send them home from here. There’s no sense in adding more time to their journey. Make the arrangements while I get Finnian settled on a horse,” I command.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



It's dusk by the time we make it to the temple ruins. I'm thankful that I changed into a different set of fighting gear before we began the journey, or else I would be freezing right now. We would have gotten here sooner, but I helped bandage my wounded guards before sending them back home. The only Aestilian guard currently with us is Jarek. He volunteered to ride with Finnian, which I'm sure Finnian will be *thrilled* about when he wakes up. He's still unconscious, and I'm not strong enough to keep him upright on a moving horse. Jarek will ride back tomorrow morning when we depart from the temple. Ailliard knows the mountains just as well as I do, so he led the ride while I was flanked by Cayden and Ryder.

The ruins are just as I remember them. Pillars stretch high into the orange sky, but the roof caved in many years ago, long before I was born. Some of it remains, creating an uneven border around the top of the temple. I slide off my horse and stretch my sore muscles. Cayden strides over to Jarek to help him get Finnian up the steps.

"I'm good. This seems like a one-person job." The tone Jarek uses makes me think he's trying to poke at the fact Cayden and Ryder shared the load earlier. Cayden's back is facing me, but I can tell he notices Jarek's tone judging by the way his shoulders stiffen.

"Unless you wish to put pressure on his wounded leg and possibly trigger further bleeding, I suggest you let the adults make the decisions," Cayden says while looping Finnian's arm over his shoulders. I raise a glove-covered hand to my mouth to stifle a giggle, but Ryder catches me. Damn it. I don't think it's very queenly to laugh at the expense of your

people, but I *know* that bruised Jarek's ego considering he's thirty-one. I grab Finnian's bedroll from the trunk strapped to the back of his horse and hurry after them. Cayden guides them through the temple, past a fire where several soldiers gather. I offer a smile to anyone I pass, but my main concern is just getting Finnian situated and then signing the agreement papers.

"Here," Cayden says, halting in place. I don't question him; I just lay out the bedroll and let them gently place Finnian on top of it. I lean down and dust some of the dirt off Finnian's cheeks. He's breathing evenly. The knot loosens in my chest at the proof of his body recovering. I'll change the bandages in a few hours, just in case any remaining poison leaks from the wound.

"Thank you, Jarek. You're dismissed," I state.

"Your Majesty," he bows before turning and taking long strides toward the front of the temple.

I stand again and Cayden's eyes track my movements. "Did you draw up the agreement we discussed?"

His sour expression melts and is replaced by a mischievous glint that shines in his eyes as I step toward him. "Hidden marriage clause and all," Cayden smirks.

My nose wrinkles in disgust, but I quickly replace it with the same false sweetness I adopted by the pond. "I can't blame you for your desperation. A hidden clause is the only way you'd gain my hand...unless you beg for it."

"My sweet affliction," he sighs while leaning his head down, silently challenging me to back away, but I don't. "I regret to inform you that I don't beg."

My spine stiffens with the rising tension between us and my heart pounds against my ribs. People are turning their heads in our direction, but I don't care. I feel like turning away first is the equivalent of losing a fight. It's a battle of who can challenge who more, and I want to win.

"Hmm," I muse, reveling in the way his eyes flash to my lips when I purse them. "We'll see about that, soldier."

"Will we, angel?" He arches a full, dark brow. My smirk widens while I take in his dilated pupils and parted lips. I'm sure I look similar as heat radiates off my cheeks, but I don't look away.

Someone clears their throat next to us.

“Yes?” Cayden asks without backing down or looking away; his tone is a deep rumble.

“My apologies for the intrusion. Ailliard is reading over the agreement now, so if you’d like to follow me over there or...” Ryder’s voice trails off. Cayden and I take a step away from each other at the same time. A draw. The heat between us cools as we follow Ryder to the other side of the temple. Ailliard stands behind a chunk of white stone that most likely belonged to the ceiling. He looks up from the contract when he hears me approaching, nodding once.

No hidden clauses.

Cayden and I walk side by side to where Ailliard stood. My eyes dance across the piece of parchment. Our vows are exactly the same as they were when we stated them a few nights ago. There are no alterations or embellished phrasing. I’m surprised he remembers them this well.

Cayden moves first, twirling the quill in his long fingers before dipping it into the ink pot and scribbling his name at the bottom of the page. His hand breaches the space between us, holding the quill out for me. The tips of my glove-covered fingers brush against his. I blame the tingles that travel through me on my burns and nerves.

“I suppose it’s time to find out how honorable your intentions are,” I say while signing my name beneath his. Everyone around us claps their hands as I place the quill back on the stone slab.

“Believe me, Elowen,” he says, drawing my attention away from everyone else, “my intentions are never honorable.”

His long legs stride away from me, and his presence is soon replaced by Ailliard. His eyes have a hint of pride to them, but I doubt he’ll ever state it. “You should eat something,” Ailliard suggests.

“I didn’t bring any food from home,” I confess. I gave whatever I had to Nyrinn and the orphanage before I left.

“They’re cooking deer. General Neredras informed me other patrols were successful this morning.” I’ve been so preoccupied with everything else that my brain didn’t register the scent of cooking meat. It makes my mouth water. The last thing I ate was the fruit I had with Nyrinn. As if on cue, my stomach grumbles. Ailliard laughs softly, “Come along.”

I sit between Ailliard and Jarek on a log while one of Cayden’s soldiers comes over to hand me some food, which I gratefully take. It’s a tough piece of meat, but it’s edible. The man seems kind; he tells me he’ll set

some aside for Finnian for whenever he wakes up. He was with us during the battle, but I didn't witness anyone from Vareveth's fighting skills aside from Cayden's sharp aim. Jarek's thigh brushes against mine, making me jump slightly. He clearly doesn't understand the definition of personal space.

The hair on the back of my neck stands up when I feel a set of eyes on me again. My gaze dances over the soldiers surrounding me, but everyone seems to be preoccupied with their dinner or talking to one another. A few people glance my way, but it's nothing noteworthy. I expect curious glances. It's not every day an heir essentially rises from the dead.

"I'm going to check on Finnian," I state while walking away.

"Do you need a guard?" Jarek asks.

The last place I want to be is in a dark corner with Jarek. "I'm fine, thank you."

Crouching down beside Finnian again, I unravel the bandage around his leg and toss it to the side. The tonic is helping, but he'll need another round of it before I rewrap the wound. My satchel is still in my saddlebag. I get to my feet, sticking to the perimeter of the temple. The pieces of fallen ceiling make it easy to walk unnoticed. Technically I don't have to hide anymore, but I'm not in the mood to talk to anyone.

I make it out of the temple but don't even make it down one step before I hear him, "Going somewhere?"

"Oh gods, I forgot to tell you." I raise my hand to lightly smack my forehead while turning in place. "I've decided to run away."

Cayden shrugs while cutting the distance between us, "I do love a good chase."

I roll my eyes at his response. "I'm just going to get my healing supplies. Do you need to sign traveling papers for me to walk down the steps?"

"The two of you are going to be an absolute pleasure to work with," a voice grumbles behind me. "I'll get it." Ryder's back comes into view as he steps around me and bounds down the steps. The silence is heavy between us in Ryder's wake. Usually, I enjoy silence. I hate forcing conversations, but there's this unsettling energy between us that makes me jumpy. Every second that ticks by feels like a minute. It feels like an hour has passed by the time Ryder gets back.

“Thank you,” I say while taking the satchel from him and slinging the leather strap over my shoulder. He gives me a curt nod in response and sticks his hand out for the handshake I promised him. I place my hand in his, but a searing pain shoots through me when his fingers close over mine. I yelp and jerk my hand back. His obsidian eyes widen, and his brows draw together. Cayden grabs me by the elbow and spins me toward him, ripping one of my gloves off to reveal my red, blistering skin.

“What the fuck,” he growls through gritted teeth as his hazel eyes blaze with anger. This feels a lot like a glare he probably gives his soldiers when they do something wrong, but he needs to remember that I’m not one of them. His glares don’t make me shake in my boots the same way it makes his soldiers react.

“It’s just a few burns.” I try to step away, but his hand stays firm on my elbow. “I’m fine.”

“Don’t tell me you’re fine when you’re covered in burns that obviously hurt,” he keeps his tone low. Nobody aside from Ryder can hear us, but his frustration is evident. Using his other hand, he takes off my second glove to reveal equally mangled skin. “You’re a healer, and you didn’t think to bandage yourself? Is that why you’ve been wearing gloves this entire time?”

Make better decisions, Elowen, Ailliard’s voice echoes in my mind, which only increases my frustration. “Stop talking to me like that. I had my reasons.”

“Then give me some answers,” Cayden demands.

“I didn’t heal my hands because I didn’t want to waste medicine on myself. Are you happy now? You have your answer.” I yank myself out of his hold and take a step back. “My injuries aren’t life threatening, and I can handle pain. Someone might need it more than me.” Like Finnian needed it today. The scowl still mars his face as his cool, calculating gaze travels over me. I can practically feel him trying to define me in his head. He’s a military man, a strategist. His job is to decipher things.

“Stop looking at me like that,” I tell him.

“Like what?”

“Like you’re trying to figure me out.”

I expect him to smirk or give a snide comment back, but he doesn’t. He stares at me a beat longer before turning toward Ryder, “Can you grab the medical bag?” Ryder doesn’t answer; he just takes off into the temple.

“I can use my medicine if the burns worsen.”

“No,” Cayden shakes his head. “I shouldn’t have spoken to you in that way. Besides, it’s hard to heal your own hands.” I wonder if he’s speaking from experience. Given his position, he most likely is. The pinch of sadness in my chest propels my feet forward, and I take a seat at the edge of the temple, dangling my feet over the side.

Cayden takes a seat beside me after Ryder gives him the supplies. He sits close to me, one leg dangles off the side, and the other stretches out behind me. Reaching forward, he gently takes my wrists in his hands and places my hands on his thigh. Water burns my skin a few seconds later, and I intake a sharp breath while squeezing my eyes shut.

“I’m sorry,” Cayden mumbles.

“It’s okay,” I say in a tight voice.

“I suppose I don’t measure up to your healing skills,” he lightly teases.

I huff out a strained laugh, “It’s raw skin. Everything is going to hurt.”

His frown deepens while he uncaps a tin of salve, dipping his fingers in and coating them in a generous amount. My wrist tingles when he wraps his opposite hand around it, rubbing soothing circles on my skin while gently spreading the salve. It burns at first, but the longer his fingers rub it in, the nicer it feels. He seems pleased when my shoulders loosen, his eyes tracking my reaction.

“What made you interested in healing?” His interest seems genuine, no hints of smugness on his face.

“I don’t like feeling helpless,” I answer after a few moments. “If I couldn’t heal Finnian today, I would’ve watched him die in front of me.” Cayden’s fingers still for a beat, but he slowly resumes his soothing movements. “I also like knowing I can patch someone up just as well as I can tear them apart,” I tack on, worrying I said something that prompted him to pause his movements. His proximity is making my head spin. This isn’t us. We’re not friends or gentle with each other. We’re begrudging allies that have been at each other’s throats whenever we’ve interacted.

His soft chuckle brings me back to the present, “Can you do me a favor?”

“What?” I ask, feeling uneasy.

He looks up at me while unwrapping a roll of bandages and begins wrapping my left hand. “The next time you choose to tear a monster apart, can you wait for me to get there so we can tear it apart together? All I got to

do was fire arrows at its head.” A shocked laugh escapes my lips; that’s definitely *not* what I expected him to say. I don’t even know what I expected, but it wasn’t that. His lips turn upward as my laughter fills the space between us and he begins rubbing salve onto my other hand.

“Maybe you just have to be quicker,” I jest.

“Perhaps,” his eyes drop from my smile to focus on my hand again. “Then at least tell me when you’re burned.”

“Perhaps,” I echo.

He sighs, and I have a feeling he would pinch the bridge of his nose if his hands weren’t covered in salve. “Why do I have a feeling you’re going to be the bane of my existence?”

“Because it’s a title I’ll be happy to take.”

He rolls his eyes while reaching for another roll of bandages, but it’s a halfhearted eye roll. “You looked uncomfortable earlier.”

I scrunch my brows together, “What do you mean?” Is he talking about when I almost watched my best friend die?

“By the fire.” He looks up at me after finishing off the second bandage, but he absentmindedly continues rubbing circles on my wrist with his calloused fingers, warming my skin under his touch. I’m thankful the sky is dark because if it wasn’t, he would see my heated cheeks. “You jumped.”

So, it was his eyes I felt on me when Jarek’s leg brushed against mine. I wonder how long he was watching me. I mean, he is guarding me, so I suppose it’s important he keeps an eye out. But I was surrounded by *his* soldiers. He should have known I was safe.

“I’m just a little nervous,” I mutter. It’s not hard to believe, and it’s not a total lie. There are no regrets when it comes to leaving Aestilian, but that doesn’t mean I’m just going to embrace the world with open arms. I would be an idiot to do that. This is the first time in fourteen years that I’m in a place other than Aestilian where people know who I actually am.

“Right,” he says, not sounding fully convinced. His jaw clenches, and his eyes get that assessing gleam that they had before he started bandaging me. Once again, I feel like a puzzle sitting in front of him while he’s trying to place the first pieces of the border. Each stroke of his thumb winds me so tight, to the point I feel like I’m going to combust. “I should get back to my post,” he clears his throat, dropping my hand.

“Right,” I rush out, practically jumping away from him and getting to my feet. “I should check on Finnian—thank you again for helping me with

him today, and for the bandages.”

“No problem.” He shrugs his shoulders, looking up at me completely unaffected, as if it means nothing.

I turn away from him, but only make it a few steps before I spin on my heels as he gets to his feet. “Do you want me to take a watch shift at some point?”

His mouth tilts up in the corner, never a full smile, just a half. “No, go rest and watch Finnian.” He takes a few strides toward me, and my hands tighten on the leather strap of my satchel. “Goodnight, angel,” he says before passing by me and bounding down the temple stairs.

“Goodnight, soldier,” I whisper into the darkness after he’s long gone.

CHAPTER TWELVE



The brief truce between Cayden and I dissolved quickly over the past four days. In between traveling, there has been endless bickering, which usually leaves one of us red-faced and the other smirking. At one point, I chased him with a knife before Finnian threw me over his shoulder and carried me away from the hazel-eyed heathen. That's what I've been calling him in my head every time he makes me angry, which is often. I don't even remember what prompted the knife chase...but it was fun. Cathartic. It's not like I could actually do anything with the knife.

We're so close to the Vareveth capital, Verendus, that I can hear the cheers and rumble of citizens that have crowded the streets to get a look at their returning commander and enemy princess turned ally. My shaking hands finish off the intricate braid I've been working on for the past ten minutes. It starts out as two braids on either side of my middle part before joining together in one braid down my back. Finnian went through my trunk so I could blindly apply minimal makeup since I don't have a mirror. I wasn't planning on a grand entrance after traveling for almost a week. Finnian watches me with narrowed eyes while I tuck a ruby and gold diadem into my hair.

"You sure you're okay with this?"

"Yes," I give him the same short answer I have the past five times he asked that question. I'm not fine, I'm far from fine, but I must be fine. The thought of being surrounded by people is more intimidating than I thought it would be. My inhaleds are sharp and shallow, my stomach churns, and my palms tingle. It's not that I've never been in front of a crowd before, I've addressed the citizens of Aestilian more times than I can count, but the

thought of being surrounded by people I don't know...people that could very likely be there to kill me, is daunting. *Nothing is going to happen*, I tell myself for the thousandth time, but nothing eases the tightness in my throat.

"You don't have to lie to me. I know you well enough." Finnian kicks off the tree and takes a few steps in my direction but never reaches out to touch me. He knows it won't calm me right now. I don't want to stand still; I want to keep pacing.

"Have you stopped being mad at me?" I jokingly ask.

"Fine," he holds up his hands in surrender, "I forgive you for not telling me you made a deal with two of the best-looking men I have ever seen. Other than myself, of course." My laugh sounds breathless, more like a gasp. Finnian's humorous demeanor, which usually appears effortlessly, is strained. "You definitely could have wiped the drool off my face, though."

"I was a little more focused on getting the poison out of your leg," I retort. Finnian was never actually mad at me. I'm also glad I didn't tell him anything about Cayden or Ryder because the look on Finnian's face when he first saw them was priceless. I had to push his chin up to close his mouth.

"A noble diversion." His smile fades, "Are you ready to leave?"

I dryly swallow, surveying the space around us. We're separated from the rest of the group by a rocky hill. I didn't want anyone seeing me like this, but Finnian doesn't count. Cayden had to send off a letter to Egor once we heard the cheering, so we're taking a temporary break. His darkened eyes and deep glare were the only signs he's pissed. I take it he's not a fan of the parade either.

"Mhmm," I hum. I make it a few steps before it feels like a hand has closed over my throat. My shaky palms moisten. I dig my nails into my skin, but nothing can control the flare-up of anxiety coursing through me, conquering me.

"Elowen," Finnian's concerned voice streams forward. My fingers close around two hilts while I sink to my knees and place my fists on the cool surface of the rocky hill. Sweat breaks out against my skin, but I feel incredibly cold. Shivers rack up and down my spine, making my teeth chatter together. My breathing is ragged, and black dots fill my vision. I pull on the collar of my leathers, which suddenly feels too tight. "Fucking gods, Elowen, look at me." Finnian drops to his knees beside me, but I don't look at him; I can't. I keep my eyes on the knives my hands clutch.

They're something I can control. I'm not the same girl I was in Imirath. I can defend myself if anyone comes for me.

"What's going on?" Ailliard's familiar voice drifts closer, followed by the crunch of leaves. But I don't look at him either. I keep my eyes on my knives to ground myself and take in deep breaths to calm my nerves.

"The fucking parade! Who throws a parade for someone that spent the last fourteen years in hiding and a prisoner for the other ten?" Finnian's tone rises in anger. I drop a knife and reach out to him, silently telling him to keep his voice down.

"It's what she signed up for," Ailliard hisses. "Elowen, come on, be stronger than this. You can do this."

"She is strong," Finnian growls. "She can be strong and have anxiety. She's not made of stone."

"Finnian, it's okay," I rasp, desperately needing water. The tingling sensation still lingers in my palms, along with lightheadedness, but I want to end their argument before it gets worse. "It is what I signed up for." I mutter a curse, getting to my feet and wiping the sweat from my brow. My body still shakes as I walk out from behind the hill, Finnian and Ailliard in tow. The latter whispers that I'll be fine in my ear before jogging over to his horse.

"I can find a back entrance," Finnian offers, uncapping a canteen for me.

"I have to do this." I take in several gulps of water before speaking again, "I don't want to be scared of living."

Leaves crunch behind me, but I don't have to turn to know who it is. I wrap my shaking hands around my torso and turn toward Cayden. Doing my best to appear unrattled. Even though I know it won't work. I've realized he almost never believes I'm fine when I say I am.

"I sent a letter with your proper titles so that Eagor will announce you as both princess and queen," Cayden states. The kind gesture catches me off guard. I know the shock is evident on my face and that he catalogs it in his brain—just like every other reaction I have. "My soldiers are lining the perimeter of the parade, and I made sure that citizens won't be allowed to watch unless they temporarily forfeit their weapons. Ryder and I will flank you—"

"I'll be on one side of her," Finnian cuts in.

Cayden continues after I nod my head, confirming that's what I want. "Finnian and I will flank you the entire ride to the castle. Once we enter the gates, it's a straight shot forward."

"Okay," I nod, turning away from him and raising myself onto my horse. Finnian walks away once I'm on mine, but Cayden remains, looking like he wishes to say something more. "Yes?"

I can read him just as well as he can read me, and I know it irks him just as much as it irks me. We're two people that don't like anyone digging too deep, but he's met his match. If he wants to push me, I'll push him right back. His tongue pokes into the side of his cheek, eyes drifting toward my crown.

"Looks good on you," he jerks his chin toward my crown before turning away, leaving me stunned and irritated.

The ride to Verendus is short, and we're soon enveloped by the cheering crowd. Cayden's soldiers line the parade just as he promised. My horse's hooves patter against the cobblestone street as I give an effortlessly fake smile to the citizens around us. Various colored petals rain down, engulfing us in a sea of red, pink, purple, and yellow. It's hard to make out anything other than the petals, but I see vines creeping up several buildings along the main road. Some of their leaves have turned orange and red as the first hint of winter enraptures the city.

Finnian soaks in the attention and seems to be smiling genuinely. It doesn't shock me when I look to my other side and find Cayden giving his signature glare. He must feel me looking at him because he quickly turns his head, and a smirk grows in place of his scowl. The scent of butter, cinnamon, and chocolate travel out of several bakeries, making my mouth water. I can't wait to try some of their pastries. Pastries have a special place in my heart—alongside knives, flowers, books, and coffee.

The petals clear, and in front of me stands a castle far more beautiful than anything my mind concocted. We rode between the border of Feynadra and Urasos, so I never saw their castles, and I don't remember what Imirath looks like, but I don't think anything can compare to Vareveth. The castle, made of a mixture of white and tan stone, sits on top of a jagged rocky hill that resembles a small mountain. Vine-covered spires extend high into the sky. On the left of the castle sits a deep blue lake that stretches into a forest. The forest sits at the base of snowcapped mountains and loops behind the castle. A gushing waterfall spills over the left side of the mountain that the

castle sits upon and into a river at its base. An extravagant stone bridge with gold embellishments stretches down from the entrance, and the steps end a few feet in front of the open circle we've stopped in.

King Eagor and Queen Valia Dasterian descend the steps, stopping on one of the platforms that stretches between flights while waving to their citizens with practiced smiles. They look exactly how all monarchs are supposed to look: regal, untouchable, rich. Matching gold and white capes drift behind them, and emerald crowns sit on their blonde heads. Valia's hair is platinum and curled to perfection, whereas Eagor is sandy and pushed back, not a hair out of place on either of them.

The crowd silences when their king raises his hand. "It is with my greatest pleasure that we welcome the Atarah heir, Queen Elowen, to Vareveth. The Princess of Imirath and Queen of Aestilian, a nation she forged herself. We are honored to form an alliance with such a resilient woman." The crowd cheers once again, drowning out Eagor's voice. I turn away from the monarchs and face the cheering crowd, waving at them. Finnian raises his fingers to his lips and blows out a high-pitched whistle that changes my smile from forced to genuine.

As inviting as this welcome is, I know how sometimes the most beautiful things can be the most dangerous. It may seem like I'm looking at a rose bush, but I'm fully aware of the thorns that threaten to pierce my skin if I get too close, or the vipers that will bite my ankles if I'm distracted. Everyone knows how you take care of a snake should they threaten you—you cut off the head.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN



E agor and Valia return to the castle before I have the chance to meet them, but Cayden informs me of a banquet happening tonight. We bound up the steep steps, and my legs wobble by the time we make it to the entryway. The castle is just as beautiful on the inside as it is on the outside. A large stone fountain with gold detailing sits in the center of the hall, and the trickling sound of water calms me. Floor-to-ceiling windows stretch the entire length of the room. The sunlight that streams through dances in the diamond chandelier that hangs at the top of a curved double staircase.

I say a quick goodbye to Finnian and Ailliard when the maids inform us that they'll show us to our rooms. Each room we pass is more magnificent than the last. I get glimpses of expensive furniture covered in gorgeous fabrics, paintings of various places on the continent, and so many jeweled chandeliers. It's odd to think that this would all be normal to me if I had been properly raised in Imirath. We continue to twist and turn down several hallways and climb up several flights of stairs before the maid pulls a key from her belt and opens a door.

"There's a bathing chamber filled with all kinds of soaps and linen. I'll be back in an hour to help you get ready for the banquet." The maid curtsies, a dark red curl falling in her face.

"Thank you," I say as she turns away to head down the hall.

A small gasp leaves my lips when I take in the details of my room. It's so extravagant. I'm almost scared to walk inside, afraid I'll get mud on the perfectly polished wood. But my curiosity gets the best of me. Lanterns and vases filled with white lilacs are placed on either side of a large four-poster

bed. The dark wood matches the floor and mantle of the fireplace directly across from my bed. The books I packed will look perfect there. A seating area made up of two emerald green couches with gold floral embroidery that matches my bedding is arranged in front of the fireplace, separated by a coffee table. I walk toward two glass doors, turning the knobs and stepping out onto a half-circle balcony. I rush forward and press my hands into the cool stone banister, gazing out to the snowcapped mountains and lake far below.

“It’s gorgeous,” I murmur.

“I like my view better.” I snap my head to the side and, much to my dismay, find Cayden staring at me. He is sitting on a chair with his boots propped up on a breakfast table for two. I have an identical table on mine. Actually, our balconies are completely identical—down to the shrubs. “I’d love to get a closer look, though,” he says while walking to the banister where our balconies are closest.

“The closer you get, the closer the distance to the ground,” I gesture to emphasize my point, “doesn’t seem as daunting.”

He places his hands on his banister, they span almost the entire width of it, and his mischievous gaze rakes over me. “Just trying to be neighborly.”

“Neighborly?” I echo.

He spins away, walking through his glass doors, and I follow suit. My head spins in the direction of a knock, but not on the door that leads to the hall. I hurry over to the door I assumed was a closet and rip it open, revealing an extremely smug Cayden.

“Neighborly,” he whispers.

He shoves his hand onto the door before I can slam it in his face and steps around me to enter my room. We have conjoined rooms. “This is a hilarious joke, but you can call it off now.”

“It’s for your protection,” he states, crossing his arms and widening his feet like he’s preparing for a fight.

“You’re going to protect me from my nightmares?” I pout.

“Not my original plan, but if you feel the need to scream my name during the night, you may

do so.” Oh gods, he makes me want to pull my hair out. He’s like a walking supply of endless innuendos, smirks, and glares.

“I’m not much of a screamer, and I doubt you’ll turn me into one,” I retort. He takes a few steps closer. My heart pounds every time his boots

thump against the wood. Getting close to my face like we did a few days ago.

“We’ll see about that, angel,” he whispers before strutting off to his own room, leaving me boiling in anger.

I slip out of my boots and stomp over to my bathing chamber on the opposite side of my bed, slamming the door shut behind me and shoving my middle finger in Cayden’s wake. This room is just as gorgeous as my bedroom. White tile replaces the wooden floor, but the same beige paint with golden flecks coats the walls. A large porcelain tub is accompanied by a two-tier tray of soaps and oils. I turn the handles on the tub, letting it fill halfway before pouring some lavender and vanilla oils in. I unarm myself before peeling off my fighting gear and slipping into the water. The tub is so deep that the water rises to my shoulders. I submerge myself, running my hands through my tangled hair and scrubbing every inch of me with luxurious soaps. My aches ease the longer I stay in the tub.

“Your Majesty?” A soft knock on the door stirs me from my relaxed state. I can’t believe how much time I spent in the tub; my fingers must look like raisins.

“I’ll be out in a moment!” I stand, quickly drying myself and slipping into a navy blue silk robe before entering my room. The same red-headed maid stands by my vanity, setting out various makeup and hair products. She offers me a small smile and gestures for me to take a seat. “What’s your name?”

“Hyacinth, my lady,” she says shyly.

“It’s nice to meet you,” I smile at her through the mirror, wanting to ease her anxiety.

We fall into a comfortable silence while Hyacinth works on making me look like I’ve actually had a sound sleep within the past several days. She wraps my hair around some heated curlers that will help my hair dry quicker. Then begins covering some blemishes, lining my eyes and lips, and adding some rouge to finish off the fresh and light look.

“I took the liberty of hanging the gowns you brought while you were in the bath. They’re very lovely, but I think the lavender one would look exceptionally wonderful tonight, if I may say.” Hyacinth’s pale cheeks redden.

“Then that’s the one I’ll wear.” I get to my feet and walk behind the dressing screen after making sure the conjoined door is shut.

“I’ll tie up the laces and fix your hair before you get the first look,” she says while handing me the dress.

I slide the shimmering lavender gown up my body and hold the bodice to my chest while I step out. Hyacinth circles around my back and begins tightening the ribbons of my corset. I haven’t seen the full dress, but I can already tell it’s gorgeous. I glance down at my long leg peaking between the slit and smirk; my dragon dagger will be the perfect accessory tonight. After Hyacinth ties off the corset, she begins taking the pins out of my hair and sticks the curlers in her pockets. She runs her fingers through the curls, shaking my hair at the roots, before letting out a satisfied sigh.

I walk over to the full-length mirror, my gown gliding along the floor in my wake. I convey the same kind of appearance Eagor and Valia did on the steps: regal, untouchable, rich. My chest is small, but the dress amplifies what little I have. Sheer trumpet sleeves cling to my upper arms and widen below my elbow. My hair resembles the sketches of mermaids I used to read about when I was a young girl. I look like the queen I’ve always wanted to be but never had the chance.

I lift the lid of my trunk, plucking a new thigh garter, dragon dagger, and gold elm tree crown from the contents inside. I take a seat on the bench in front of my bed and slide my feet into a gold pair of heels with ties that cross around my calves. I’m adjusting my crown in front of the mirror when a sharp knock rattles against the entrance to my room.

Hyacinth rushes over to answer. “Good evening, Commander Veles,” she curtsies before stepping to the side and letting Cayden enter. Annoyance and anticipation prick under my skin.

“Muse of my nightmares, you have returned,” I sigh while running my fingers through my hair and straightening my dagger. “Are you here to escort me?”

Nothing but silence greets me.

“Cayden?” I ask, spinning on my heels to face him. The tops of his ears and apples of his cheeks flush as his dark gaze roams over me. If he clenches his jaw any tighter, I’m afraid his teeth will break. His cheekbones are so sharp that I could hone a sword on them. I take a moment to let my gaze to roam over him. His hair is styled and pushed back except for a few strands that still brush against his forehead. I want to slap my hand when it itches to push those strands back. He wears a tailored black tunic that hugs his shoulders and arms perfectly, with tailored black pants to match. A

sword hangs low on his hips. He looks...*no*. Not going there. “Cayden?” I ask again, but this time my voice sounds like a breathless whisper.

He blinks and shakes his head as if he’s coming out of a trance, “Did you say something?” He clears his raspy throat. Why does his voice have to be raspy and deep? It makes me wonder what he would sound like in the morning, or what he would sound like during—no! Not going there *again*. Both of us have too much to lose if we get involved with each other personally and it ends badly.

“I asked if you’re here to escort me to the banquet.”

He covers up his previous expression that I would personally classify as a wanting look with an unreadable, blank face. “This banquet and any other banquet, ball, or dinner that comes.” He must notice the confusion on my face because he tacks on, “You’re stuck with me, angel.”

“Don’t you have a job to do? You’re not a guard.”

“I added you into my job description.” He smirks while walking toward my door. “It now reads, ‘Cayden Veles—Commander of Vareveth and Defender of the Bane of his Existence’.”

I loop my hand through his extended arm and try to ignore the fresh scent of pine and spice that surrounds him. “So, you have officially given me the title?”

“It was only ever yours to take.”

“It’s truly an honor,” I grin.

We walk the rest of the way in silence, but my skin prickles with anxiety, considering every click of my heels on the tile brings me closer to the banquet. Ailliard and I had a conversation about Eagor and Valia before we crossed into Vareveth. I’ll have to win them over if I want the alliance papers to be signed in a timely manner. Royals have a habit of pushing things off if they don’t want to make a deal with someone. I’ll do my best, but I won’t compromise who I am. Nobody is worth losing my dignity for. It would be so much easier if Cayden was the only one I had to deal with, but my people need food just as much as I need my dragons.

Cayden pauses when we get to a set of closed double doors. They’re covered in green and gold detailing, just like the walls of the hall. They’re the colors of Vareveth. “You ready?” he asks.

I raise my chin while staring down the doors before meeting his eyes that are already on me. “I’m not bowing,” I state. He smirks but quickly shuts down the crack in his unreadable expression before I can decipher it. I

like when he can't control his initial reactions. I doubt he's used to being caught off guard.

"Good. I never do," he says while facing forward and raising his fist to knock three times on the door before straightening himself out by my side.

"Have you ever bowed to anyone?"

"No."

A staff thumps against the floor, silencing whatever crowd has gathered on the opposite side of the door. My hand involuntarily tightens on Cayden's arm, but if he notices, he doesn't make it known.

"Commander Cayden Veles of Vareveth and Her Majesty Elowen Atarah, Queen of Aestilian and Princess of Imirath." The doors fly open as the cheers of the crowd rise to meet us. Cayden guides us forward, and into the den of vipers we descend.

PART TWO

THE ALLIANCE



CHAPTER FOURTEEN



The cheers increase with every step we take, descending into the banquet hall. Several tables with intricate floral centerpieces are spread throughout the room. There's an aisle in the center of the sea of tables that leads to a singular risen one. My eyes glance around the table we're walking toward. Finnian is seated between Ryder and an empty chair. Ailliard is on the opposite side between two Vareveth advisors. Cayden gracefully helps me up the steps and escorts me toward King Eagor and Queen Valia, who stand at the front of the raised platform. Now that I'm closer, I can see that the pair looks to be in their upper thirties. They have coordinated their outfits to match Vareveth's signature green and gold. Eagor wears an emerald tunic with gold buttons, and Valia wears a modest gold gown with puffy sleeves and an equally puffy skirt. Her gray eyes flash toward my dagger, and her smile twitches disapprovingly before she recovers.

"Eagor, Valia, may I present Queen Elowen Atarah," Cayden says once we're in front of them.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Eagor smiles. I stretch my hand out, expecting him to shake it, but he brings it to his mouth, placing a kiss on my knuckles while keeping his green eyes on mine and giving me the urge to wash my hands as soon as I'm able. I feel Cayden stiffen under my hold, and I bite back a joke to poke at if he's jealous. We can't be juvenile in public.

"You as well." I flash my practiced smile. "Your castle is lovely."

"It must be nice to be in a castle again. I assume Aestilian doesn't have one?" Valia asks with a broad smile on her face. My hand tightens on

Cayden's arm at the subtle jab. Even if her tone is sweet, I can decipher an insult in disguise. Cayden cocks his head, but I open my mouth before he can say something to make this awkward.

"Any home is a castle with a queen inside." I shrug, seeming unbothered.

"Very true," Valia replies. "I hope you enjoy the feast we've prepared."

"Anything is better than more deer and berries," Cayden states dryly before brushing past the pair as if they're no more than strangers and escorting us to our seats. He pulls my chair out and slides it in behind me. "Now, I have someone better for you to meet," he murmurs while taking the chair next to me.

"That's not much competition," whispers a feminine voice beside me. The first thing I notice when I turn my head is a warm smile. "Saskia," she extends a dark umber hand in my direction, and I shake it.

"Elowen." I know they just announced me, but it feels better to introduce myself to someone I'll be working with for the foreseeable future. I note the similarities between her and Ryder—their eyes are the same obsidian color, but Saskia has something warm about her. Maybe it's her round cheeks that lift when she smiles.

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you, and it's nice to see you home in one piece," she leans forward to address Cayden, her long, midnight box braids falling over her shoulders.

"It's nice to see you haven't died of boredom while Ryder and I were gone."

"The peace was a welcomed change." She leans back in her chair, facing me again, "Even if it was a short-lived peace."

"I can still hear you," Cayden says into his chalice.

Saskia ignores him. "Was she rude to you?" She lowers her voice so only I can hear. It takes me a moment to realize she's talking about Valia.

"Not exactly," I answer truthfully. "Wait, do we not like her?" I glance in Valia's direction, but my eyes catch Finnian's in the chair next to hers. She chatters into his ear while he looks at me with pleading eyes. Ryder subtly rubs his temples like a headache is already forming.

"Oh, the boys are going to regret introducing us to each other." Her shoulders shake with laughter. "She's not a terrible person, but she's the type of person that makes you feel like you chew toast wrong." I visibly

cringe but cover it up by taking a sip from the chalice in front of me. The wine is the perfect medium between sweet and tart.

“Do you like the wine, my lady?” Eagor asks across the table.

I nod my head. “Is it from around here?”

“We import it from the North,” Valia cuts in. “Do you have wine in Aestilian?”

I place my chalice back on the table and meet her stare. Does she think we have nothing more than dirt and sticks? “We do.”

“How interesting.” She places her chin in her hand.

“Do you have a tavern there?” Eagor asks, seeming earnest. I flash my eyes to Ailliard, who gives me a subtle nod to proceed. It’s not that I need Ailliard’s approval, but I don’t want to give out too many details. I’ve never navigated a court before, and it’s good to get a second opinion from someone who has.

“The tavern is one of our biggest buildings along the main road. The bartenders that own it make everything themselves. Their hard cider in the autumn is my favorite.” It’s a hot cinnamon-apple cider that warms you up from the inside out. I go to the tavern almost every other day in the autumn just to get a taste of it. Honestly, alcohol is the one thing we have in abundance, but alcohol and empty stomachs never mix well.

“It sounds established,” Eagor says, running a hand over his blonde stubble. He even seems impressed. A small sliver of hope wraps around my heart; maybe it won’t be so hard to get the treaty processed.

Valia lets out a loud giggle as servers enter the room, carrying silver trays of food. “It’s hard to imagine an *established* kingdom that I’ve never seen.”

Cayden and Saskia both stiffen beside me, and Finnian shoots me a death glare over the table. It’s not directed at me, obviously, but I need to shut this down before it escalates. Arguing on the first night isn’t exactly the first impression I want to make. Everyone at the table can note the backhanded meaning of her statement. The sliver of hope snaps, turning into something ugly. I lift my chalice from the table again, pointing it in her direction.

“Then perhaps you need to broaden your mind,” I remark before taking a drink. Her cheeks redden, but her smile stays in place. At one point, my words were the only defense I had. When wielded properly, words have the power to cut someone down with more pain and precision than any sword.

I relax back into my seat while servers begin piling our plates with food; gravy-covered chicken, mashed potatoes, fresh vegetables, and bread with a glorious amount of butter. It's the type of plate I would dream about when all I had to eat that day was an apple. The last month of winter is always the hardest, especially when the frost stays longer than usual. By then, the snow is piled so high that patrols can't get out for raids or hunts, so we must make whatever food we have stretch for as long as we can.

I dip my chicken into the potatoes before bringing the fork to my mouth and fight to hold back a moan when the gravy dances along my tastebuds. *This* is how food is supposed to taste. "I would kiss your chef if I saw them."

"You have a chef kink? Shall I don an apron over my armor?" Cayden asks after swallowing the food he was chewing.

"I have a mashed potato kink, and I'll only accept the pinkest and frilliest of aprons." I point my fork at him.

"You have my word, angel." The corner of his mouth lifts.

"How long will it be before we can start working?" I ask them both, keeping the conversation low enough for only us to hear. I glance over the table, and I'm relieved to see Finnian and Ryder lost in their own conversation without Valia.

"What do you mean?" Saskia asks before taking a bite of bread.

"Well, the alliance papers haven't been signed, so I wasn't sure if we have to wait." Cayden told me that Saskia and Ryder believe I'm here to work closely with the army, despite Eagor's plan to keep me close to the castle. But I'm not sure if they know about the heist yet. Neither of us mentioned it on the journey here. I'll have to ask Cayden when we have a moment alone.

Saskia waves a dismissive hand through the air, "They'll get signed when they get signed. I'm not a fan of waiting for someone to do their job, so I just do mine. They can catch up." Oh, I *really* like her.

"Advisors take forever." Cayden rolls his eyes.

"Not a fan of authority?" I poke.

"I'm a fan of getting *around* authority," he confirms.

"You're giving a great representation of Vareveth, Cayden," Saskia grumbles.

"I'm providing an accurate one," he argues.

“You’re a commander. You’re *the* symbol of authority here,” I remind him.

“I never said I don’t like having authority. I said I don’t like people having authority over me,” he boasts with a sly smile. I hate that I like what he said because it’s something I can see myself saying. “While you’re here you’ll have the option to train with us if you’d like to join. Finnian too,” he tacks on.

That sounds like a much better option than training in my room like I thought I would have to do. “Yes, I’d like that.”

“Good. Your footwork could use some work,” he says while taking a bite out of his bread and baiting me in the process. If I was a better person, maybe I would ignore it, but he doesn’t stand almost a head taller than me only for me to be the bigger person.

“My footwork?” I narrow my eyes at him.

“Someone’s in trouble,” Saskia sings into her chalice.

I pause my retort as servers clear the table and place a strawberry and cream-filled cake in front of us. I’m convinced this place is a food utopia. Cayden can wait. There are fresh strawberries and cake in front of me. A piece of cake seems like such a trivial thing. It’s accessible to so many people that they usually don’t think twice when it’s placed in front of them, but I can see my emotions reflected on Finnian’s face across the table. To us, it feels like a sunny day after months of rain. Seeing my best friend eat a full plate of food with dessert is a sight I’ll treasure forever because it makes me feel like I’m doing something good. I eventually descend from my strawberry-scented cloud and remember I’m annoyed with Cayden.

“Do you not remember when I held a knife to your neck?” I ask while stabbing my fork into the cake. I don’t remember the last time I ate something this delicious.

“I actually think about it quite often, but if you want to give me a reminder then you’re free to do so.” He licks some cream off his index finger, and I despise him for the jolt it sends right to my core.

“I’m blocking you out.” I huff while angling my body toward Saskia, who seems to barely be holding in her laughter. “You’re too annoying to talk to while I’m eating strawberry cake.”

“That’s not fair,” Cayden complains behind my back.

“It’s entirely fair,” Saskia giggles, unable to contain her laughter any longer. It’s a light sound filled with mirth and merriment, and I find myself

laughing along with her. I didn't think it would be such a natural adjustment, and I know there's still a long way to go, but it feels good to have a moment of normalcy.

"Do you know any good dressmakers in town?" I ask while taking in the details of her dress. Dark purple skirts flow around her hips, and a metallic golden halter bodice covers her chest. It looks lovely on her. I won't be able to get by with the clothes I brought in my trunk for long.

"Plenty," she grins before biting into a strawberry, "I can take you tomorrow if you want to head into town."

"You're sure you don't mind?" I fiddle with the ends of my sleeves.

She gives me an overexaggerated eye roll and a corner of her mouth lifts, "I've had nobody other than Cayden and Ryder to deal with the last few years. I'd be happy to go shopping with you."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



“I can’t believe you brought your books with you,” Finnian jests, laying on one of the couches by the fireplace.

“Words are food for my soul,” I reply after applying my lipstick. The curls Hyacinth did yesterday now fall in loose waves down my back. I need to learn how to use those curlers.

He props himself up on his elbows while giving me a no-nonsense glare. “Smut is your soul food?”

I toss one of the big pillows from my bed in his direction. “Don’t judge my flavor palette.”

His laughter is drowned out by the pillow connecting with his face. He doesn’t bother moving it and just stays sprawled out under the fluff. The sun is shining today, so I can get away with wearing one of the day dresses I brought with me. I slip into the maroon chiffon fabric behind my dressing screen. It ties around my waist which means I don’t have to worry about a corset. My favorite part is the long sheer sleeves that button around my wrists. My moonstone pendant hangs around my neck, at the center of the V-cut neckline. I tie my black cloak around my neck and slip my knives under my dress.

Finnian gets to his feet, straightening out his white shirt and brown leather vest before throwing on his quiver and bow and meeting me by the door. I slip my arm through his and make our way toward the front of the castle where we’re meeting Saskia. Finnian needs clothes too, and I wouldn’t want to explore a new city without him. We pass through several extravagant rooms as we glide down the equally extravagant halls. I’ve seen more jewel-covered chandeliers in this castle than I’ve seen over the span

of my entire life. We make it to the last step of the staircase when voices filter through the open door.

“You hate dress shopping.” I recognize Saskia’s voice right away.

“I love dress shopping,” Cayden retorts. He kept the door between our rooms open last night, but I didn’t hear him moving around this morning. When I peeked into his room, there were no signs of him other than an unmade bed and a half-drunk cup of coffee on his nightstand. He must have been out before dawn. Two guards are always standing in front of my door, so it’s not like he left me sleeping and defenseless, even though I always sleep with a knife under my pillow.

“No. You and Ryder love getting drinks at the tavern while I shop for dresses,” Saskia argues.

“Wait, are we not getting drinks at the tavern?” Ryder’s confused voice joins the mix.

“No, I told you, we’re going dress shopping,” Cayden states in a tone that makes me believe he’s pinching the bridge of his nose.

“I thought you were joking. Why are we going dress shopping?” Ryder inquires.

“I think I know the reason,” Saskia sings.

“Elowen!” Cayden cuts off their conversation and steps around Saskia when Finnian and I exit the castle. Saskia leans forward, her ivory day dress flowing around her ankles, and whispers something to Ryder that causes them both to laugh before they slowly follow behind Cayden. He throws them a glare over his shoulder and stops in front of me.

“Saskia Neredras.” She sticks out her hand to Finnian.

“Finnian Eira.” His freckled hand grasps hers.

“You’re coming dress shopping?” I quirk a brow at Cayden.

“I told you that you’re stuck with me. I’m your guard,” he answers.

“Are the fabrics going to bite me?” I clutch my chest and widen my eyes.

“If they do, I promise to rip them from your body. Can’t have you getting hurt on my watch,” he says while grabbing my shoulders and ushering us toward the stairs that descend over the river.

I roll my eyes even though he can’t see. Saskia walks beside me, and the three boys stay behind us. The waterfall looks gorgeous in the sunlight, and I notice a bridge that rises over the peak of the falls; it must be beautiful to walk across. I turn away from the few gondolas gliding along the surface of

the lake as the town rises in front of me. It's much easier to absorb the details now that flower petals aren't flying through the air. The shops along the main road are made of mixed gray stones and dark wood, some have vines creeping up the front and sides, but all have different colored shutters and signs. It's more crowded than any town I've ever been to—horses trot through the cobblestone streets, people walk from shop to shop with baskets on their arms, and others wheel carts of fresh fruits and fine fabric. Swords glimmer in the sunlight outside of blacksmith shops. Dresses in windows we pass make me wonder where Saskia is taking me if *those* don't belong to the seamstress she considers the best. We pass perfumeries, apothecaries, flower shops, and taverns.

It's overwhelmingly real. The group chatters amongst each other, but I just focus on taking in every little detail. I never thought I would walk down a street outside of Aestilian where people could smile at me, knowing exactly who I am. I've hidden who I am for so long that sometimes I don't even feel like myself. Instead of being a ghost, I can be a person. People can know my name and remember my face after I leave a tavern or a shop. I've always known I wanted my dragons, but I never knew how badly I wanted the opportunity to exist.

The scent of vanilla, apples, and cinnamon draws my gaze and makes me stop dead in my tracks. A force slams into me from behind, and I only know it's Cayden when leather-covered arms wrap around me, steadying me, and the scent of him surrounds me. I jump out of his hold as if his touch burns me—it may as well have. I can still feel his hard chest pressing into me, even with the space between us. His touch isn't something I can easily erase from my mind. I'm unable to meet his eyes even though I can feel them on me.

"Is something wrong?" Finnian scrunches his orange brows together. His eyes scan the area my head was turned toward, and a knowing smile slides onto his face. "She wants to go to the bakery."

Saskia peers around me. "That's a good one!" She loops her arm through mine and practically drags me over to the pink trimmed door with a sign in the shape of a cupcake hanging over it.

The bakery is tiny, nestled between two larger shops. The bakery we have in Aestilian is even smaller and usually only sells bread. Nothing too extravagant considering all the ingredients it requires just to make one cake. I inhale the sugary scent deeply as Saskia and I walk over to the counter.

Wicker baskets filled with loaves of bread line the wall behind it. Glass cases with all kinds of pastries stand tall on either side of the counter; stuffed with fruit tarts, flaky and fluffy bread, cream puffs, layered cakes, chocolate muffins, and more.

A short elderly man with flour on his cheek steps out from behind a curtain that I'm assuming leads to the kitchen. "Oh!" he exclaims, wiping his hands on his apron. "I didn't hear the bell. What can I get for you all?"

Finnian, Saskia, and Ryder all stand shoulder to shoulder in front of the glass cabinets, discussing what their pastry of choice will be. I spin around and find Cayden leaning against the far wall of the tiny bakery, hands in the pockets of his black leather pants. They're looser than the ones I've seen him in. He's not in armor, but a sword still hangs around his hips. He's wearing a loose navy blue shirt with the laces by his neck undone, and a black leather jacket over it.

My feet carry me toward him even though my chest winds tighter with every step I take. His eyes track me the entire way. "Not a fan of pastries?" I inquire.

He shrugs. "I haven't eaten enough of them to know what I'm in the mood for."

"Didn't have enough birthday cake as a boy?" I joke, but immediately regret it when his shoulders stiffen slightly.

"Not exactly," he flatly states without looking at me. I know that look, even if he tries to hide it. It makes me want to reach out to him and let him know I understand that look without words. He doesn't need to use words for me to hear his thoughts. The broken and burdened have a language of their own, and only they can understand it.

"I haven't had many either, but I saw one of my favorites in there. We can split it if you want." His unreadable eyes flash back to me. Gods, I feel so stupid. Why did I say that? I blame empathy. Empathy makes me stupid sometimes. It's just more ammunition for him to tease me with.

"Okay," he murmurs, quieting my thoughts. His face inches closer to mine as he pushes off the wall and my breath catches in my throat. I feel like I'm in a trance while we walk over to the now empty counter, and I ask the baker to cut an apple tart in half.

"Commander?" The man pauses the knife over the tart, and it clatters onto the counter as he vigorously wipes his flour-covered hands on his apron. "It's an honor, sir." He sticks a hand over the counter, which Cayden

grasps, giving it a firm shake. His face still hasn't changed from that cool, impassive look, and it makes me recall what Nyrinn said about him. I reach into my pocket to pull out some coins, but a large, calloused hand wraps around mine. My throat tightens as his skin glides against mine.

"It was my idea." My voice comes out as a whisper, which he can hear perfectly because his face is angled down. I don't understand this. I've stared down death but buying a pastry with him is what makes me nervous. Emotions are bullshit; they never do what I want them to do.

I want to be unbothered.

But I am most definitely bothered.

"It's my treat," he says, brushing his thumb over my hand before releasing it. My heart beats so rapidly that I wonder if he can hear it. Even if he can't, my cheeks have a permanent flush to them. I've concluded that we need to get into another argument so I can reel in my hormones. He accepts the tart, and we leave the bakery with the others. The cool air feels lovely on my cheeks.

"The dress shop is around the block," Saskia calls out through a mouth full of muffin. Cayden holds the pastry out to me, and I pluck half from his palm, secretly watching him from the corner of my eye to gauge his reaction. I hope he doesn't hate it. His jaw flexes as he chews on the sweet flavors.

"Well?" I ask.

"I'm giving you a new title."

"Oh?"

"Bane of my existence." He licks his lips and taps his free hand against his jaw, appearing very contemplative. "And pastry advisor."

"You like it?" A smile breaks out across my face.

The corner of his lips rises. "I do, angel."

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN



S hopping with Saskia is like a fever dream. Finnian picked out a few patterns he liked and placed his order within the first hour we got here. Saskia won't let me off the hook that easily, not that I mind. She has a keen eye for fashion and clearly knows what styles flatter me. She also placed an order for some new winter clothes after noticing some patterns and fabrics she liked. The boys are camped out on the couches at front of the store, probably grumbling about how long we're taking.

"I promise just one last dress," she says with an excited smile while holding a swatch of fabric.

"You said that for the past five dresses," Ryder's annoyed tone drifts from the front of the shop.

"Elowen and I are having fun. Go be annoyed somewhere else," she scolds with one hand on her hip and the other pointing at a rack of clothes as if Ryder will materialize within the tulle. "You'll practically live in sweaters when you come to the border, but you'll need the dresses for political meetings and dinners. We'll place orders for ball gowns as we need them." We already sorted out an order of several dresses, heavily knit sweaters, fleece-lined leggings and pants, cloaks, boots, scarves, and undergarments because I wasn't lying to Cayden. I *love* matching sets.

"The border?" My thoughts linger on the place she mentioned.

"That's where the three of us spend most of our time. You'll be there soon enough." She hushes my next question by holding up a champagne-colored fabric in her hands. "This would look good on you."

I place my hand on the fabric, lowering it so I can see her face again. "How about I pay for the stuff we already sorted out and get the testy trio to

the tavern?”

“Yes!” Finnian and Ryder shout in tandem, Cayden’s voice doesn’t join the mix.

“What happened to solidarity?” Ryder scrutinizes in a hushed voice.

“I wasn’t aware that the two of you rehearsed the response,” Cayden fires back.

“So, you *do* want to go to the tavern,” Ryder remarks.

“Obviously I want to go to the fucking tavern.” Cayden’s attempt to whisper is a failed attempt.

“You have no idea how nice it is to have a girl around,” Saskia sighs while throwing an arm around my shoulders and guiding me to the counter so I can settle my bill. The total at the bottom of the page nearly topples me over. I sign my name, even though every pen stroke riddles me with guilt, and place the money on the counter. The testy trio scramble to their feet as Saskia ushers us straight out of the shop.

“Quick, before they change their minds!” Ryder whisper-shouts to the pair.

Saskia rolls her eyes, but her lips turn down when she faces me, “Did I keep you there too long?”

“Don’t listen to them,” I brush a dismissive hand in the boy’s direction. “I had fun.” I mean it, and I mean it even more when a relieved smile spreads across her face. I don’t want to be unprepared or underdressed in comparison to others, and I’m honestly grateful for her guidance.

The tavern they want to go to really is directly across the street from the dress shop. We bypass the few drunks standing around high-top tables outside the tavern and walk through the dark brown door. The noise immediately pummels my senses; it’s so loud in here, given the mixture of a band, dancing, and people in general.

“Take the girls to a table. Finnian and I can grab drinks!” Ryder shouts to Cayden over the noise before heading toward the bar. Cayden places a hand on the small of my back and gently urges me forward. Saskia keeps her hand in mine so we don’t get separated by the people walking aimlessly without direction or caution.

Copper lanterns hang down from ceiling beams, high enough so people don’t hit their heads but low enough to illuminate the sea of dark wood tables of varying heights and sizes. It would be cozy in here if it wasn’t for the number of people occupying the space. Several patrons are playing or

watching card games, placing bets on upcoming horse races and fights, but my favorite is the dancing taking place on the other side of the tavern. Couples intertwine, sway, and leap to a merry jig played by fiddles, drums, and pipes. There's an upper floor, but Saskia guides us toward the back left of the tavern, where it's slightly less populated. I can also hear a bit better back here. People throw smiles and bows in Cayden and Saskia's direction as we pass.

"I can't believe it." I turn my head so Cayden can hear me. He's so close that the back of my head brushes his shoulder. "There are people here that actually like you." Saskia finds us a small table with five chairs around it and tosses her cloak over one of them. I mirror her actions and take a seat.

"Funny," Cayden slides his leather jacket off his shoulders before sitting next to me, "I thought the same thing about you when you were saying goodbye to your guards."

"You just have a natural talent for pissing me off."

"It's precisely why I reserve my bad qualities for you."

"You have good qualities?" I gasp.

"You'll see them one day," he smirks.

Finnian and Ryder come back to the table with a tray of twenty shots in Finnian's hands. "We placed an order for regular drinks that'll be brought over, but in the meantime...." Finnian waves his hands over the tray of shots and plops down in the seat on my other side.

"The two of you aren't allowed to gauge how many shots to order," Saskia mutters, staring down the tray like it's about to bite her but grabbing a shot like the rest of us.

"We should toast," Finnian suggests while holding his shot in the air. "Help me." He nudges me with his elbow.

I search my brain, trying to come up with something as four sets of eyes flash toward me. "To having a common enemy?"

"Fair point," Ryder acknowledges. "I'll drink to that."

"To wanting to murder the same people and not each other!" Finnian cheers as we clink our glasses together and throw back a shot of whiskey.

We're a really fucked up group.

I think I like it.

We keep going until there are no shots left. I slam my fourth empty glass on the table, feeling delightfully giddy.

“That’s my girl!” Finnian nudges me in the side; a broad smile covers his face while he takes in my reddened cheeks and glossy eyes. Alcohol goes straight to my head. I’m a lightweight, and he loves it. Downing four shots in a row probably wasn’t the best decision, but bad decisions often lead to the best memories. My tongue feels dry; I want more shots.

I cup my hands around my mouth and lean toward his ear, “We should get more.”

He chuckles softly, “Cider first.”

I frown, “What if I chase every shot with a sip of cider?”

“I can’t encourage your bad ideas in front of the new people. Save them for later.” I’m sure everyone else can hear our conversation judging by their snickers...maybe we weren’t as quiet as I thought we were.

“Your drinks,” says a male server while placing our drinks around the table, giving a double take to Finnian. I nudge him with my leg under the table, and he nudges me right back. Finnian meets the server’s eyes while taking a sip from his pint. Color rises on the server’s tan cheeks. “Let me know if you need anything else,” he mutters before scurrying away in the direction of the bar.

“I love bubbles,” Saskia marvels while looking at the glass of cider in front of her. Yay, a fellow ale hater!

“I know. They’re like friends inside of your drink,” I sigh while staring at my own glass of cider. Who knew bubbly alcoholic fruit juice could be so mesmerizing?

“Exactly!” She claps her hands in front of her, causing Ryder to jump in his seat and Cayden to snicker again. Her dark eyes flash to Cayden, “When do you go back to the border?”

“Yes, normally, you’d be at the border by now.” Ryder’s eyes follow suit. “I wonder what’s different this time.” He leans back in his seat, easing one leg over the other while clutching his pint and taking a sip.

“Soon,” Cayden replies shortly.

“When can I go?” I ask, turning my attention to him.

“When I’m sure it’s safe,” he answers without looking at me.

I narrow my eyes on him, but he seems to be in a broody mood, so I don’t push him. He’s fully aware I can take care of myself, and I’d rather not sprint headfirst toward the Imirath army without being prepared. The other three have fallen into a conversation and—oh gods! What if one of them tells Finnian about the heist before I do? I forgot to ask Cayden if they

know. My brain is too fuzzy to process all the damage that could cause. I bite my lip and my hands tighten around the cool glass of cider. The chilling sensation is helping me keep my nerves at bay. Cayden's head whips in my direction, as if my mood shift set off alarm bells in his mind. He dips his hand between us and pulls my chair closer to his, draping his arm across the back of it. My body fights the mixture of wanting to inch closer and wanting to sprint away. My brain and body are at constant odds when it comes to him, which is something I've never had to deal with and also something I loathe.

"What's wrong?" He still wears his broodiness on the forefront of his expression, but the crease between his brows hints at curiosity...maybe even concern.

Perhaps it's the alcohol that makes my lips loose because I find myself inching closer to his ear, close enough for our thighs to press together. "Do they know...." I can't exactly talk about the heist in an open tavern. "Do they know where we're going?"

I pull my face back so I can see him again. It takes a second for recognition to wash over his features, but when it does, he subtly shakes his head no. Relief floods through me because it makes me feel like I'm not making the wrong decision by withholding things until I have more information. And if I'm a bad person, at least I'm not alone in my deviance.

The music abruptly changes. Finnian jolts up in his seat and his wide eyes swing in my direction, "You owe me a dance, my lady." He stretches to his full height, bowing at the waist and offering me a hand.

"We'll talk later," Cayden says into my ear.

I place my hand in Finnian's, which is the only thing that keeps me steady while rushing to the dance floor. The alcohol in my body washes over me like a fresh wave of giddiness. He stands a few feet in front of me, hands clasped behind his back. The first note sounds, it's a sharp beat of a drum, and Finnian bows at the waist, outstretching his hand again. The second note sounds, and I curtsy. The third note sounds, and I place my hand in Finnian's. I twirl under his arm, his hand clasps around my waist, and we join the thrall of dancers.

"He hasn't taken his eyes off of you," Finnian shouts over the music.

He doesn't have to say Cayden's name. There's nobody else he could be talking about. We left the conversation on an unfinished note. Maybe he's

watching me because he's wondering if I'll tell Finnian right now. "He's guarding me. It's part of his job."

Finnian snorts, spinning me again and resuming the steps. "He never complained once during dress shopping. He looked like he wanted to ram his head through a wall, but he never said a single thing." We both stumble slightly, but it only adds to the joy building up in my chest from a mixture of music, dancing, and cider. A smile beams on my face as Finnian lifts me in the air in tandem with another sharp drumbeat. He places me back on my feet, and we follow the rest of the steps as best as our floundering feet allow us.

"Stop meddling!" I laugh. "We both know nothing can happen between us."

"I know men, darling." I don't like the way his tone is changing. This is usually when he plays to win. "When this dance is over, go to the bar—order a drink, stand there, I don't care. I give it five minutes before he's there."

"Finnian, you're being ridiculous. That proves nothing," I say as we finish the final set of steps.

"If it proves nothing, then do it. You have *nothing* to lose." We stop in place, and some people in the tavern clap while requesting another dance. "I'll keep my eyes on you the whole time. I'm staying on for another dance." He treads backward and finds a boy with long blonde hair to dance with next.

I roll my eyes and fist my dress so that I don't trip over the hem on my way to the bar...or let it drag through anything unsanitary. My eyes spot an open place at the counter, and I slide into it, placing my elbows on the wooden surface while glancing at the different barrels of wine, cider, and ale behind it.

"Well, aren't you a beauty," a gruff voice next to me states. I was so preoccupied reading the names of all the places the barrels are imported from that I didn't realize someone approached me. A man in black armor inches forward. His black beard is cut close to his face, and his dark eyes bore into me.

"Good eye," I note.

On my long list of pet peeves, men randomly coming up to me to flirt is one of them. If I give a smile? Sure, maybe. But if my head is down, I haven't made eye contact, or I haven't smiled at you? Leave me alone. He

leans his elbow on the bar and inches further into my personal space, stretching a hand toward my arm. I'm about to swat it away but someone else does, pinning the man's wrist to the bar.

"Angel, I was wondering what time you want to leave?" Cayden asks calmly in my ear, as if he's not making a grown man squirm beneath his strong grip. His arms cage me on either side, but it doesn't make me uncomfortable...it makes me feel the opposite. I spin in his arms and press my back into the bar so I can look at him. His tone may be calm, but he's far from it. That icy glare of his is pinned on the man's face and I have a feeling he's committing it to memory. "I'm going to assume you didn't see her stumble on her way over here," Cayden snarls before turning his intensity on me. "What did he say to you? I saw you stiffen."

"He said I was pretty."

"Damn understatement," he mutters. My breath catches in my throat, but he can't hear it over the roar of the tavern or his raging temper.

"C-Commander, I'm sorry. I didn't know she's you—"

"Leave." Cayden releases his hold without taking his eyes off me. I watch the man scramble away from the corner of my eye, tripping over himself to get away from Cayden.

Yours.

The man was going to say that I'm Cayden's. It's such a stupid notion to belong to someone. I wholeheartedly believe I'll never belong to anyone. But given our current situation, I suppose in some backward way, I am his. I'm temporarily his, and he's temporarily mine. Neither of us can reach our goals without each other, and those goals mean more than anything else ever could. We're each other's leverage, a means to an end. My eyes pop over to Finnian, and he flashes me one of the biggest smirks I've ever seen on his face. I don't even think I was standing here for two minutes before Cayden came over.

"I was about to hit him before you stole the show," I say while swaying between his arms.

His ice melts away as his eyes ping back and forth, following my swaying. "Would you have even been able to land the hit?"

"You want to go a few rounds with me, soldier?" My words don't carry as much of a threat as they normally would.

"I'm feeling like a gentleman; I'll give you the first shot." His sneer has all but completely vanished, and I know I'm in dangerous territory because

the only thought my alcohol-induced brain can manage is how handsome he looks.

“Did you come over here to dance with me?” I jest.

He scoffs, “I don’t dance, angel.”

I’m about to push him toward the dancing, but a cold drink slides down the front of my dress, bringing me back to reality and physically washing the delirious thoughts from my brain. Cayden’s glare is back in full force as he removes one arm from the bar and reaches toward the person that spilled their drink on me.

“I’m so sorry; I lost my balance.” The person’s eyes glance between Cayden and me.

I reach for Cayden’s outstretched hand and rein it back in, ignoring the weight of his hand in mine. Pressing my other hand to his chest, I slowly back him away from the bar. “Calm down, hazel-eyed heathen. It’s nothing a bath can’t fix.” My voice is a bit breathless. His thin cotton shirt enables me to feel the hard ridges of his muscles.

Cayden blinks in confusion and looks down at me. “What did you call me?”

My mouth goes dry. Damn alcohol for making my filter disappear! “I called you an idiot,” I stammer. “People are going to think we’re together if you keep acting like this.”

“Let them think whatever they want if it keeps creeps away from you. It’s not like it can happen,” he rushes out.

“Right.” My hand on his chest suddenly feels far too personal, and I drop it away along with my eyes. Of course, it’s just a protective measure. We’re two people too consumed by revenge to let anything else in. “We should go back to the castle,” I add. Finnian has made his way back to the table, so I wave over to the others and ignore the way Cayden is still looking at me like he wants to say something else. Our hands are covered in thorns, and every touch draws more blood.

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN



“Do you still want to talk tonight, or do you want to sleep off the whiskey and cider?” Cayden asks as we enter my room. His tone is back to being playful.

I flip him off, “We’ll talk. I’m taking a bath first because I smell like ale.” My hand plucks at the neckline of my dress that was drenched while standing at the bar. The walk home helped sober me up, and the five of us went down to the kitchen for some water and bread before retiring for the night. “Shut the door between our rooms after you leave,” I call out. Hyacinth began drawing a bath for me while I was in the kitchen, so the steaming tub is ready for me to slip inside.

“I’ll grab some fresh linen and then I’ll be back to place it beside the tub for you, my lady.” Hyacinth curtsies and exits the bathing chamber.

I step out of my dress and sink into the bath. She prepared the vanilla and lavender oils just as I like them. I pour another glass of water from the crystal pitcher on the stand next to the tub and drink half of it before setting it down. My head doesn’t feel as fuzzy as it did at the tavern, and I’ve had enough water that I won’t be hungover tomorrow, which is a blessing. The door creaks open behind me, and I remember how I wanted to ask Hyacinth about using the curlers.

“I was wondering if you could teach me ho—” my sentence is cut off when a pair of rough hands grip my shoulders and shove me under the water. The tub is so deep that it doesn’t take much to submerge me, and my legs aren’t long enough to reach the end. My hands push against the bottom, fighting to breach the surface, but the person holding me down has incredible strength. It’s not Hyacinth, that’s for sure.

I choke on soapy water, and my chest burns from the lack of air in my lungs. I give up trying to shove myself above the water and attempt to pry their hands off. It's no use. Another pathetic choke escapes my lips—the bubbles rise, mocking me. I reach my hand toward the side table and grip the crystal pitcher in my weak hand, slamming it over my assailant's head in a desperate attempt to free myself. Their hands move from my shoulders and latch onto my neck, squeezing hard. The light blurs above the water. I feel like I did in my cell, looking out at the world through a sliver between stones. I can't die like this. I don't need a knife when I have my mind.

My hands pad against the bottom of the tub and my fingers close around a shard of glass from the pitcher's handle. I plunge the glass into their wrist, and blood clouds the water around me. I pull it out and plunge it in again, cutting a vertical line down their wrist. If I die, I'm taking my assailant with me. I'll give them a wound so deep that even their soul will wear it in the afterlife. They may think they found me in a helpless position, but I'm never helpless. If I wasn't using glass, then I would've used my teeth. The blood grows thicker in the tub, obscuring my vision until all I'm surrounded by is the deep red cloud of my sins.

I'd rather drown in my sins than drown in my goodness.

The hands vanish from my body, and I grip the side of the tub, hauling myself forward. I cough water onto the floor while I cling to the porcelain as if it's my lifeline. A pair of strong arms wrap around me, and a sob of relief shudders through me. My head is buried into a warm neck while I take in heavy gulps of air.

"Secure the fucking perimeter!" Cayden commands someone beyond the door.

"Is she hurt?" Ryder's rattled voice filters in.

"Go now!" he barks.

"Cayden," I wheeze.

"I'm right here." He pulls me closer, and my chest presses into the side of the tub. "Elowen...the blood, is it yours?" His tone is frantic. One arm stays wrapped around me, holding me upright, but the other slides up toward my head and gently pulls me from the crook of his neck. He cradles my face in his rough hand—the gentle touch is so opposite to the feel of him, all hard muscles, sharp lines, and glares. I didn't think it was possible for Cayden to look like this...so distressed.

“It’s not my blood,” I manage through my raspy throat. His eyes flash toward my neck and the way his nostrils flare leads me to believe that bruises are already forming. My body starts to tremble as my brain catches up to the gravity of what just happened. An assassin got into my room. Cayden must have slit his throat because a wide arc of blood drips down from the wall, and a man lies crumpled in a crimson puddle on the tile floor.

“They’ve never gotten that close,” I whisper.

His arms instantly tighten on me, and I’m pulled into his neck again. “You’re safe now,” he murmurs while stroking the back of my head. “You’re safe with me, angel.”

I don’t know if it’s the way he says the words like a promise or if it’s the way he feels like the only steady formation while the world shakes around me, but I do something I’ve never done with anyone other than Finnian. I let his comfort soak into me and loop my arms around his neck to pull him even closer. Even if we’re both covered in thorns, I want him to pierce me right now because he’s the only person that understands the depth of why we need each other, and maybe he needs this reassurance just as much as I do. Watching him slip away would be the equivalent of watching my dragons slip away. I can continue to hate relying on him in the morning; I’ll allow myself to forget tonight. He reaches to the side to unplug the tub before his hand returns to my head, resuming the soothing strokes.

“I heard the glass shatter through the door. I’m sorry I wasn’t here sooner.”

I shake my head in his neck, which feels a lot like nuzzling, but he doesn’t seem bothered by it, and I’m too shaken up to care. “You’re here,” is all I can manage to get out because it’s true.

“Of course I’m here.” His voice is comforting but his heart is beating uncontrollably.

My mind can’t wrap around the fact that when I needed help...it was Cayden that ran to me. Even if he only did it because of the dragons and the fact he needs me alive to get them, he’s still the one that’s here, holding me against him. The rim of the tub presses into my chest, we’re hardly touching, but it’s the only thing keeping me from running out of this castle and screaming in frustration. He stays silent until the water completely drains from the tub, leaving a rim of blood and exposing the glass at the bottom.

“I’m going to lift you from the tub now,” he says quietly, as if he doesn’t want to disturb the peace between us.

I stiffen in his hold and move my head out of his neck so I can look at him, “No.” I don’t want him to see my naked body or feel his hard muscles pressing against my exposed skin. It’s a feeling I never want to unlock because it’s another part of him I doubt I’ll be able to erase from my memory. “I can stand.”

“There’s glass on the bottom, I don’t want you to step on it,” he bites his lip in contemplation, still speaking in a soft tone while stroking my hair. “Okay, I have an idea.” He reaches down into the tub and lightly brushes his fingers over a spot to make sure there’s no glass there. He holds his hands in front of me while I grip the edge of the tub. “Guide my hands. I don’t want to touch you anywhere that you’re not comfortable. If you step on a piece of glass, then I’ll keep you steady or lift you before it cuts deep. I’ll get close to your face, and I’ll keep my eyes on yours the entire time. Then, once you’re steady, I’ll keep my eyes on yours while I reach for the robe on the hook,” he pauses for a moment, his eyes flashing down to the bruises on my neck before meeting mine again. “Let me help you, Elowen.”

Every instinct I have should tell me to shove him away, to tell him to leave me and join Ryder in securing the perimeter because that’s what will make me feel safest. But it’s not what I want. I feel like I’ve entered some parallel universe because rather than him just being here, I feel like he understands me. His eyes have no trace of judgment in them; he’s not looking at me like I’m broken and need help. I’ve survived this long on my own, and I know damn well I can get through tonight without him—but why should I? He’s my ally, my true ally, and he’s the only person that knows the depth of our deal. He’s looking at me in a way that was most likely reflected on my face in the bakery. I didn’t have to reach out to him, I didn’t have to split an apple tart with him, but I wanted to because I know what it’s like to not know how to ask for help and to feel like you’re screaming in the middle of a room, but nobody can hear you.

He hears the words that I don’t have to say. It’s what pushes me to close my hands around his wrists and guide his hands to my hips. His face inches closer to mine, so close that our foreheads press together. His hazel eyes dilate, and I hear his small intake of breath when I wrap my arms around his neck.

“If your eyes wander, I’ll cut them out myself,” my breathless tone doesn’t convey the gravity of my threat.

“They won’t,” he states in a low, gravelly tone. “Ready?”

“Mhmm,” I don’t trust my voice.

Slowly...so slowly, he tightens his hold on me and eases me to my feet. My eyes stay on his, and his stay on mine, but I don’t think I could look away if I tried. There’s something mesmerizing about the steadiness in his gaze and the way the brown in his irises bleed into green. His breathing deepens when I’m steady on my feet, and his hands linger until he’s sure no glass pierces me under my full weight. Then, just as he promised, his hand reaches to the side without ever taking his eyes off mine. He slides the blue silk robe behind my shoulders, and I glide my arms through the holes. His fingers brush down the sides of my arms while I fasten the sash around my waist.

“There’s glass and blood on the floor. I’m still wearing my boots, so I’m going to carry you.” His raspy voice sends a shock straight through my body and makes me want to press my legs together. How is it that he can make me want to stab him one second and then feel like this? I don’t even want to label exactly what this feeling is. I just know it’s overwhelming, suffocating.

He steps back once I’m clothed and scoops me up bridal style in his arms, carrying me out of the tub. My body presses into his muscles, and my hands loop around his neck. I wonder what it would feel like for him to hold me up in a different position.

No. No. Naughty brain.

I take one last look at the man crumpled on my floor before Cayden turns into his room and carries me toward his bathing chamber.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



I don't realize I rested my head on Cayden's shoulder and completely relaxed in his hold until he stops in his bathing chamber while holding my noodle-like limbs.

"Angel?" he asks, a hint of a smile in his tone.

"I'm awake!" I exclaim, yelling at my muscles to wake up. He places me on my feet in front of him and reaches down to turn the dials on the tub.

"Use whatever you want. I'm going to grab you something to change into." I watch him slip from the bathing chamber before taking in the sights around me. It's the exact same as my room.

"I didn't peg you for a gold accent kind of guy," I remark as he places some clothes on the counter.

"It's not my normal room. I'll be out here when you're done." He shuts the door behind him, and the running water isn't loud enough to cancel out my thoughts. He just confirmed what I suspected but didn't want to ask—he moved rooms for me.

I rinse off and resist the urge to smile while uncapping the soap. I lather myself in Cayden scented suds before rinsing off and stepping out of the porcelain tub to wrap myself in a towel. Padding over to the mirror to assess the damage, my fingers poke at the long black and blue bruises that wrap around my neck. They're going to be annoying to cover up. I drop the towel and pick up the clothes Cayden laid out for me—*they're his*. I look back in the mirror while holding his shirt to make sure I'm not hallucinating. Nope. My doe eyes are staring back at me, Cayden's shirt in hand, and heart sputtering in chest. The shirt sleeves fall past my hands, and the pants pool around my feet. The only reason they're staying up is because I pulled the

drawstring as tight as possible. I run my hands through my hair and shuffle over to the door.

Cayden is sitting on one of his couches with a glass of whiskey in hand. His gaze lifts from the paper he's scanning when he hears me. He raises his glass to his smirking lips, "Perfect fit."

I raise my hands to flip him off, which he can't see since my hands are covered in black fabric. My body sinks into the couch next to him, but I leave a cushion between us. He leans forward to pour me a cup of tea from the tray he must have ordered. I mumble a thank you when he hands me the warm drink. The liquid feels wonderful on my throat, and I quickly down it before pouring a second.

"What did you mean when you said they never got that close?" His tone is quiet, but I don't mistake it for calm. Cayden is the type of person to lock down his anger and weaponize it when he needs to.

I lick my lips and place the mug on the table so I can fuss with the sleeves that pool around my hands. There's no sense in avoiding it. "I've encountered assassins before. My father didn't know for sure if I was dead or alive, so they never came in heavy waves, but they came. I was prepared for them most of the time; I knew when they crossed the Fintan, just like how I knew you crossed the Fintan. They thought they had the upper hand on me, but they're dead now, and I'm still breathing." My shoulders shrug; I stopped mulling over assassins years ago when I realized I could be just as deadly as them. "That's not what I wanted to talk about."

The last thing I want to do is rehash my past with Cayden. Talking about it can't erase what happened to me. I want to move forward. Sometimes, when I don't talk about it, it makes me feel like I can ignore it, even if it's only for a few moments. Our bodies are maps of our pasts, but not every scar is physically marked along the journey. Those are the scars that bleed like open wounds on bad days.

"Right," he clears his throat and closes his eyes briefly. When he opens them again, the quiet rage is filed away, hidden from the surface and locked down for later use. "I remember you saying something about my eyes. Did you want to discuss the shade in depth?" I slowly turn my head in his direction. "Brown-eyed barbarian," a challenging smirk covers his face.

I gasp while reaching for the pillow behind me. So he did hear me! Oh my gods, he's never going to let me live this down. I smother the smile that covers his face with the pillow. His laughter is muffled by the cushion but

floods up to my ears in full force when I pull it back. I smack him with it again—this feels better than it should.

“I am a brown-eyed beauty. You’re the heathen,” I clarify while smacking him again. He grips my wrist before I can hit him a fourth time and plucks the pillow out of my fingers.

“I never said you can’t be both,” he points out while glancing at my smile.

“Let’s talk before someone brings you a report,” I say through my fit of laughter while sitting back down. He takes a sip of whiskey to sober himself. “The night we first met; I heard two people talking about you wanting me because of my dragon link. If that wasn’t Saskia and Ryder, who was it?”

“It was them,” Cayden confirms. “Saskia was with us for the first leg of the trip. She traveled back with a group of soldiers after a few days because she had a political meeting she couldn’t miss.”

“But you said they don’t know about the heist.”

“They know I want you because of your link to the dragons; they don’t know we’re going to get the dragons. I would still want you here even if we weren’t planning the heist.”

“Why?” I hate the way my chest constricts at his words.

“Because I wouldn’t want Garrick to get to you before I did.” Lovely, nothing like a reason that makes me feel like a commodity. “I also didn’t tell them because I don’t want you to think that everything you tell me goes straight to them. Why didn’t you tell Finnian?”

It feels nice to know him and I can have conversations that stay between us. It makes me feel like my words are valued, like they hold weight. I take a deep breath while reaching for my tea again. “I want to ease him into it. We’ve been removed from the world for our entire friendship. I can’t just throw everything at him and expect him to be fine.”

He nods, “Was it hard growing up like that?”

I hate that he’s looking at me with a calculating gaze. Ready to decipher any statement I make and file it somewhere in his brain to pull out for future reference. His calculating expression is hardly different from his impassive expression; he probably doesn’t even realize I can decipher it. The only difference is that his right brow is slightly higher than his left, and sometimes his lips pinch in the corner—but he never does either at the same time.

“It was fine until it wasn’t,” I say while getting up from the couch and walking over to the desk that’s piled high with papers. “You’ve started looking at maps?”

“Garrick is rigorous with security. His castle didn’t get nicknamed *The Impenetrable Castle* for nothing. We need to find a way in that won’t be under heavy guard,” he answers.

I bite my lip while looking down at the several maps on the desk. I wasn’t allowed in most parts of the castle, save the dungeon and throne room on occasion. Even when I was allowed in the throne room, I was blindfolded while I walked through the halls. I wonder if the seer that relayed the prophecy saw this, me, aligning myself with Imirath’s enemy. One of the maps catches my eye and I pluck it from the surface. It’s a map of the Eastern side of the castle. It’s the side that leads into the Etril Forest. I know this because it’s the side of the castle that I fled from, but the exit we took is missing from the map.

“Where did you get this?”

“Saskia drew it. She has spies in Imirath,” his voice is close; he’s peering over my shoulder. “I’m going to have to tell her about the heist soon.”

“I know.” It’s good she has spies there; they’ll have more knowledge than I do. I won’t be able to offer much but I can offer this small piece of information. “There’s an exit missing.” I place the map on the desk again and drag my finger along the surface while grabbing a quill from an ink pot. “There,” I circle the spot on the map, “it leads to the dungeon.”

Cayden’s brows scrunch together while he drags a hand through his hair. “What’s it used for?”

“It was used to smuggle goods into the castle during sieges. It hasn’t been used in years. I don’t know if they have guards there now, but there weren’t any while I was there. It’s so dark down there that you can’t even see the door against the stone unless you stay in the dungeon long enough for your eyes to adjust.” Cayden stiffens next to me, and I realize I revealed too much. I forgot I’m talking to someone that hangs onto every syllable that comes out of my mouth.

“I’ll have Saskia investigate it in a few days. She’s going to get suspicious when we hand her the dragon text.” I’m thankful he doesn’t pry into my previous statement. “Now, onto the next matter of business before

the report comes.” I raise my brows at him, urging him to continue. “We hatched this plan; we should be the ones to see it through,” he finishes.

“I agree,” I respond without a moment’s hesitation. I’ve already thought this through since the night Cayden and I met in the forest. I would never ask Finnian to accompany me into Imirath, I don’t want him there, and I’m not dumb enough to think I can go alone. Imirath is a place I never thought I would see again, let alone alongside someone I don’t trust, but that’s the reality of the situation. “Just you and I,” I state. No extra soldiers, no friends, just us. If he betrays me, at least I’ll be close enough to my dragons to burn him. No matter how much kindness he shows me, I must remember who he is. I benefit him right now, but if a better offer comes along, he’ll stab me in the back without warning.

“Just you and I,” he echoes. A knock rattles the door against its hinges, and both of us straighten behind the desk. “Enter,” Cayden calls out.

The door practically flies open and bangs into the wall. Finnian surges forward, eyes on me, “Thank the gods.” It’s the only thing I hear before he latches his arms around me and lifts me off my feet in an embrace I feel throughout my entire body. He shoves his head into the crook of my neck, and a sob vibrates against my skin. The noise makes me feel like someone stabbed me through the heart. “Ryder told me you were fine, but I needed to see you.”

“I’m fine, I promise,” I murmur while running my fingers through his curls. His tears soak the collar of my shirt. “I would’ve found you, but I thought you were asleep.”

“I heard the guards moving around, and then I saw Ryder in the hall. He told me someone tried to kill you,” Finnian says while setting me on my feet and moving his hands to my shoulders as if he still needs to reassure himself that I’m here. “What the fuck happened to your neck?” His tears turn into flames dripping from his eyes.

“I’ll explain later.” I reach up to wipe his cheeks. “We’ll go over the report, and then we’ll talk.” He lets out a shaky breath before nodding his head. He spins me on my heels and wraps his arms around my shoulders while placing his chin on top of my head. I stay here, locked in his arms, while Ryder gets ready to give the report. Finnian is big on needing physical reassurance, so his need to hold me is something I expect.

“I’m just going to say the worst part first,” Ryder begins, a grimace contorting his face. “Garrick placed a bounty on your head, and it’s high

enough to make even the holiest person in Ravaryn contemplate murder.” Finnian stiffens behind me, and Cayden tosses back the remainder of his whiskey. The tension in the room rises with the stakes of the game we’re playing. It’s something all of us expected, but not this quickly.

“How paternal he thinks I’m worth so much,” I bitterly snicker.

“I’d place a bounty on his head if it was worth it,” Cayden states while strapping a sword around his waist. His eyes are back to blazing with the flames of his barely restrained rage.

“Why isn’t it worth it?” Finnian asks, but I have a feeling I already know the answer.

“An assassin would be quick. Garrick deserves a slow, painful death,” he says it with the same level of informality someone uses when ordering a pint.

“Not quick like drowning,” I joke, but I’m met with two glares and Finnian’s arms tighten around me. “Okay, too soon. Noted.”

“The assassin tonight was dressed like a servant, which is why the guards in front of Elowen’s room didn’t suspect anything. I think he slipped in during the banquet and just bided his time before making his move. The perimeter is secured, but we’re going to have to go into town to figure out more answers,” Ryder finishes off.

“We’ll head there now,” Cayden states, tossing on his leather jacket and a broadsword across his back. “I’m changing the guards by the door and ordering them not to let anyone into the room, no matter who they are. The guards that were at her door will be on stable and weapon cleaning duty for the foreseeable future. I want to start with the man that spilled a drink on Elowen at the tavern.”

Ryder purses his lips, waiting for Cayden to explain. “He knew she was going to be in the bath when we got back.” Cayden looks at me from across the room, scanning me from head to toe. He opens his mouth before closing it again, looking conflicted, almost like he doesn’t want to leave me. “If you need me, just hand a letter off to a servant, and I’ll come back.”

Part of me wants to offer to go with him, but I need space to sort myself out. I let my eyes glance over him even though I know I should just turn away now. “Be safe,” I say, turning my back on him and leading Finnian into my room.

CHAPTER
NINETEEN



I don't remember what time Finnian and I fell asleep; all I remember is holding his hand while dozing off. I only slept for two hours tops before I woke up feeling restless, so I plucked one of my favorite novels from the mantle and reread my favorite chapters...some particularly steamy chapters. We used to have sleepovers like that when we were younger and one of us woke up screaming, but we climbed into bed right after Cayden and Ryder left because reality felt a lot like a nightmare. He stayed in my room while I got ready, then we went to his, and now we're waiting for Ailliard in a sitting room to have breakfast together. It's early, most people in the castle aren't awake, but I want to get to Ailliard before he hears about the assassin from someone else.

I bring the steaming cup of coffee to my lips and take a sip, glancing at Finnian over the rim. He still doesn't look fully present, and we have to split up later because he has a meeting with Vareveth's advisors—no monarchs allowed. It's an outdated rule, and Finnian will tell me whatever they say, but some people love conforming to peer pressure from dead people.

My limbs stiffen in my seat as the sound of boots slapping against tile grows in volume. Drinking coffee probably isn't the best idea considering my nerves are bouncing off the walls, but nothing starts a morning off quite like self-destructive habits. Finnian bites his nails while pushing eggs around his plate; it's a nervous tick he's always had. My fighting gear feels tight against my skin. My hand itches to pull on the collar, but I force myself to keep still. The door creaks open, and Ailliard slips into the room.

“Morning.” He looks the both of us over with curiosity and skepticism. Finnian is dressed for politics in a freshly pressed white tunic, but I’m in full fighting gear—knives line both of my legs. It feels good to wear them after what happened last night. It’s a barrier between me and the world.

“Morning.” I force my voice to stay even.

“How did you sleep?” Finnian asks, even though it’s muffled by his hand.

“Fine,” Ailliard draws the small word out as he takes a seat. “Someone tell me what’s going on.” Finnian’s eyes flash to me while he waits for me to continue. Is there even a right way to say this?

“Something happened last night.” I place my cup back on its saucer. “An assassin made it into my room.”

Ailliard’s hands shoot forward to grip the edge of the table. “Do they not have guards by your room?”

“They do, but the assassin dressed as a servant. General Neredras thinks he came in during the banquet,” I state.

Ailliard shakes his head while looking down at the table, disbelief coating his features which soon morphs into anger. “We should go home,” he starts to get up from the table, “we’ll leave today. We can cross the border before they catch on.” Absolutely not. He needs to stop using running as a solution. Garrick knows I’m alive; it doesn’t make sense for me to leave when the damage is done.

“Sit,” I command, and he falls into his chair. “Take a breath.”

“Elowen, I told you that I won’t lose you like I lost your mother. Garrick is no threat to be taken lightly. Please, try to move forward.” Gods, I want to keep a leash on my temper, and normally I have a better hold on it, but it drives me up a wall when he brings up Garrick like he’s no more than a bump in the road.

“Stop trying to make me into some benevolent being when all I’ve ever known is violence. I will never stop wanting revenge. Stop trying to derail me from the path I’ve chosen for myself.” My temper rises with every word that falls from my lips.

“This path is destructive,” he tries to reason. Finnian’s hand drops to the arm of his chair, and his knuckles turn white, but he stays quiet. His body subtly inches closer to mine.

“It’s only self-destructive if I lose. You told me you were on my side when we left,” I argue.

“I am, undoubtedly, but someone tried to kill you in your own room. Have some sense!” he shouts.

“I survived for ten years in a place where I wished someone would have killed me—praying for them to beat me hard enough for my life to end. You don’t think there’s part of me that wishes I could let it go?” I get to my feet and toss my napkin on the table. The only reason I forced myself to stay alive, even after I left Imirath, was because of my dragons. They’re still in the castle, and I’m going to get them back because life as a prisoner is no life at all.

“You may think I’m a monster, but I am the product of what was dealt to me.” I shove my chair back and take quick steps toward the door; I don’t want to be in here anymore. I want him to understand my choices, even if he doesn’t agree with them. My final retort twists my stomach; my tongue is a knife when I’m mad, always aiming for the kill. “I can’t just ignore things as well as some people.”

How many nights did Ailliard fall asleep with a full belly on a feathered mattress while I screamed for someone to answer me? A god, a guard, my dragons, my own parents—it didn’t matter. Finnian and Ailliard can’t see the pained expression on my face while the memories of my small hands gripping the bars of my cell and screaming for someone to help me surge into the forefront of my mind. All I had was a sliver of the world through a crack of stone that I would crawl toward and count the stars until I either passed out from the pain, blood loss, or starvation. They fed me enough to keep me alive. The only reason I was taught to speak was to inform them how to break my dragon link.

“Elowen,” Ailliard starts, sounding remorseful.

“No,” my tone is final. Ailliard may have gotten me out of the castle, but he didn’t save me. I saved myself. I fought every day, through every panic attack, through every nightmare, and through every person that tried to kill me because I realized I was worth fighting for.

I continue to fight for myself even on the days I hate myself because if I give up, I relent.

I am relentless.

The door slams shut behind me, and I walk aimlessly down the hall. Not caring where I end up, I just want to run. My feet pick up their pace, and my boots slap against the tile. My lungs crave air, and my senses long to be

outside with no walls confining me. I round the corner and collide into a hard chest. Hands reach out to steady me while I stumble back.

"If you wanted to see me so badly, you didn't have to run into me," Cayden's voice surrounds me.

"Excuse me," I mutter while slipping out of his hold and stepping around him. I'm not in the mood for his teasing right now. I make it one step before his hand shoots forward, grabbing my hand and spinning me back around to face him.

"Hey," he says while tugging me back, "what's wrong? What happened?"

"Nothing," I bite out, pulling my hand from his hold again. Physical touch is too much for me to deal with right now. He has on his calculating face, and I know he's mentally logging that I'm shying away from his touch. "Do you need to talk to me?" My boot taps against the tile floor as my mind closes in on itself; I need air.

"Where were you running to?" he inquires.

"Outside." I can't stop myself from pulling on my collar.

"There's an exit up ahead, come on."

I follow his long strides to the exit and feel the pressure being lifted from my body when the sky is high above me, and no walls surround me. My heart steadies as the cool breeze washes over my face. The black spots clear from my vision, and I feel like I can think properly again. My clothes don't feel like a cage anymore.

I promptly remember Cayden escorting me out of the castle, and I turn my head to find him staring at me, frowning. "What did you want to talk to me about?" I ask.

"You almost died last night. I was coming to check on your bruises before you caked all that on," he says while gesturing to my neck.

"Did you expect me to waltz around the castle with them on full display?" I retort.

"No, which is why I wanted to see you before you left your room," he crosses his arms over his chest. "You should wipe it off."

I bite my tongue and mirror his stance. The bruises were too tender for me to fully cover them. The sitting room Finnian and I chose was dimly lit, so Ailliard didn't notice them, but natural light exposes everything.

"I'll make sure to consult you on my brush strokes next time I apply foundation." I'm glad to see we're back to normal. I press my hand into my

sore neck and begin wiping the makeup off.

He sighs while taking a step forward, “Let me help you.”

My body jolts when his hand makes contact with my neck. I recall him saying those exact words to me last night, right after he asked me to guide his hands. His throat muscles flex as his hand softly coils around the back of my neck. The gentleness of his touches will never fail to shock me.

“Tell me if I’m using too much pressure.” His voice is low and soft. He covers his thumb with his black cloak, and softly drags it down the column of my neck. My pulse quickens due to his proximity, and I know he can feel it. The thumb that’s coiled at the base of my ponytail begins rubbing soothing circles that make me want to melt. I hate that he can affect me like this, and I hate that he’s so close he can both see and feel my physical reaction to him. The only bonus is that I can see his reaction to me as well—dilated pupils, parted lips, and the pulse in his neck beats just as rapidly, if not more so, than mine.

“Why did you want me to take the makeup off?” I whisper. Nobody is around us, but it feels like one of those moments that we’ve escaped into an alternate universe.

“I want you to look at yourself and see what I see,” he says, matching my quiet tone.

My lips part, “What do you see?”

There’s no trace of teasing in his eyes or his tone, “A survivor.” His gaze travels from my neck to my eyes. “A survivor that can handle any threat and doesn’t need to hide her bruises because she did more damage with a glass shard than her assassin did during a prepared attack.” My eyes widen, and my pulse stutters. The hands that dangle helplessly at my sides long to reach out and touch him.

“Cayden...” my voice trails off. He makes my emotions ping back and forth so vigorously that my brain has whiplash. I force my eyes to stay on his, but my mind strays to his scar. Is that what he thinks when he looks in the mirror every day? He doesn’t say anything, but his hands are still on me, and it doesn’t feel overwhelming like it did only moments ago. The wind carries a few dark brown strands across my face, which Cayden quickly reaches up from my neck to brush away.

“Who made you upset, angel?” he asks, tone raspy. His fingers glide down my cheekbone, and I blame the chill that travels up my spine on the fact I’m not wearing a cloak. I need him to take his hands off me, and yet...

I can't bring myself to push him away. But I don't need to because the sound of footsteps bounding down the hall pops our bubble. He slowly removes his hands from the back of my neck and cheek, gliding his fingers against my skin like he's trying to savor the feel of me.

"Elowen!" Finnian's voice echoes against the stone. I watch his lanky frame bound down the hall. A second figure is swiftly walking toward us, much further back than Finnian. Not as tall, and more so on the stocky side.

I twiddle with the strands of my ponytail. "I think you should go," I mutter to Cayden. But Cayden does the opposite; he takes a step closer to me, close enough for me to feel his body heat.

"He's an ass when he's upset," Finnian says once he gets close enough. "Do you want to get out of the castle today? I'll blow off the meeting." I know that this is his way of saying: *If you need to find a place to scream, I'll find it with you.*

"Don't skip the meeting," I poke him in the side. "I'm fine. I just needed some air." He doesn't look completely convinced, but he doesn't push me. It'll be good for him to have a normal day here, even if it's away from me.

"Please, Elowen, let's talk," Ailliard pleads once he steps through the exit. Finnian's jaw clenches, but he doesn't say anything.

"You two should get to the meeting." My smile is forced; it's the one I use every day that nobody other than Finnian can see past. That is until I met Cayden.

"It doesn't start for two hours." Ailliard takes another step forward. I just want to melt into the earth. Cayden places his hand on my lower back, and I'm shocked that the feeling of it comforts me rather than unnerves me. Nevertheless, I lean into his hold, silently telling him it's okay to touch me, and his fingers begin trailing a line up and down my spine.

"Her Majesty has promised her morning to me," Cayden states. "I intend to hold her to it."

Ailliard's eyes roam over Cayden, and his face contorts into a distasteful grimace. My anger sparks inside of me. Ailliard shouldn't be looking at him like that; he doesn't even know him. My body subconsciously gravitates toward Cayden, wanting to protect him from Ailliard.

"You two seem to be spending a lot of time together," Ailliard observes.

I look to Finnian with pleading eyes to get Ailliard out of here. “We’ll talk later,” Finnian mouths to me. I nod.

“Yes. She’s like my own personal plague—very hard to get rid of.” Cayden’s tone is humorous, but one glance at him, and I can tell he’s riled.

“You’re such an ass,” I deadpan.

“You adore it.” Cayden drops his hand from my back and takes a step between Ailliard and me. He’s taller than Ailliard and stares him down like he wants to grind him into dust. His display of protectiveness ties my tongue.

“Elowen—” Ailliard flicks his eyes away from Cayden and tries again.

“Elowen is spending the morning with me,” Cayden cuts him off, drawing Ailliard’s glare in his direction again. “Do I make myself clear or would you prefer me to write it down so you can comprehend it?”

“Let’s go, Ailliard. We should prepare before the meeting,” Finnian says while hooking a finger in Ailliard’s collar and heading back to the castle. Ailliard complies with Finnian, even if his face looks pained, and I watch their backs until they round a corner.

“Did you find the man that spilled the drink on me last night?” I ask as Cayden turns to face me again.

“Yes. It didn’t take much to make him talk.” The comment brushes over me; I’m not one to judge. He unties the cloak around his neck and drapes it over my shoulders.

“So, he was in on it?” My toes curl in my boots while he fastens the tie around my neck; his scent encompasses me. I know he won’t take the cloak back, no matter how much I protest, so I accept it.

“The pair of them worked together, nobody else was in on the plot,” Cayden confirms. Well, I’m glad that’s taken care of. It’s one less thing for me to worry about. The bounty on my head is still there, but at least this assassination attempt is a closed case.

“You can go back to doing whatever you were doing.” I don’t want to interrupt his morning with my family drama. I drop his gaze, “I’m also sorry about—”

He cuts me off and tilts my chin up with his finger. “You have nothing to be sorry for. I was looking for you. I have somewhere I want to take you,” he says while pointing to the tree line next to us. I look around for the first time since we left the castle. At first glance, it just looks like a staircase that leads to a patio lined with columns and has a nice view of the forest.

“You were looking for me...to take me into the woods?” I skeptically ask.

“It’s what lies *beyond* the woods.” My eyes wander over his body. He’s wearing sleek black fighting gear with silver shoulder armor that buckles across his chest, accompanied by a broadsword on his back, two short swords at his waist, and throwing knives along his thighs.

“This feels a lot like the second time we met,” I muse while he grips my shoulders from behind and urges me forward. “Are we going to steal something?”

“Now you’re being an ass,” he jests while smirking down at me.

CHAPTER TWENTY



At first glance, I never would have noticed the path, but maybe that's the point. The further we venture into the forest, the denser the trees become and the louder the sound of clashing metal grows. My curiosity increases with every footstep, but there's still no end in sight. Hardly any direct light reaches us, which should unnerve me, but it reminds me of the forest surrounding Aestilian. The shadows of the forest were always kind to me; they hid me when I needed a place to disappear. Darkness comforted me when light mocked me.

When I was in Imirath, the guards never came for me at night. They always came during the day, bringing pain in their left hand and suffering in their right. Counting the stars through the sliver between stones kept me sane and helped me keep track of my days. Anger still courses through me, keeping a firm grip on me, but being surrounded by trees momentarily calms me. There's something inherently peaceful about nature. I don't get many moments of peace, so I do my best to soak this one in.

"How much further are we from the mystery destination?" I ask.

"Tired already?" Cayden retorts.

"No, just curious."

"I can carry you the rest of the way. I got my practice in last night. Climb up, angel," he says while extending his arms in front of him. I roll my eyes and resist the urge to shove him into a tree trunk. Not because I'm above it. But he probably wouldn't budge, and I don't want to listen to him ramble on and on about his strength.

"That was a one-time thing, and there's no glass on the ground out here." I give him a pointed look, and he makes a noise as if to say *we'll see*.

I'm just glad he doesn't make a retort about how I went limp in his arms. I couldn't help it. My pain fit in the palm of his hand, but rather than leaving me to deal with it on my own, he held it close to him until it melted and evaporated. I don't understand how someone who is the personification of ice can manage that. He's like one of the poison flowers I grow—the prettiest ones lure you in before they cut you down. Every brush of his rough hands against my bare back kept me present. It's fine that it happened, but it can't happen again. We're political and militaristic allies, a strategic match. Nothing can stand in the way of that. People like us don't have the privilege of acting on emotions, especially when I don't even know how to label what I'm feeling.

We return to silence as we near the end of the path. I give my eyes a moment to adjust to the rush of blinding sunlight. Once my vision clears, I'm able to take in my surroundings. Vareveth having a strong army was always a fact; not just anyone could take on Imirath, but the sheer magnitude of the army is staggering. Ryder shouts orders while standing in front of a regiment of at least two hundred soldiers; all perfectly lined up and wearing identical armor, all in impeccable condition. It's almost identical to what Cayden's wearing, but Cayden's is more detailed. It's a black base with silver armor accents and a dark green cloak. The soldiers move in unison, flowing together like a stream.

"Is that your infantry?"

"A very small portion of it. They're new recruits, so Ryder is laying down the basics," Cayden answers.

"This isn't your whole army?" I gesture to the space in front of us. It's huge. There are soldiers wherever I look, all practicing some deadly act with swift precision; archery, sparring, spear throwing, knife throwing, ax throwing. Honestly, after watching Cayden fight, I shouldn't be surprised. His army is a representation of the deadly grace he fights with—a bloodlust reverence.

"Not even close." There's a smile in his voice, but the same smile that reflects on my face isn't forged in happiness. It's the teeth-baring grin of two people who are going to rain hellfire down upon their enemies. "This is headquarters," Cayden explains, taking a step closer to me so he can point out different things while we stand on top of the hill.

"That's the banging you heard—it's an armory. Some of the best blacksmiths on the continent work there." My eyes follow his hand and land

on the largest arsenal I've ever seen. All the arsenals I've seen in my life could probably fit into this one. Hundreds of swords, spears, arrows, and daggers all line up in varying sizes and detail, ready to be used. But the arsenal isn't just for handheld weapons; no...this arsenal was made for winning wars. I've heard about catapults being implemented in armies, but I've never seen one until now, and it's clear that Vareveth has no shortage of them.

If I was a religious person, I would sink to my knees with open arms to thank the gods for this opportunity, but the gods didn't get me here. I did. A mixture of hope and accomplishment swirls in my chest. I never knew what it would feel like to be proud of myself, but I am. I got myself here because I pushed myself to survive until I could feel alive, which is exactly how I feel at this moment.

My eyes well up with tears that I quickly blink away. We're far enough from everyone that they can't see my face but crying in public is a big no for me. I'm so tired of being stepped on, overlooked, shoved into corners, and never having the means to extract the revenge I've always desired. But now it's right in front of me. I'm standing side by side with the person that commands all of this because he wanted a deal with me rather than anyone else. It's relieving for someone else to tell you that you're good enough through their actions rather than words.

"It's..." I shake my head, trying to come up with a word that encompasses what I feel. My eyes flick over to Cayden and find him already looking at me. He rakes a hand through his hair and rolls his shoulders—he looks anxious. "Cayden, it's amazing." His shoulders visibly loosen, he lets out a slow breath, and one of the corners of his lips tilts upward. Maybe he's not as cocky as he wants me to believe he is. "Can I see more?"

"Absolutely," he grins while leading me down the hill. The more he explains, the more pride fills his eyes. He commands one of the most powerful armies in the world; he has every right to feel this way. "Up on that hill," he points at the hill to the right of us, "is the archery field. Every throwing weapon has its own field. We also have paths throughout the forest that lead to the border for the archers to practice on horseback." I make a mental note to tell Finnian about those trails.

"Which way is the border?"

He must notice the hint of curiosity in my tone because he stops dead in his tracks. I spin on my heels; he's smirking with his arms crossed over his chest while shaking his head back and forth. "Don't even think about it."

"You don't even know what I'm thinking." I plant my hands on my hips, which only widens his smirk.

"I know you better than you think I do, Atarah." Well, that's slightly unnerving. "It's that way, through the town," he says, pointing to several buildings to the left of the training area, "but don't get any ideas about sneaking off."

"I wasn't making plans to sneak off," I argue. I was only *considering* making plans. I'm still on the same page as last night of not wanting to run headfirst into Garrick's army—but I would just sneak a peek and then come back.

"It's all in your eyes." He wiggles his finger in front of my face and I swat it away.

"Stop trying to read me," I retort.

"I'm not *trying* to do anything; I am reading you," he insists.

"Well, I can read you too, Veles." I tilt my chin high.

"Oh yeah?" He quirks a brow.

"Mhmm, like a book." I poke him in the chest. "Moving on from this —"

"No, no, no, not so fast," he cuts me off. "Tell me how you read me."

"I'm not sharing my secret stash of knowledge with you." I pivot on my heels to look toward the buildings. "What's in the town?"

"It's where most of my soldiers live when they're not on the border—houses, taverns, shops, the works," Cayden informs me.

"Is it separate from Verendus?"

"Not exactly, some people call it Ladislava, but it's not an official name. We usually call the part of Verendus you saw the Inner Kingdom," he shrugs. "Anyway, we're not going into town."

"Where are we going?" I ask.

He takes a few strides toward me and points to an open field, a wicked smirk covering his face, "We're going to train together."

Excitement flares through me. I need an outlet after this morning, and a training session sounds perfect. Even if I had a momentary respite, I know my anger will flare up the second I see Ailliard unless I work it off. I usually train every day, but I haven't trained in over two weeks given

everything that's happened. He puts his hands on my shoulders and ushers me toward the field; I have to run just to keep up with his strides. When we stop in the center, I realize we're surrounded by a circle of targets. There's somewhere to aim wherever I turn. Cayden leaves me in the center.

"Begin," he calls over his shoulder before spinning on his heels and standing along the edge of the target circle.

I scrunch my brows, "Back up."

"You can come over here and make me move if you want, angel." He looks far too calm—hands tucked into pockets in a leisurely stance.

"What if I miss?"

"You won't," his voice is void of any apprehension; he truly believes I won't miss. He has a way of validating me without even realizing he's doing it, but satisfaction courses through me nonetheless. "Now, get on with it."

My blood is pounding in my ears, and all my senses are tuned into the steel that's strapped along my legs. The familiar fluttering feeling in my chest that always starts before I throw stirs into motion. It's the type of feeling someone gets when they're staring off the edge of a cliff. Wrapping my fingers around two handles, I survey the targets again before rolling my shoulders and neck.

My eyes fall shut; there's nothing but me and my knives. The leash snaps on my anger, and I let it surge through me again. I grit my teeth as I replay Ailliard's dismissal. I'll prove he's wrong to perceive me as less than Garrick through my actions, not make him believe he's wrong through words. The little girl that got locked in a cell ran away and became a monster, ready to hunt. Garrick will beg for my mercy in the same way I begged for his.

I snap my eyes open and zone in on the first target, adrenaline surging through me as I throw the first blade. Without waiting to see where it lands, I spin on my heels and throw the next knife. Turning toward another target, I throw two daggers this time. My mind conjures the image of Garrick's merciless, dark eyes, void of human emotion, as he stared down at me, bleeding out on his floor, urging his guards to continue their beatings. I repeat my actions until I become a hurricane of black and silver while silently counting off the targets in my head. Each knife thudding against a target is another note in a song that makes my blood sing. My chest heaves, and fire blazes under my skin. If anyone is spying on me, waiting for their

turn to make a move, let it be known that I won't walk meekly into death's arms, and if I do meet death—I'll drag them down with me. Whether it's a knife, a shard of glass, my nails, or my teeth—I will always fight. I stop when all the targets have been hit, and the first sound I hear is a low whistle behind me. My head turns toward Cayden, and I watch him as he approaches while surveying the targets.

"You've provided quite the distraction this morning," he nods over his shoulder toward his soldiers.

"It's not my fault if I'm more interesting than your exercises."

"You're more interesting than most things." He doesn't give me a moment to register his words before he moves on, "Tell me, how many targets did you imagine as me?"

"Just one." I don't know if it's the adrenaline pumping through my veins that makes me feel bolder than usual, but I place a hand on his chest and tilt my lips toward his ear. I can't feel the ridges of his muscles like I could last night, but I still feel him stiffen under my palm. "That one," I point to the target I imagined Garrick's eyes on.

"Endearing," he huskily mumbles. I hold his gaze while inching away from him and notice he's holding two swords. He flips them in his hands, their hilts now facing me while he grips the blades.

"They're dull blades for sparring." He opens his fingers a bit to show me he's not bleeding.

"You want to spar with me?" I ask while wrapping my fingers around one of the hilts, swinging the blade in my hand to get a feel for the balance.

"Someone has to correct your footwork," he smirks.

"I don't know if you'll be able to handle me," I sigh.

"Actually, Elowen, I think I'm the only man that can handle whatever you throw at him." His hazel eyes fill with challenge as I untie the cloak and toss it aside. I'm beginning to realize that this may be our dynamic; who can push the other one more? It's a constant battle of trying to figure each other out. Something nobody has ever been able to fully do, but neither of us back down from challenges; we chase challenges.

Before he can blink, I tighten my grip on the sword and swing it toward him. He blocks it, and our eyes meet over our locked blades. "Prove it, soldier," I challenge before unlocking our blades and take a few steps back. We begin circling each other, waiting to see who will make the first move. I keep my steps precise, ready to defend myself if he strikes first.

“You said you don’t dance, but you’re dancing around me quite a bit.”

“I’m thinking,” he says.

“I’m sure that must be very hard for you,” I quip.

I can tell he’s biting the inside of his cheek to stop himself from smiling. “How about we raise the stakes?”

The thought of fighting to win something against Cayden sounds very tempting. “A bet?” I inquire.

He nods, mischief written all over his face. “If I win,” he begins. My heart rate increases the longer he ponders what he wants. “I want a favor at a later date.”

That could mean anything; that could *be* anything. I weigh his words with the same precision I weigh the blade in my hand. He won’t do anything to physically harm me considering he needs me. Plus, the way he took care of me last night...no, he won’t harm me. Maybe he’ll hurt me one day, maybe we’ll be enemies rather than allies, but he’ll most likely just use the favor to do something to annoy me.

“Fine.” It’s not like he doesn’t annoy me every day. “I want the same if I win.”

“The deal is done,” he declares.

Not even a breath later, he cuts the distance between us and strikes. I shoot my sword up to block him. Our eyes lock over the blades again, and the clang of steel vibrates my bones. Using all my force, I shove him back and waste no time advancing. Moving forward, I strike once, twice, three times—he blocks them all.

“Are you going to tell me what Ailliard said now?”

“What?” I grit my teeth.

“What did he say?” Our blades separate and lock again. “I know he’s the one that upset you.”

“Stop,” I command.

“Did he call you a sheltered princess?” Separate and lock again. “Did he say you don’t know what you’re getting yourself into?” Separate and lock again. “Did he bring up Garrick?”

“Shut up!” I knee him in the stomach, and he takes a few steps back. I know exactly what he’s doing. He wants me to act on anger because anger will make my moves sloppy. I try to keep it under wraps, but venom coils through me.

“You want to ask me so many questions? Well, now it’s my turn to ask some.” I whirl my blade in his direction while firing off questions that make my stomach twist. “Why did you get so distant in the bakery?” Separate and lock again. “Why do you hate Garrick so much?” Separate and lock again. “How did you get the scar on your face?”

His nostrils flare, and he forces me back with his blade. I stumble over the foot he wedges behind my heels and throw my weight to the side to keep my balance. He takes this opportunity to grab my arm and spin me so my back is pressed against his chest. Before he can lower his blade to my neck, I block him, and the swords lock right in front of my face. My arms shake with how much effort I use to keep his blade away from me. Being this close to him only increases my temper because I can feel that he’s not as affected as I am. He’s sweating, but his arms and legs are firm, unshaken.

He lowers his lips to my ear, “You lived in Aestilian, you had the privilege of being a ghost. Did Ailliard tell you he wants you to go back there so you can live out the rest of your days coddled? Because I know you’d hate that. You’d hate to hear someone belittle you like that.”

“You don’t get to judge my choices when you don’t know the options I had,” I snarl. My body vibrates with the need to finish this fight. Shoving the blades forward, I drop to a squat and pivot before facing him again. I may have been a ghost, but I had a plethora of people to take care of before I lost all my baby teeth. I was hunted and haunted. Even when I had days with nothing to do, which were few and far between, my mind tortured me. What could I have done? Stare down Garrick’s army with only a few soldiers and knives and go back to an existence in a dark cell filled with suffering?

I want this fight to be over so I can get away from Cayden. Everything he is saying is ripping down everything he has said to me. I surge forward and put all my weight into the first swing so I can knock his blade to the side, far enough so I can shoot my fist forward and connect with his jaw. It’s not hard enough to bruise or draw blood. He hardly seems phased, but gods, that felt good, even if my knuckles sting.

Cayden cranes his face back to me, “I enjoy your feisty side.”

“I don’t give a fuck what you enjoy. I’ve wanted to do that for the past two weeks.”

“I love it when you get sentimental,” he grins.

My knees wobble under the force of his next blow, but I remain standing. I won't be able to hold off another one like that, so I wait for the next strike, biding my time to slip into the perfect window of opportunity. His sword rises again, and the next blow is coming. I duck under his arm and kick him in the back of his legs, bringing him to his knees.

"You look good on your knees," I purr.

I swing my blade to make the final blow, but he knocks it straight out of my hand with his. Then, with shocking speed, he reaches back and grips my wrist. Before I can register what's happening, he shoots his foot out while tugging me forward and spins me before I can faceplant. My back hits the ground, and he's above me in a second, pinning my arms on either side of my head.

"You look even better on your back," he smirks down at me.

He won.

He won.

He won.

Our faces are so close that he could whisper something, and I'd hear it perfectly. He's so close that he can see the flames of my anger burning behind my eyes, but he doesn't leave like most people do when they witness me at my angriest; he stays on top of me.

"Get. Off." I'm not mad about losing the bet, I'm annoyed at that, but I'm angry about the questions he fired off at me.

"We're not done training. You're going to punch my hands and let your anger out," he states.

"No." I try to push him off, but his hold on my wrists tightens.

He narrows his eyes at me, "Fine. But you're going to listen to me."

"I obviously don't have much of a choice," I bite out.

He ignores me, "Elowen, I don't believe whatever Ailliard told you. I can assume whatever it was based on your reaction and the fact you aren't telling him about the heist. You're going to get angry when we go to Imirath, and you're going to get angry when you see Ailliard again. I can handle your anger, all of it, but I want to make sure you're going to be okay when you have to face whatever it is you fled."

"Stop. Please stop." I feel like there are knives in my lungs. He doesn't need to stop talking; he just needs to stop looking at me like he cares about me.

“I will never, and have never, judged you for the choices you made that led you here,” he continues. The sting of my past actions burns me like acid. Usually time dulls pain, but thinking about how I left my dragons behind will always remain an open wound. I laid awake so many nights in Aestilian while the guilt ate me alive to the point I could hardly function. The wails of my dragons as Ailliard kept me locked on his horse are still fresh in my mind. That day was the last day I ever begged for anything; I pleaded with Ailliard to turn around, but he didn’t listen. I thrashed in his hold to no avail. I would have thrown myself off the horse and ran back to them if I could have.

“Elowen,” he murmurs, “look at me, angel. I didn’t mean to push you that hard.” His voice brings me back to the present. He’s looking down at me in a way that paralyzes me.

“I’m sorry if I said anything that offended you,” I whisper. I don’t want to talk to him about what’s going on in my head right now. Asking him those questions physically pained me. I wonder if it pained him to ask me his—it looks like it did.

He shakes his head, “I started it, don’t apologize.” But I do feel sorry; I don’t want to use things I observe about him as ammunition. “Ailliard is a fool if he can’t see how resilient you are,” he whispers in a gravelly voice.

“You mean that?” I match his tone.

“Every damn word.” He releases my wrists but stays on top of me, keeping both of his hands on either side of my head. My wrist lay helplessly motionless in the grass where he pinned them, but neither of us move. I can’t look away; it feels like I’m in a trance. His eyes pin me to the ground as easily as his hands did.

“Cayden?” Someone clears their throat near the edge of the target circle. My cheeks burn at the position we’ve been found in. The servants probably began spreading all kinds of gossip last night after Ryder found Hyacinth and told her I’d be staying with Cayden. He reaches a hand down to help me up, but I’m already pushing myself to my feet before walking in the opposite direction to collect my knives from the targets.

I turn back toward the pair after securing my knives and retying the cloak around my neck. I should have figured it was Ryder; only he and Saskia call Cayden by his name. Ryder nods at me in acknowledgment, and I offer him a small smile. Cayden’s brows crease while he looks over the letter Ryder handed him.

“I’ll head there after I walk Elowen back to the castle,” Cayden says while folding the letter and tucking it into his back pocket.

“You’re going to the border?” I ask.

“Nothing gets past you, does it?” Cayden quips.

I smirk because rarely anything does. “I can get back to the castle, you said the border is through Ladislava; we’ll be going in opposite directions.”

“I have to get some stuff from my room before leaving.”

“You do?” Ryder’s dark brows shoot up. “What kind of stuff?”

“Stuff,” Cayden states, pressing a hand into my back and guiding us past Ryder.

“Bye, Ryder!” I call out over my shoulder.

“I’ll be around later,” he answers me. “Don’t do anything stupid,” he says to Cayden.

“I’ll carry myself as I always do,” Cayden responds.

“That offers me no sense of comfort whatsoever,” Ryder replies dryly.

Cayden ignores his comment, “Make sure you have some of the soldiers try to beat Elowen’s time on the targets.”

“You timed me?” My brows scrunch together.

“23 seconds!” Cayden shouts.

“For ten targets?” Ryder’s astonished voice cuts across the grass.

“All perfect throws!” Cayden tacks on.

The question itches at my throat so much that I can’t help but ask, “Do you think any of them will beat me?”

“Not a chance,” he smirks down at me. “In fact, I would bet on you ten times over. I’ve been lucky with my bets recently.”

I shove him in the side when he brings up the bet. “You’re insufferable,” I say with a smile on my face.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE



It's been a week since Cayden left—no letters, no updates, just dead silence. Ryder installed a deadbolt on either side of the door that conjoins our rooms so that guards don't have to stand in front of Cayden's door while he's not here. His absence has been filled with politics, which I might like more if the meetings didn't take all day. Sitting still for an entire day is unnatural to me. The only thing that keeps me sane is that I always sit with Saskia, Ryder, or Finnian. But never Saskia or Ryder at the same time because they switch off and travel to wherever Cayden is. Ailliard usually takes the lead when it comes to discussing Aestilian and listing terms for the formal alliance treaty.

He apologized the same day we fought by preparing dinner for him, Finnian, and myself in one of the sitting rooms. I heard his reasons for reacting the way he did, even though they were a repetition of what he said when I first told him about the alliance. He has the option of leaving if being here is too much for him, but he hasn't taken it. Since that night, I've noticed a positive change in his behavior reflected in how he conducts the political meetings and dinners on behalf of Aestilian. One of which we're currently at. I'm seated between him and Saskia while I push the roast around my plate.

There are more important things to discuss than his opinion of me. I've never pretended to be good; the world has never given me the opportunity to be just that. But the blood that stains my hands is there for a reason. My soul may be corrupt, but I'm far from evil. I won't make apologies for craving revenge when those that manufactured my rage have never shown remorse for their actions.

My mind keeps straying to Cayden no matter how much I force it to stay in the present situation. I wish he would write to me, or Saskia would tell me what he's doing. He said he usually spends a lot of time at the border, but I didn't think it would cut contact between the two of us or that I wouldn't be there with him. I'm close to my wit's end with men giving me unsolicited advice and prodding me for more details about Aestilian. I won't betray my people for the sake of appeasing these advisors. The conversation flurries around me, but I'm content to just keep my mouth shut to everyone other than Saskia and Ailliard. Finnian is on Ailliard's other side, so I can't make conversation with him right now.

"Do you not like the food? We can sneak off to the kitchens after this," Saskia mutters through the corner of her mouth. I didn't realize she was paying attention, but she never misses much.

"It's fine. I'm not very hungry. However, I won't mind sneaking off after another few minutes of this," I answer.

My anxiety has been perturbing my appetite. It's always hard for me to eat when I'm *this* anxious. Everything I shove down just feels like it's going to come right back up. Being here without Cayden makes me feel stagnant. We can't plan the heist if we aren't talking. I know we're making progress with the food supply that's being sent home, but I feel like I'm grasping at time and it's slipping through my fingers. I've waited so long to get back to my dragons, then it felt like it was finally happening, and now everything is just standing still.

I'm coming, I think to myself while staring into the fire that roars in the hearth, *I didn't abandon you*. My eyes slip shut, but rather than being greeted with the familiar darkness, a pair of orange irises are looking back at me. There's pain in those eyes, so much pain, and anger. It hurts to gaze into them, but I can't look away. My palms grip the oak chair. *I'm coming for you*, I think to myself again. The pupils dilate before flaring in intensity. I gasp and snap my eyes open. When I blink, the orange irises are gone.

"My lady, are you alright?" Eagor inquires across the table. I must say, he's been very pleasant over the past week.

"I'm fine," I force a smile and clasp my clammy hands on my dress. "I'd like to retire early tonight if that's alright with you."

"Of course. Let the servants know if you need anything," Eagor smiles. Valia eyes him from the side, but I'm not about to get in between the spouses and question what's going on there.

Saskia stands next to me, "I'll escort Her Majesty back to her room."

She loops her arm through mine, and both of us step into the hall, leaving the chatter of the dinner behind us. She's only slightly taller than me, so it's easy for us to keep in step with one another. Three guards trail us; they always stay far enough to give us privacy but close enough to step in should anything happen.

"Those dinners are going to kill me from boredom one day," I groan.

"Trust me, I fully agree. They're better now that you're here. I can't convince Cayden or Ryder to go with me unless they absolutely must be there," Saskia says. My heart flips in my chest when she mentions Cayden. I'm already on edge from seeing the eyes.

"Why do you have to go to those dinners if they don't have to?" They're all part of the army; if they don't have to go, then she should also get a free pass.

"I'm the Head of Intelligence of the Vareveth Army; it seems like a bad move to let politicians that affect the army congregate without me present. They put the government first, and I put the army first. We need both for Vareveth to survive, and I speak for one of those sides. Cayden and Ryder used to come with me, but they have their own duties to attend given the rising tension between here and Imirath," Saskia informs me.

"Please tell me the dinners will die down," I plead. She makes it sound like they take place regularly.

Saskia lets out a soft laugh. "They'll die down. They're only taking place as often as they are because of how long the treaty meetings are taking. I'll be back at the border and far away from all of that soon enough," she waves her free hand over her shoulder.

My heart sinks at the thought of being here without Saskia, but Cayden did say I'll be going to the border eventually. Maybe Saskia and I can travel there together. I'm intrigued to see what it looks like after seeing their headquarters. We slip into my room, and she lets out a big yawn before sinking into one of the couches by the fire. She collects her box braids in her hands and flings them over the back of the couch while settling in. The sunset orange gown she wears compliments her complexion and curves beautifully.

My eyes flick toward the closed door between mine and Cayden's rooms. I haven't asked Saskia or Ryder about Cayden, and they haven't told

me anything. Sometimes I feel like they have a bet between the two of them to estimate when I'll crack—which is right now.

"So, um..." I take a seat on the couch across from Saskia, who already looks at me with playful eyes while dragging her finger over the gold beads that line her bodice. Wonderful, I'm off to a great start. "I was just wondering if you've seen Cayden?"

Her lips tilt upward, "I have." She knows exactly what she's doing.

"Good." I pat my hands on my thighs. Her dark eyes plow into me from across the coffee table, imploring me to say more. "How is he?"

"Fine," she shrugs, once again giving me nothing. "You could write him a letter. Hand it off to one of the servants, and he'll get it tonight or tomorrow morning depending on when they do the mail run."

I pause and meet her eyes, "Would he want a letter from me?"

"Yes." Normally, she's a complete chatterbox, but *now* is the time she chooses to make me talk.

"Has he said that?"

"He doesn't have to." She points two fingers toward her eyes. "I see everything," she whispers dramatically while getting to her feet, her gown pooling around her ankles. "I'll leave you to your letter writing, but I'd write soon so that the servants get it before it's too late."

"How do you know he wants to hear from me?"

Her laughter filters throughout the room as she walks toward my door. "Goodnight," she calls out in a singsong tone before shutting the door behind her, leaving me with my thoughts.

No, no, I'm not going to overthink. If I start overthinking, then I'll keep myself awake until the sun peaks over the mountains while trying to figure out if I should use a period or a comma. I grab a piece of paper from my vanity drawer along with a quill and ink pot.

CAYDEN,

IF AN ASSASSIN HAS STRANGLED YOU IN YOUR BATH, CAN YOU PLEASE LET ME KNOW? I NEED TO FIGURE OUT IF I'LL HAVE TO SEEK OUT SOMEONE ELSE TO COMPLETE MY FUTURE ENDEAVORS.

ELOWEN.

Oh gods, I've lost my mind. I think I've gone insane. But that doesn't stop my feet from carrying my insane self to my door and turning the knob

with the sealed letter in my hand. It's just a letter. People write them all the time.

"This is for Commander Veles." I smile at the servant at the end of the hall.

"I'll get it sent right away, Queen Elowen." The boy smiles before turning down the hall with a basket of linen on his arm. What have I done? He's probably not even going to answer.

Day 8

ELOWEN,

MY BATHS ARE VERY LONELY AND UNEVENTFUL, BUT YOU'RE ALWAYS WELCOME TO HOLD A KNIFE TO MY NECK AFTER I FINISH WASHING MY HAIR. RYDER TELLS ME YOU AND HIM SPEND MOST OF THE MEETINGS MAKING UP FAKE SCENARIOS FOR ALL THE STUFFY ADVISORS; I CAN'T SAY I BLAME YOU. HOW ARE THE MEETINGS GOING OTHER THAN THAT?

CAYDEN.

CAYDEN,

WELL, TODAY ONE OF THE ADVISORS FELL ASLEEP, AND VALIA SHRIEKED WHEN HE LET OUT A LOUD SNORE. IT WAS THE HIGHLIGHT OF MY DAY—OTHER THAN MY COFFEE. SOME OF THE ADVISORS GAVE ME NASTY GLARES WHEN I COULDN'T STOP LAUGHING, BUT I WAS SITTING BETWEEN FINNIAN AND SASKIA, SO TRYING TO STOP MY LAUGHTER WAS CLOSE TO IMPOSSIBLE. HOW'S THE BORDER?

ELOWEN.

Day 9

ELOWEN,

I'M OFFENDED THAT MY LETTER RANKED LOWER THAN A SNORE AND YOUR COFFEE. I GUESS I SHOULD STEP UP MY GAME; I HOPE YOU LIKE

THE ROSE THAT COMES WITH THIS ONE. DO YOU WANT ME TO PUNCH THE ADVISORS THAT GAVE YOU NASTY GLARES? I THINK IT'S A FIT PUNISHMENT FOR NOT SMILING AT YOU.

THE BORDER IS BORING YET EVENTFUL; YOUR LETTERS ARE A NICE BREAK FROM THE REPORTS.

CAYDEN.

CAYDEN,

THE ROSE EASILY MADE YOU THE SECOND-BEST PART OF MY DAY. I DON'T WANT YOU TO PUNCH THE ADVISORS, BUT YOU'RE REALLY LIVING UP TO THE HAZEL-EYED HEATHEN TITLE. WELL, I SORT OF WANT YOU TO PUNCH THEM, BUT ONLY IN THE FICTIONAL WAY. EAGOR AND I WALKED AROUND TOWN TODAY. HE CLAIMED HE WANTED TO SHOW ME HIS FAVORITE GARDEN, BUT I THINK IT WAS SO THE PEOPLE COULD SEE US TOGETHER.

WHAT DOES BORING YET EVENTFUL MEAN?

ELOWEN.

Day 10

ELOWEN,

WHAT DOES "FICTIONAL KIND OF WAY" MEAN?

I NEVER THOUGHT I WOULD MEET A QUEEN THAT'S WASTED IN A CASTLE, BUT YOU ARE. AT LEAST YOU ARE FOR NOW. I ASSURE YOU THAT YOU'D BE MUCH MORE VALUED ON MY ARM AT THE BORDER; I'M ALSO BETTER COMPANY THAN EAGOR.

BORING YET EVENTFUL MEANS THAT THERE ARE THINGS HAPPENING TO MAKE IT EVENTFUL, BUT IT'S BORING BECAUSE I WOULD MUCH RATHER BE SOMEWHERE ELSE.

CAYDEN (HAZEL-EYED HEATHEN).

CAYDEN,

FICTIONAL KIND OF WAY MEANS I WANT YOU TO DO IT, BUT IT CAN'T HAPPEN. I NEED THOSE STUFFY PUPPETS ON MY SIDE, AND YOU NEED THEM ON YOUR SIDE IF YOU WANT ME TO STAY HERE. BEING BETTER COMPANY THAN EAGOR ISN'T HARD. HE'S NICE, BUT HE FIXED HIS HAIR IN THE REFLECTION OF MY KNIFE WHILE I MOSEYED THROUGH THE GARDEN—WE ONLY WALKED THERE TOGETHER.

HURRY UP AND SECURE THE BORDER, AND I'LL BE THERE BEFORE THE SUN RISES.

ELOWEN.

Day 11

ELOWEN,

BOLD OF YOU TO ASSUME I'D LET THOSE STUFFY PUPPETS, OR ANYTHING, STAND IN THE WAY OF KEEPING YOU HERE. I DON'T HAVE YOUR REGULAR ADDRESS AND WOULD HAVE TO WAIT SEVERAL DAYS BETWEEN YOUR LETTERS WHICH IS COMPLETELY UNACCEPTABLE. DID YOU AT LEAST ENJOY MOSEYING THROUGH THE GARDEN?

YOU'RE VERY DEMANDING; TELL THE SUN TO GIVE ME MORE TIME. IF ANYONE CAN BEND THE SUN TO THEIR WILL, IT'S YOU.

CAYDEN.

CAYDEN,

THE SUN OBVIOUSLY DIDN'T LISTEN TO ME; MAYBE I SHOULD HAVE SPOKEN TO THE MOON. MOST OF THE THINGS IN THE GARDEN WERE DEAD SINCE WE'RE FAR PAST THE FINAL BLOOM, BUT THE LEAVES ON THE TREES WERE PRETTY. IS THERE ANYTHING PRETTY TO LOOK AT WHILE YOU'RE AT THE BORDER?

I HAVE ANOTHER DINNER WITH THE STUFFY PUPPETS TONIGHT, BUT I'LL BE BETWEEN FINNIAN AND SASKIA SINCE AILLIARD DOESN'T FEEL WELL. I HOPE THEY SERVE A GOOD DESSERT THIS TIME. THE LAST DINNER WAS SOMETHING LEMON AND SOUR.

ELOWEN.

Day 12

ELOWEN,

NOPE, NOTHING PRETTY TO LOOK AT HERE. THE ONLY PRETTY THING TO LOOK AT IS CURRENTLY IN THE CASTLE AND HOPEFULLY EATING SOMETHING THAT'S NOT LEMON AND SOUR. I'LL TAKE YOU TO THE GARDEN IN THE SPRING WHEN THE FLOWERS ARE IN FULL BLOOM.

I HAD ANOTHER APPLE TART YESTERDAY.

CAYDEN.

CAYDEN,

YOU'RE VERY FUNNY...

ANYWAY, THIS PRETTY THING HAD SOME KIND OF RASPBERRY CHOCOLATE CAKE THAT I'M GOING TO FORCE YOU TO TRY. HOW WAS THE APPLE TART?

SASKIA MENTIONED SOMETHING ABOUT THERE BEING ARCHIVES SOMEWHERE IN TOWN. I'D LIKE TO SEE THEM AND DO SOME RESEARCH FOR FUTURE ENDEAVORS, BUT SHE SAID I SHOULD CLEAR IT WITH YOU FIRST.

ELOWEN.

Day 13

ELOWEN,

THE APPLE TART WAS MISSING SOMETHING THIS TIME.

I MADE AN APPOINTMENT FOR YOU TO GO TO THE ARCHIVES IN LADISLAVA IN TWO DAYS. THE SCHOLARS WILL PREPARE SOME THINGS I THINK YOU'LL BE INTERESTED IN. I KNOW YOU'LL ROLL YOUR EYES AT THIS PART, BUT DON'T GO WITHOUT RYDER. I KNOW YOU CAN TAKE

CARE OF YOURSELF, BUT FOR THE SAKE OF MY SANITY, PLEASE RESPECT MY WISHES JUST THIS ONCE, AND YOU CAN STUFF ME WITH RASPBERRY CHOCOLATE CAKE TO YOUR HEART'S CONTENT.

YOU CAN ALSO REBEL AGAINST ME FOR THE NEXT MONTH, AND I'LL KEEP MY MOUTH SHUT.

CAYDEN.

CAYDEN,

FOR SOMEONE THAT COMMANDS AN ARMY, YOU SHOULD ENCOURAGE OBEDIENCE. WHY IS IT YOU'RE ENCOURAGING MY DISOBEDIENCE, SOLDIER? I'M BEGINNING TO THINK YOU LIKE IT WHEN I CHALLENGE YOU. PERHAPS YOU SHOULD CALL IN YOUR FAVOR IF YOU REALLY WANT ME TO TAKE RYDER.

I FULLY PLAN ON STUFFING YOU WITH CAKE NO MATTER WHAT.

ELOWEN.

Day 14

ELOWEN,

MY FAVOR STILL STANDS AND WON'T BE CALLED IN ANY TIME SOON. I'VE ALREADY TOLD RYDER THAT HE'S TO ACCOMPANY YOU.

I ENCOURAGE YOUR DISOBEDIENCE BECAUSE I LOOK FORWARD TO THE ENIGMA THAT IS YOU. I COULDN'T PLACE YOU IN A BOX IF I TRIED.

CAYDEN.

CAYDEN,

I'LL LET YOU KNOW IF I FIND ANYTHING GOOD IN THE ARCHIVES AFTER I GET BACK TO THE CASTLE TOMORROW NIGHT.

WILL YOU BE BACK SOON?

ELOWEN.

Day 15

ELOWEN,

I'LL BE BACK SOON, ANGEL, I PROMISE. MAYBE YOU CAN RECOMMEND SOME OF THOSE ROMANCE BOOKS YOU KEEP ON YOUR MANTLE LIKE THEY'RE YOUR MOST PRIZED POSSESSIONS. I HEARD YOU GIGGLING WITH ONE OF THEM IN YOUR LAP WHEN I SLIPPED INTO MY ROOM AFTER TAKING CARE OF THE ASSASSIN.

ENJOY THE ARCHIVES,

CAYDEN.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



I lean the back of my head against the wooden chair I've been occupying for the past few hours. My neck aches from being hunched over, and my eyes burn from scanning pages upon pages of information. I inspect the walls covered in stained glass windows and let my eyes travel up to the high vaulted ceiling to take a break from the tiny text. The sun has already disappeared, but I'm sure the windows are gorgeous during the day. Normally, I would consider hours surrounded by books to be an ideal evening, but these books are filled with reality rather than escapism. I've never been a non-fiction reader.

A spark of anticipation rattles through me whenever a door creaks open, and I wait for Cayden to waltz in like he owns the place, but it's never him. What does *soon* even mean? His letters have made this week go by faster than last week. The final political meeting took place this morning, but I'm not sure if I'll include that in the letter I'm writing him tonight. It has become part of my routine to start my day with a letter from Cayden and end it by sending a letter back.

We can't put anything that could jeopardize the heist, whatever he's doing at the border, or any concrete details about the political meetings I've attended in our letters just in case they get intercepted. Our letters feel more like two friends catching up rather than two allies keeping tabs on one another. Not that I mind, I'll never admit it out loud, but I miss our verbal spats. I always make sure to open his letters first thing in the morning, when I'm completely alone, so that nobody can see the idiotic smile that spreads across my face when I spy an unopened letter on my nightstand, lying on top of the rest of his opened letters.

The red rose that I stuck in a glass of water also sits near my letter pile. Sometimes I even find myself smiling at nothing when I recall his words or when something happens that I know I'll tell him about. My cheeks burned so harshly this morning after he mentioned the romance books that I had to put a cold towel on my face. Ice cubes would have melted the second I rubbed them on my skin. I'm still debating on recommending him my filthiest book or a chaste book, so I can watch him hunt for the dirty parts to no avail.

I rub my temples in an attempt to ease the dull headache that's slowly forming. I've spent the evening tutoring myself on the conflict between Imirath and Vareveth. I know a lot of it already, but the customs in Vareveth are interesting to learn about. The reigning Monarch of Vareveth and the Commander are almost equal in power. Each has a specific role, and neither can infringe on the other's power because they're supposed to act as a unit. It was a settlement after a brutal civil war that had taken place hundreds of years ago.

Cayden can form a militaristic alliance with me, but not a political alliance, and I need both. Eagor controls the provisions for his people and the army, which is why he's the one that must handle the food supply going back to Aestilian. Eagor can engage in political disputes but needs Cayden's support to mobilize the army. Cayden can technically only be my ally in the war, but a smirk rises on my lips as I recall what he said about getting around authority and giving me the elixir for crop growth.

"You know you can ask Saskia anything you need to know, right?" Ryder's voice cuts through the silent archives. His tight curls aren't as structured today; it looks like he's been running his hands through them.

Finnian stiffens beside me; he's been on edge since I met up with him after his final meeting of the day. I tried to inquire about his mood shift, but Ryder appeared before I could. Even if the four of us have grown closer in Cayden's absence, I don't feel right prodding at his feelings in front of other people.

"Why can't she ask you or Cayden?" Finnian stiffly asks. What's going on with him? Even Ryder looks confused.

"Because Saskia is our strategist, she's always studying this stuff and can answer any questions Elowen might have better than Cayden or me," Ryder smoothly replies, picking at the paint under his nails. I wonder what kind of things he paints. I've heard of soldiers using creative outlets to

cope; I do the same with baking, gardening, and healing. I think there's beauty in creating things despite feeling like all your hands can cause is damage.

"Or give the most elusive answers," Finnian mumbles under his breath. I nudge him with my elbow. It's not as if I can't put that together myself, given Saskia's fierce intelligence, but she's been nothing but helpful these past two weeks. Always whispering the definition of terms, names, and titles I may have forgotten. The archives are empty aside from a few scholars and us, but I don't want the scholars getting the idea there's strife in our group. Gossip spreads like wildfire—I should know. I've seen the servants paying more attention to me after the assassination attempt, and the letters between Cayden and I became regular.

"I'll ask her for clarification on a few things the next time I see her," I cut in before Finnian can say anything else. I don't want him dragging Saskia into his foul mood. "How long have you been preparing for the war?"

"Four years," Ryder replies. "We started when Cayden became commander."

"What's different now than it was four years ago?" I press. Ryder's gaze sweeps around the space we occupy, no doubt looking for signs of anyone lingering around us. We all stay quiet and strain our ears to pick up on the tiniest of sounds. Ryder's dark eyes flash to mine, and I nod in confirmation that I also don't hear anyone around us.

"We have on good authority that Garrick has been consorting with dark magic," Ryder begins in a hushed tone, causing Finnian and me to lean forward. The news doesn't surprise me. Garrick has consorted with mages, witches, priestesses, and sorcerers about breaking my dragon bond. But no matter who he sought out, none of them were successful. Dark magic is risky and unpredictable. "There's a famine that's been driving the people of Imirath to starvation. But what the people don't know is that Garrick is causing the famine on his own accord."

A shiver runs through me as I recall the harshest winter in Aestilian. Most of my time was spent wading through the snow to go on raids and hunts. Forcing myself to sleep was close to impossible when I knew so many citizens would starve if I didn't manage to find food.

My hands tap against my legs, "He's driving them to desperation."

“He’s also telling his citizens that we placed a curse on them and that they need to push the border in order to gain fresh land,” Ryder adds.

“They can’t possibly believe that. Garrick is known to consort with magic, and Eager despises it,” Finnian retorts. I look over at him and remember how skinny he became during that particular winter in Aestilian. The two of us have always been thin, but we were a far cry from healthy at that point.

A frown turns the corner of my lips while I recall the way his clothes hung on him, “People will believe anything when they have nothing. It’s why Garrick is taking everything away from them. He wants to control them.”

Finnian opens his mouth and shuts it. His blue eyes turn to ice, and I wonder if he’s also recalling the same winter I am. He never forgave me for lying to him, telling him I ate more than I did before giving him most of any food I had. I just couldn’t watch him suffer. He only caught on to what I was doing after I fainted into a snowbank and monitored my small meals like a hawk every day after.

“I assume that there’s nothing we can do to help?” I ask, though I already know the answer.

Ryder grimly shakes his head, “We can’t give aid to our enemy when there’s no guarantee that the provisions will go to the citizens. Garrick is sabotaging his own people, so anything we give them would only be a temporary fix anyway.”

“You got that information from Saskia’s spies?” I let out a defeated sigh. Maybe this is why Cayden is at the border; he definitely can’t put that in a letter.

“Yes,” Ryder confirms.

I close the book in front of me, a dark red leather-bound retelling of Vareveth’s Civil War that Cayden recommended. He didn’t recommend any books about dragons, probably because he knows I’m with Ryder and can assume I brought Finnian. My chair squeaks against the floor as I shove it back and stand while lifting the book in my arms. The first time I left the table, I had to argue with the pair of them for twenty minutes before they accepted the fact that I could safely travel through the archives by myself. I narrow my eyes at them; they fidget in their chairs but make no move to get up. Turning my back on them once I’m satisfied that they’ll stay in place, I

carry the book away with me. The silence is something I cherish as I twist and turn through the tall shelves.

The History of Vareveth section is easy to find, and I climb the ladder halfway to the top before sliding the book back in its place. My boots move down the ladder once my arms are empty, and my knives shimmer in the dull candlelight the sconces provide. My teeth sink into my bottom lip while I drum my fingers along the book spines and contemplate my next move. D is only a few letters before H... and I don't know when I'll have access to the archives again. Bringing a book about dragons back to the table might spark Finnian's concern or Ryder's curiosity—both are two things I don't want to encourage.

I've done my fair share of research on dragons over the years, but I've never been in an official archive like this. My curiosity is high, and my self-control is low. The amulet has been plaguing my mind for the past few days after I saw the pair of orange eyes behind my eyelids. The priestess said it's essential, but I've never seen it in any dragon text I've read. I'm in a place with the most information I've ever had at my fingertips in my entire life. I am The Dragon Queen, most people would believe everything about dragons comes naturally to me, but it doesn't.

My head turns toward the opposite end of the aisle, and my boots lightly tap against the floor as I follow my new path. I'll get back to the table before Finnian and Ryder become suspicious. My mind is my own beast to nourish; why should I neglect it of nutrients when it's within walking distance? I weave through the staggering bookcases in search of the D-section. I've never been in a building shaped like the archives. It's several floors and is shaped like a five-pointed star with a circular staircase in the center. The shelves are all diagonal and resemble a maze more than a library.

The candlelight is even dimmer here, but I strain my eyes to focus on the titles.

Demons.

Creepy, yet intriguing.

Defensive Attack Strategies.

Not what I need, but it could be useful in the future.

Divination.

No.

Di, Dl, Dm...

My knees sink to the hard floor so I can get a better look at the spines on the bottom shelf. I reach out to brush some dust that has collected in the corner of the shelf before cringing and wiping my hand on my pants. Dust always makes me feel itchy. I honestly think I hate dust more than blood, but I'd rather not analyze what that says about me as a person. The shelf ends at *Do*. I get to my feet while muttering a curse and round the shelf to the opposite side to continue my search, but a familiar broad figure is leaning against the ladder.

I cross my arms over my chest, "Following me?"

Ryder stays relaxed on the ladder, one boot resting on the third rung, "You've just described my job."

I roll my eyes. I don't like being followed, especially when he's leaning on the ladder I need to climb. "I thought your talents lay in the realm of swords and soldiers. Not following women through archives."

"Finnian and I started returning the rest of the books on the table. I figured you would be looking for information on dragons at some point considering you didn't bring any back to the table." He holds his palms up in mock surrender. "But there's something you need to be informed of, and I doubt Cayden will put it in one of his letters."

The shock that he knows about the letters dissolves quickly because all my mind can focus on is what he needs to tell me. I take a step closer, so I'm able to hear his hushed tone. If Cayden can't put it in a letter, then it must be important. It's also something Ryder wasn't comfortable saying at the table. If Finnian's mood stays sour, then I'll keep it to myself until tomorrow. I don't want to pile more things onto him without figuring out what's bothering him. A large part of me wants to pull Finnian aside and tell him everything; my fears, my hopes, my dreams. But I think I was always destined to carry some burdens alone, in silence.

Ryder proceeds once I'm close enough, "We haven't received a report on the dragons in years. I read through the past spy reports before Cayden rose in power, and the dragons haven't made a sound in a long time—not a peep. It's like they gave up a few years after you left." Pain shoots through my chest, and I drop my gaze to the floor so that Ryder can't read the guilt in my eyes. "That changed a week ago."

My head snaps up, "What do you mean? Someone heard them?" My words come out so rapidly that it takes him a few moments to decipher them.

“Reports are brief; all I know is that they were roaring for the first time in years. It was written a week ago, but obviously reports are delayed so we only got it today. Have you felt anything different with the bond?” he inquires.

I saw the eyes flash behind my eyelids a week ago. Telling Ryder about my vision before Cayden doesn’t seem like a good move. Being in a partnership is weird; it’s like we’re on two sides of a scale, and one can’t rise without the other one falling. We must stay perfectly balanced to stay afloat. So, I do what I always do, use humor to deflect. Lying has also never been a problem for me; I could lie to sin itself.

“You mean my dragon tingle?”

“You have that?” The confusion that coats his face almost makes me crack. “You *tingle*?”

“Sometimes it feels like my heart grows wings in my chest, and then my spine starts to tingle the faster the wings flap,” my hands add animation to my words.

“Are you serious?” He looks like a six-year-old that was just told they have free access to a candy store.

“Nope.” I press my lips together to suppress a smile. His face drops, and he pinches my arm. “Ouch! Stop it, that hurts!” My smile breaks free while I swat his hand away.

“So does the hope you gave me,” he grumbles.

“Don’t be so dramatic. I’m sure my dragon tingle will kick in one of these days,” I giggle. Ryder is about to respond, but he snaps his mouth shut and turns his head in the direction of the footsteps that are approaching us quickly. “I hope you realize I can find my way back to the table myself.” Changing the subject seems like a good idea.

Ryder catches on immediately, “Is that why you were walking in circles?”

“Not all paths are linear, some get a little squiggly,” I shrug. He makes an expression that looks like he doesn’t get paid enough to guard me.

Finnian rounds the corner looking relieved to have found us. “This place needs a map,” he says while coming closer. “I followed your voices. Did you find everything you need?”

I’m in the aisle of what I need, but I don’t want to look for the dragon books in front of either of them. It takes every ounce of self-discipline I can

muster to plaster a smile on my face and not glance upward. “Yes, I’m all done for the day.”

“Thank the gods. I’m tired of smelling old paper,” Finnian sighs while spinning on his heels. Ryder doesn’t say anything else; he just leads us toward the exit.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE



The night air is crisp but welcome after spending several hours in the dusty archives. Ladislava is quaint. It resembles the town in front of the castle—wood and stone buildings with colorful signs and shutters, but there’s more weaponries and everyone is walking around in armor. Houses stretch back behind the town along curved roads. There aren’t many people out tonight, most likely because of the dropping temperatures. I should have remembered to wear my cloak, but I didn’t expect it to be this cold. After living in the mountains for so long, you think I’d be used to it.

I rub my hands together to bring some warmth into them while scanning the surrounding area—rooftops, alleyways, sharp corners, shadowed corners, etc. Ryder makes a sharp right down one of the streets, and I follow his lead. It would take a ridiculously bold person to make a move on me while I have two armed guards, but I stay as sharp as I would be if I was alone. Muffled voices stream out of one of the buildings along the quiet street. Ryder stops in his tracks and turns his head toward the source. He squints into the darkness, looking like he’s trying to find something. Nothing stands out about it; it looks like a standard overcrowded tavern.

“Looking for something?” I ask, either wanting to go inside or hurry back to the castle so I can warm myself by the fire and hand my letter off to the servants before they do their mail run. Nobody stands outside; it’s too cold to enjoy drinks out here without firepits.

“The horses,” Ryder replies as if it’s the most obvious thing.

“Do you want to pet them?” I suggest while grinning up at him.

He takes his eyes off the tavern to shoot a half-hearted glare in my direction. "I'm looking for a *specific* horse that belongs to a *specific* person," he states. I figured that's what he was doing but annoying someone a little bit is good for the skin and soul.

"Come on," I say while walking toward the tavern. "Finnian and I can wait by the bar while you look for whoever you need."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," Ryder advises, following my stride.

"Perhaps not, but I rarely have good ones." I smile over my shoulder. "These," I gesture down my knife-clad legs, "are my consequence correctors."

Without waiting for his response, I shove the tavern door open and am greeted by the familiar scent of ale, smoke, and sweat. I'm not a fan of crowded taverns, the scent being one of the many reasons. A small wave of homesickness washes over me. Aestilian's tavern never gets crowded like this; it's more of a place to relax and catch up after a long day. Finnian slips his hand into mine and cuts a path to the bar. He shouts his order to the bartender when we finally make it to the counter. He glances at me, but I shake my head, silently telling him I don't want anything.

I feel Ryder tap my shoulder while the shaggy-haired bartender bends down to grab a pint. "I'll be ten minutes at most. Do not move from this spot," he orders. His mouth is an inch away from my ear, but he still has to shout.

The shriek of a fiddle vibrates through the air, and if possible, the crowd gets louder. Rather than shouting, I just give Ryder a thumbs up, and he disappears shortly after. I sincerely hope he's only ten minutes, or else my head might explode. Finnian hands a few coins to the bartender and receives his drink, but rather than sending Finnian on his way, the bartender leans across the counter to say something. I'm not sure what he says, but Finnian's shoulders grow tighter before he spins on his heels, clasps my wrist, and all but drags me toward a corner a few feet away. He pulls me so hard that I practically stumble into the wall when he releases me.

"Tell me what's wrong," I demand, tired of dancing around the subject if he's going to act like this. He doesn't get mad often, but when he does, it's like he has tunnel vision.

"The advisors in the meeting today wouldn't stop talking about your sparring session with Cayden. The bartender even brought it up. They all also mentioned how no soldier could beat your time on the targets." His

voice is raised due to the volume of the tavern, but I have a feeling he would be yelling no matter where we were. He must notice the confusion on my face because he continues, “The advisors think you’re making yourself into a target. You’re purposely showing anyone hunting you that you’re something to beat. They’re saying you’re practically asking for anyone to try, and making it into some sort of competition.”

“People have been trying to kill me for as long as I can remember. They haven’t succeeded thus far, so I must be doing something right,” I state.

“I told you that I’m not losing another sibling!” Finnian snarls. His tone makes my stomach twist. I can deal with this kind of argument with Ailliard, our personalities clash all the time, but it feels unnatural with Finnian.

“You won’t.” I try to reach out to him, but he jumps back. I withdraw my hand in silent pain. The foam of his ale splashes from the rim and coats his hand. “Can we talk more when we get back to the castle?” I can hardly hear him, and both of us are shaking. Maybe a small cooldown will do us good; at least now I know what’s been bothering him.

“You’re not invincible,” Finnian whispers, and his pain is louder than any fiddle or flute. He looks toward the ceiling, the floor, the walls, anywhere but me. Angry tears glisten in his eyes, making them resemble a stormy sea. I know I’m not invincible, but I can’t live my life as if I’m made of glass—not when I hardened myself into steel so many years ago. He slams his ale onto a nearby table and disappears into the crowd.

“Finnian!” I shout, but he doesn’t turn around.

My eyes stay glued to his fire-colored curls while he makes his way through the throngs of people. I throw myself into the sea and keep my footing while getting shoved around; it’s harder to cut through without him guiding me. I’ve lost sight of him by the time I break through the crowd, and I rush to the door. He has made it to the end of the deserted street, his long legs carrying him in the direction of the castle. He shouldn’t be walking back alone.

“Finnian, stop!” I shout while rushing forward. He looks back at me once before shaking his head and turning the corner, leaving me in the silence of what just happened.

No matter how angry we’ve been, we’ve never turned our backs on each other. The sting of his glare before turning the corner is so sharp that it steals the breath from my lungs as if he had punched me. A mixture of

anger and defeat bubbles inside of me. I blink back the fiery tears that begin to swell and dig the heels of my palms into my eyes, groaning in frustration. Everything in me rebels against being at odds with Finnian, but what am I supposed to tell him? That I'll change? I'll become gentler, quieter, softer? I can't. I've tried in the past, and it doesn't work for me. I'm full of sharp edges and I'm so exhausted of feeling like I pierce anyone that gets close to me. It's not my fault that people are threatened by me—they should be. I've never been able to ignore the dark parts of me that crave revenge, blood, and justice. I'm not entirely evil or unforgiving, but I'll never be entirely good or forgiving; I reside somewhere in the middle.

A pinching sensation seizes my neck while I'm turning back toward the tavern. *Fuck*. I didn't realize how far I ran down the street. I reach up and pull out the source of the pinching sensation—a dart filled with an inky blue liquid rests in the palm of my hand. My legs wobble slightly, and I blink away the dark spots that cloud my vision while tossing the dart to the street and drawing a knife. I'm slightly unsteady on my feet, but less than half the liquid entered my body, which means I have a chance at fighting off whatever it is. If any higher power is listening to me right now, please don't let the liquid be anything more than a sedative.

This *definitely* isn't something I want to write to Cayden about.

A shadow stands on the roof of the tavern and fires an arrow my way as two figures on the ground rush toward me, cutting off my path to Ryder. I spin out of the line of fire and throw a knife toward the figure on the roof before huddling against a shop. My throw feels sluggish, and my aim is off; it hits their arm rather than their chest. My body feels like I've had too much whiskey. I glance back to the two figures running at me; they're still far enough for me to make one more throw. I can take on two assailants on the ground, but there's no point in being picked off in the street like a sitting duck.

I start to regain control of my limbs when I push off the wall and charge the two assailants on the ground, two knives in my hands. My adrenaline works against whatever drug is trying to slow me down. I glance up toward the figure on the roof. They've begun wrapping their arm in a piece of torn cloth, thinking I've elected to forget about them for now. Two knives for the two people in front of me, right? Not quite. I use the extra momentum from running to throw my knife in their direction, never halting or slowing down

my speed. I don't look to confirm if I've made my hit. I know I have. I can tell from the dull thump of their body hitting the roof.

"I applaud your persistence in trying to kill me, but not your judgment." My words are sharper than I feel. When the two figures get closer, I notice it's a man and a woman, both wearing masks that cover half their faces. I throw the knife in my left hand toward the man. He dodges it and nearly falls flat on his back, just as I expected him to dodge a dead-on throw. The throw wasn't meant to kill him; it was just to buy me time. It gives me the opportunity to separate the two and fight them individually. A few seconds difference may not seem like much, but in situations like this, it's crucial.

I draw a sword from my waist and jut it forward to block the woman's swing. Her eyes are filled with malice; I think I hold the record for people that hate me but don't know me. I shove her back and cut my sword to the side. She blocks me, but the block forces her to lower her sword to the street. Risking my balance, I raise my foot and kick her in the gut. An uneven cobblestone snags the heel of her boot, and she falls backward—her head smacking into the street. The man charges at me, and I have just enough time to pivot and block his blow before he shoves me backward. I manage to stay upright, but I'm also gravely aware that the drugs are coursing through my body with every second that ticks by.

"The effects may be delayed since you pulled the dart out, but they'll hit you," the man chuckles. My hands tighten on my sword. Ryder will come out of the tavern once he realizes I'm not inside...I really hope he checks the street before scouring every inch of the building.

"I'm actually honored that you needed to sedate me before a three-on-one." I twist the sword in my hand while throwing him a wink, "Performance issues?"

He growls and advances, but I don't trust my arms to block his blow. I circle behind him and slice through the weak spot in his armor where his shoulder guards meet his back—crimson blood sprays out. My arms are so heavy, I can't bring the sword to his neck, but at least this slice slows him down. The woman swings at me again, and I notice her hands are covered in fresh blood from the gash on the back of her head. I'm not the only one fighting at a physical disadvantage anymore.

I'm going to need to fight with two swords—dropping one hand to my belt, I take out my second shortsword and become a steel storm. My muscles are crying, and my body is urging me to drop the swords and

collapse on the street, but my mind keeps me fighting. A stinging sensation claws at the top of my right arm, and my blood begins to splatter on the street below.

Just keep fighting.

Through the pain.

Through the drugs.

I can't yield.

"Give up, princess," the woman bites out.

"What a tempting offer. Have you ever considered a career as an advisor? Because you're a pretty awful assassin," I graciously suggest.

My feet drag against the street, their figures blur, and my blood is spilling like a waterfall down my arm, coating one of my sword hands and making the hilt of my blade slippery. I'm not going to be able to last much longer. I need to do something bold...or something stupid. It'll be considered bold if I can pull it off, so if I die, at least I won't have to live with my stupidity.

I've kept my assailants in front of me, but now I need to get between them. The drugs must really be affecting my brain. Not giving myself a chance to psych myself out of my next move, which borders on idiocy, I summon all the strength my heavy limbs can manage and throw it upward into the woman's blade. It's clear that she doesn't expect my sudden burst of strength because her sword soars in a wide arc. I rush between the pair and offer my back to the woman, but my feet aren't steady. The weight of my limbs paired with the sword causes me teeter to the side. The man moves to stab me in the chest, but rather than block him, I drop one of my swords and duck under his blade. My hands latch onto the leather straps over his armor and yank him forward. The crunching sound is followed by blood gurgling and confirms that my move was successful. The woman had only just regained her footing when I yanked her partner forward and used him to stab her. Neither of them expected it, which is why they couldn't stop the momentum of their bodies.

Pain spreads through my cheek, and the ground rushes up to meet me. My jaw throbs from the force of the man's punch. My vision is far blurrier now than it was when the fight first began.

Stand up.

I push myself halfway off the road before a swift kick is delivered to my ribs, followed by another wave of searing pain. Using the momentum of the

kick, I sloppily scramble to my feet. This is the last leg of the fight—just me and him.

“Elowen!” Ryder’s panicked voice echoes through the street and is followed by the sounds of heavy footsteps and unsheathing of swords. For the first time tonight, fear flashes in the man’s eyes. He bolts in the opposite direction toward the front of the town, in the direction of the castle. My feet make it a few steps in his direction before a wave of dizziness washes over me, and my legs give out. Two hands wrap around my waist and hoist me up before my knees hit the pavement.

“You, go get Commander Veles,” Ryder’s snarl vibrates against my back.

“No, don’t get Cayden, he’s going to worry too much,” I try to protest, but a horse is already barreling in the direction of the border.

“Oh, he’s going to do a lot more than worry, Elowen,” Ryder angrily mutters before spinning me in his direction. His hands on my shoulders steady me as his fear-filled eyes scan me. “Why did you leave the tavern?”

“Finnian.” My entire body tingles like thousands of grains of sand are being dusted over my skin. “We got into a fight, and he left. I need to find him.” I try to turn, but my wobbly legs threaten to give out again. Ryder moves his hands to my upper arms, but I hiss through my teeth when his hand touches my cut. He tucks me into his side and pulls his hand back, muttering a curse when he takes in the blood that coats his palm. “She’s in worse shape than me,” I mumble while gesturing to the dead woman on the street.

“General, there’s a dart on the ground. Queen Elowen has been drugged,” an unfamiliar voice comes from somewhere—behind me, in front of me, I don’t know. My eyes find the source; it’s an older man with graying waves and amber eyes, clad in armor and a Vareveth cloak. He bows his head and glances toward the blood on my arm and the street. I may not be making a good first impression, but I’m making a memorable one.

“Assemble a team. I don’t care how many soldiers you need. Track down the man that ran,” Ryder’s voice vibrates with anger.

“I cut his back under his shoulder armor,” I add, knowing it could aid their search. I’m leaning heavily into Ryder, but he’s keeping me upright.

“I’m taking Elowen to my house, and I expect a report in less than an hour. Find out whatever you can about the woman and pray to the gods you

have some information before Commander Veles gets here,” Ryder declares.

“There’s another body on the roof.” My voice is only loud enough for Ryder to hear; I can’t force anything louder than a mumble. My head lolls onto his shoulder.

“There’s another body on the roof!” Ryder shouts while throwing my uninjured arm around his shoulders and ushering me away from the mess.

The older man begins listing off names and giving out orders, but the only thing I can focus on is placing one foot in front of the other. We briefly stop in front of a tan horse before Ryder lifts me. “Hello, horsie,” I run a heavy hand through their mane while Ryder climbs up behind me. My eyes fall shut to stop myself from vomiting while he urges the horse through the streets, keeping a secure arm around my waist.

“How much of that shit got into you?” he asks.

“I pulled it out before half. Do you know what it is?” My anxiety manages to bring some feeling back into my body. Leave it to anxiety to rival a drug.

“It’s only a sedative.” He tightens his arm around me while making a sharp turn. “I can’t believe you took on three people while drugged. Remind me to buy you a drink when you wake up.”

“It was either fight or die, so my options were limited,” I mumble. “You’re a painter.”

“I dabble, I’m not very good,” he chuckles.

“So humble,” I muse. “I don’t feel good.” Riding induced nausea is becoming painful.

“We’re almost there,” he promises, yanking lightly on my braid before wrapping his arm around my waist again. “I’ll hold your hair back if I have to, Atarah.” The humorous moment between us is short-lived. My eyes open slightly as he slows the horse. His hands are tight on the reins. “Finnian left you on the street?” he asks, voice thick with anger.

“Yes.” I keep my answer short. This isn’t a conversation I want to have in general; add in drugs and nausea, and I’m absolutely perturbed. He stops the horse, slides off, and reaches up to help me down. I don’t have time to take in my surroundings while he quickly ushers me inside.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR



“Saskia!” Ryder shouts as the door falls shut behind us. “Saskia!” he shouts a second time. Footsteps pound against the floorboards, and a blurry outline of Saskia appears at the foot of a staircase.

“Ryder, you have five seconds to explain what the fuck is going on,” Saskia demands.

“She got attacked,” Ryder barks when we stop at the bottom of the staircase.

“I can deduce that for myself,” she bites back. “Weren’t you and Finnian guarding her tonight?”

“She’s bleeding and drugged, and Cayden has already been alerted.” I yelp when Ryder wraps his arms around my waist and carries me up the staircase. My hands slap against his back, but they’re more like light pats than smacks.

“I’ll be fine. I just need coffee or an ice bath. Preferably both,” I mumble. Ryder sets me down in the middle of a bedroom, and the back of my thighs brush against a bed. I spring forward and force myself to keep moving. If I sit down, then I’ll fall asleep. I must fight this; I can’t not be in control of my body. My hands scrub my face while I pace the floor; my senses woke up before the fight and I can wake them up again.

“Elowen,” Saskia appears in front of me with a comforting smile and black knit sweater in hand, “I’m going to help you out of your armor, and then I’ll get a washcloth for your hands.”

“That’s okay.” I do my best to feign that I’m unaffected; maybe then my brain will start to believe it. “I can manage.” Saskia ignores me, already

helping me out of my boots. “I have to write a letter,” I gasp while Saskia undoes the laces on my leather corset.

“Don’t worry about that. He’ll be here soon.” She continues to speak to me in the same soft, comforting tone.

Saskia slips from the room after the complicated parts of my armor are off. I muster some words of thankfulness while shimmying out of the rest and throwing the sweater over my head, using the sting in my arm to urge my senses to wake up. The sweater stops at my mid-thighs and stretches past my hands. Saskia reenters the room with a warm washcloth in hand. I thank her again while scrubbing my hands and face, continuing to pace back and forth.

“Why don’t you lie down?” Saskia gently offers.

I shake my head vigorously, “I can’t.”

“I don’t want you to hit your head.”

“I can’t fall asleep. Not like this.” Anxiety makes my throat feel tight, despite everything else about me feeling loose.

“You’ll be okay,” she promises.

“No, no, no,” emotion mingles with the anxiety already tightening my throat, “I can’t give up control.” My breathing turns sharp. I need to calm down. The lack of oxygen is only adding to my spotty vision. My legs wobble, but Saskia shoots her hands forward to steady me. I find my pacing pattern again. “I just need coffee. I can wake up. I’m fine.”

“Elowen,” Saskia’s voice wavers, “nothing will happen while you’re asleep. I—” she cuts herself off when a loud bang rises from downstairs.

“Drugged! She was *fucking drugged!*” Cayden’s voice booms as heavy footsteps bound up the stairs, and the door slams open just as my legs give out again. A pair of strong arms wrap around me, and my face is shoved into a chest covered in black leather and silver steel. I would know it’s Cayden even if I didn’t hear his voice downstairs. I can recognize him by the scent of his skin and the way his hands grip me like I’m a lifeboat in a storm.

“You’re here,” I whisper while reaching my arms up to wrap around his neck. The cut on my arm throbs, but all I can focus on is Cayden’s presence.

“I’ll always come for you, angel.” My heart clenches when his tender tone reaches my ears. I didn’t realize how much I missed the sound of his

voice. Another wave of dizziness washes over me, and I force myself to separate from him so I can begin pacing again.

I just have to keep moving.

Less than half of the sedative got into me.

I'm fine, and if I'm not, then I'll force myself to be fine.

"Hey," Cayden grabs my hands, but rather than stopping me, he starts to walk with me. Saskia must have slipped from the room when he came in—there's no sign of her other than a turned-down bed. "What's going on in your head?"

"I can't," I mumble. My attention is back on moving one foot in front of the other.

His hands travel to my forearms while he walks backward in front of me, "Can't do what?"

"I can't." The knot tightens in my throat. I hate being scared. It's not an emotion I often feel, which is why it's so hard to deal with it when I do feel it. "I can't be defenseless," I hoarsely whisper. Saying it out loud causes my body to wrack with shivers. I'd rather face three assassins than not have control over my own body.

Cayden stops in front of me and takes my face in his hands, brushing his thumbs over my cheekbones. "You're always safe with me." He begins to slowly walk me toward the bed. "I'm right here, and I'm not going anywhere. I'll be with you from the second you fall asleep to the moment you wake up. I'm not going to leave you again." The backs of my thighs brush against the soft bedding. I know he's telling the truth, but it's not only the outright sincerity in his eyes that comforts me; it's the fact that I know this is Cayden. It's the version of himself that he hides behind ice and harsh glares, the part of him that I know will truly be here when I wake up. It's the same version of him that told me to guide his hands in my bathtub, that bandaged my hands outside the temple. He protects me because he needs me to achieve his goals. Maybe it's the sedative mingling with my brain, but he's looking at me differently. He's looking at me like nobody and nothing else exists outside of this room.

"What if it takes me five days to wake up?" I jest because I know I'm fighting off the inevitable. I don't want to talk about succumbing to the sedative; I want a distraction before I fall asleep.

"Then I'll be a bedridden bastard," he replies while lifting me and placing me on the bed. If I wasn't so tired, I might laugh at the feared

Commander of Vareveth tucking me in before adjusting my pillows and taking a seat on the bed next to me.

"I'm sorry for commandeering your bed without your permission," I whisper.

"I wouldn't want you anywhere else," he murmurs.

A lazy smile spreads across my face at his words, but it quickly falls. "Finnian?"

"He's safe. My soldiers caught up to him while I was riding here." I feel myself let go of the last thing my mind was gripping to keep me awake. Cayden's eyes harden, and his shoulders stiffen again; his sneer morphs the shape of his scar. It makes me want to reach out and cup his face like he did to me, but my heavy hand lies motionless on the comforter. He's out of my reach in more ways than one. "Do you want to tell me what happened?"

I shut my eyes against my rising emotions. The sedative is making it harder to suppress my mood swings. I'm relieved he's safe, but the way he looked at me before he turned the corner is still a fresh wound. "No," I force through my tight throat.

"Look at me, angel." One of his hands cups my cheek again, and the other brushes through my hair. "What were you going to write to me tonight?"

My eyes slowly open at the mention of our letters. His sneer is gone, and it's replaced by a calm expression. I'm glad he's not talking about the assassins; it would just make me try to force myself to stay awake more than I already have. "I was going to tell you that I read the books you recommended to me, and I was going to recommend some to you. But my recommendations are much more enthralling."

"Oh, are they?" He softly smiles down at me, continuing his soothing strokes. My hands brush against the soft comforter while finding his wrist and holding his hand against my cheek.

"Mhmm. I also would have said that your letter was the second-best part of my day." It was the first, it was always the first, but I'll never tell him that.

He rolls his eyes, "What's my competition this time?"

"I wore a new dress."

His tongue tucks into the side of his cheek, "You're a tough woman to please."

"Intimidated?" I raise my brows.

“Intrigued,” he corrects. “I must confess for the first time in my life I’m jealous of the stuffy puppets.”

“*The* Commander Veles jealous of advisors?” I gasp. “This is monumental.”

“My motives are justified,” he licks his lips, “you see, they’ve been spending the last two weeks with you, and the only parts I got of you were written on paper. That doesn’t seem fair to me.”

The feeling of sand dancing over my skin begins again, and I know I don’t have much more time with him, so I ask the question I won’t have the guts to ask when I wake up. “Did you like getting my letters?”

I see his earnest grin in between my slow blinks. “Best part of my day.”

“Why didn’t you write to me the first week?”

His smile falters, and his fingers pause briefly before resuming their strokes. “I didn’t think you’d want to hear from me.”

“Cayden,” I manage to form his name while my eyes fall shut for the final time, “I think I missed you.” I don’t know if I’ll ever look too deeply into my emotions, but I know I didn’t like being away from him for two weeks, and I also know I don’t want him thinking that I don’t want to hear from him.

I feel the bed shift, and something soft presses into my forehead, “I think I missed you too, angel.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Cool water laps against my body while I float in a lake. My dark brown hair fans out in the water around me, and my satin night-slip clings to me. I let myself revel in this feeling of unfamiliar peace before opening my eyes.

The night sky stares down at me as bright stars make the inky black void shine. I push the water back and forth, gliding my hands through the silky surface. To the left is a familiar mountain range. I'm in Aestilian, floating in the lake where I learned to swim. It's the place where I would hunt for the prettiest shells and rocks in hopes a mermaid would befriend me.

The snowcapped mountains kiss the stars in ways I never could. A loud voice booms from the sky just as I'm about to reach forward to grab a star.

"Did you see who the fuck did this?" snarls the voice.

Lightning litters the sky, and I shoot up in place, now wading in the water rather than floating. No, I realize while staring into the sky, it's not lightning—the stars are falling.

"I'm going to find them and make them suffer in ways they never thought possible," the voice snarls again.

The stars splash in the lake around me and rain down on the shore. Some even ram into the mountain, making them shake. A mixture of snow and rocks tumble down from the peaks and crash into the lake. Fear spreads through my chest when waves of staggering size barrel toward me. My arms cut through the water while my feet swiftly paddle, but there's no outswimming the waves. They soon overtake me and sweep me under. Water burns my throat as I descend deeper into the endless pit below me.

My hands keep clawing their way to the surface, but I feel like I'm swimming through thick syrup. I keep pushing and thrashing my limbs until I break the surface, gulping in large breaths.

"Elowen!" My head turns toward the shore; I hear someone calling my name. I hear it through the waves, through the avalanche, through the falling stars—it's as clear as if the voice is right in front of me. "Elowen, *please*."

The waves calm around me; and I feel something feather-light brush against my cheek and slide through my hair. I reach up and wrap my hand around something warm, leaning my head into the warm touch on my cheek. My thumb rubs the warmth I clutch, echoing the comfort I'm receiving. The voice along the shore is the same voice that made the stars fall and the mountains shake, but now it's beckoning me to come closer.

It breaks through the chill the lake injected into my bones and embraces me like a blanket, reaching something deep in my body and igniting something I've never felt. It's a feeling I don't know how to describe, but I know I want to feel it more.

I want to be near that voice. Something is tugging on the back of my mind, imploring me not to get closer because the voice is dangerous. I should swim away from the voice and hide in the mountains, but I can't ignore my desire.

The shore is even colder than the lake. My satin night-slip and hair are soaked; they stick to my cold body as the wind whips around me. A shadowed figure that looks like they're spun from the night sky is sitting beneath a tree, on top of a blanket surrounded by gorgeous flowers. My teeth are chattering, and my body is violently trembling.

"Come here, angel. I'll keep you warm," the darkness gently commands, and I comply.

My shaky legs carry me up the shore and toward the darkness. Most people would run from darkness, but I can't shake the feeling that it's exactly where I need to go. I sink to my knees and lay my body on top of the figure. It should be cold and uninviting, but this darkness is anything but that. It's inviting and safe. A pair of strong arms wrap around me, and my cheek presses into something warm while I wrap my arms around the figure beneath me.

"I'm here," I whisper. I stay here, perfectly content, while darkness intertwines with my hair and dances down my spine. I don't know how long

I've stayed here, but the darkness starts to fade, and the sun begins to peek over the mountains. No, I don't want this to end. I want to stay here in the realm of dreams with my darkness.

Another voice comes from over the mountains. "The reports... downstairs..." I catch bits of a soft feminine voice.

"I don't want to leave her," my darkness confesses. I tighten my hold. I don't want my darkness to leave me either. The darkness chuckles but doesn't move.

"It'll only take ten minutes," the feminine voice speaks again.

Much to my dismay, the darkness starts to shift. I curl my body toward the fleeting warmth, but it soon disappears; the only warmth that remains is a feather-light touch on my cheek. Tree roots wrap around my wrist when I try to reach toward the darkness. *Come back*, I want to say, but the words die in my throat.

"I should have assumed you'd be fussy." The darkness chuckles again, and something is placed next to me. I tug it closer and inhale the familiar scent from the soft object. "I'll be right back, beautiful. Don't go anywhere."

The warmth disappears from my cheek, and a feeling of loneliness wraps around my heart. I yank my hand free of the tree root that restrains me in tandem with the sun fully rising over the mountain and blinding me with its rays.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX



The first thing I see when my eyes snap open is a warm, soft pillow. I'm clutching it like a bear clutches a tree. It smells delicious. My sleepy eyes start to shut again while I shove my face into the cinnamon and pine scented bundle of warmth.

Wait.

This is Cayden's pillow.

I'm in Cayden's room.

"Oh my gods," I mutter while jolting forward in bed. I'm thrust into the present like a crack of thunder waking me from a deep slumber. I grip the blankets to my chest while wading through the hazy fog that surrounds my mind. I push myself into a sitting position and lean my back against the headboard while digging the heels of my palms into my eyes to shake off the remaining drowsiness as best I can.

My eyes take in the details of the room—Cayden's room, I correct myself. It's much cozier than his room in the castle. Dark wooden walls mirror the floor, and a stone fireplace radiates heat into the room. There's a desk directly in front of me, sandwiched between a bookshelf and a weapon rack and piled high with papers, maps, and leather journals. There's an unoccupied chair to the right of the bed, and I notice a half-eaten tray of food on the floor when I peek over the edge. My knives and leathers are nowhere to be found.

My arm is bandaged: someone must have put ointment on it because it doesn't hurt as much. My fingers poke at my neck and jaw—both are sore, but it's nothing more than a dull ache. My back stiffens when the door

cracks open. Saskia's dark eyes are blown wide while she looks me over; her full lips part in a smile.

"You're awake!" she shrieks, stepping forward to throw her arms around me. I embrace her after a brief moment of surprise. She's nearly suffocating me in her tight hold, but she's clinging onto me like I'm important to her, and it feels nice. After she releases me, she grabs a glass of water from the nightstand and hands it to me.

"I'm in Cayden's room?" And in his clothes and in his bed, but I leave those facts out.

"You are," she confirms before hopping off the bed and reaching into his wardrobe to pull out my leathers. Someone must have cleaned them. "I forced him to come downstairs five minutes ago to look over some reports we received because there's too many to keep running them up and down the stairs."

She said she had to force him to come downstairs—did he stay with me the whole time? Images of his face above mine before I passed out flash in my mind. That wasn't a dream?

"Your knives are downstairs. You can meet us down there once you're dressed." She slips from the room before I can thank her.

Rather than attempting to filter through my foggy memory, I climb out of bed and put my clothes on after folding the sweater and placing it on the chair. I know Cayden doesn't always stay in the castle, but I didn't realize he has a house. His room makes me feel like I'm surrounded by him without him even being present; just the idea of him is overwhelming. I slip into his bathroom to get a look at myself and do a makeshift morning routine even though, through the window, it looks closer to evening.

I run my hands through my chaotic hair before tying it in a low ponytail and slipping from the room after making his bed. Voices filter up from the staircase on my left. My boots creep silently down the dark hallway and down a staircase before I stop halfway, peering into a living room. A deep green couch is framed by two brown leather chairs, all arranged around a coffee table. Everything faces a stone fireplace with twin bookcases mirrored on either side of it, but it's not only books on the shelves. There are weapons, knickknacks, perfumes, colognes, plants, candles, and throw blankets tucked into the bottom shelves. There's a dark wood piano pushed up against the wall, and a window bench filled with plush pillows. Cloaks and scarves hang by the door, and several swords and pairs of boots are

neatly lined up under them. It's a home, not a castle, but a perfect home with character, memory, and personality.

My eyes dance toward the door, and there Cayden stands as if death had donned a human form. His signature scowl mars his face while he focuses on arming himself. I watch as his long fingers fasten the straps and tuck the steel into their holsters. I saw him before I passed out, but this is different because there's no substance inside of me controlling or distorting how I feel. Now I know for sure that even if many things were altered by the sedative, the comfort I felt at the sight of him wasn't altered in any way—because it's just as powerful now.

My gaze catches the way his frown deepens when he raises his left arm—he's hurt. Anger bubbles inside of me at the thought of someone hurting him, and suddenly murder seems like a great way to start my day. The next step creaks under the weight of my boot, and Cayden's gaze instantly finds mine. It paralyzes me. I don't think I could look away from him if an army charged down the street.

"Elowen," he greets me while cutting across the room.

My legs carry me the rest of the way down the steps. Our gazes never waver from each other. I drink in the sight of him after stepping off the last step: his chocolate brown hair is tousled like he's dragged his hands through it one too many times, and dark circles shadow his bloodshot eyes. He looks exhausted.

"Hello," I whisper. I have no idea how else to greet him. It feels wrong to hug him or to say I'm happy to see him, even though I am.

"Hello," he echoes, without making any move to step away from the stairs. He just continues to stare at me as if I'm not real. His hands twitch at his sides, but he doesn't take it further than that or move to touch me.

"What happened to your arm?" We're talking in low voices; it feels like one of those moments when we don't have to pay attention to the world because it's just him and me; nobody's watching us. We don't have to be a queen and a commander; we can just be Elowen and Cayden.

His mouth quirks up at the corner, but his smirk doesn't carry its usual easiness. It's weighed down by fatigue. "Spying on me?"

"It's not spying if you know I'm here." He's avoiding my question about what happened. He probably knows the full details of my attack; it's only fair he tells me how he got hurt.

“Someone that’s dead now. Don’t worry about it,” he answers easily without giving me any kind of information.

Whenever someone tells me not to worry about something, it’s like a switch is flipped and I worry about it more. He presses his hand into my back and urges me around a corner before I can say anything else. Ryder stands at the kitchen island, pouring himself a cup of coffee, and Saskia is sitting at a long table with reports littered all over it. She wasn’t lying when she said there’s a lot. I can hardly see the wood of the table in between all of them.

“I take it we couldn’t keep this one quiet?” I ask, even though the answer is obvious.

“There were too many witnesses,” Ryder answers.

A piece of my memory clears, and I recall Ryder bringing me here. “Thank you for helping me last night.” Saskia cringes in her seat. “What is it?” I ask.

“It’s been almost two days,” Saskia says.

“Two days!” I shriek while surging forward to grab the reports and catch up on everything I missed, which is obviously a lot. The papers on the table become an ink-filled blur as I try to take in all the details. I feel two hands grip my hips and spin me away from the reports, forcing me down onto one of the benches that line the table. My back is now to Saskia and Ryder, and Cayden kneels in front of me. He continues to grip my hips while he looks up at me from the floor. My breathing feels shallow at the sight of him on his knees. I lick my lips, and his eyes fall to them before looking back into my eyes with much more heat than he ever has.

“Don’t read the reports,” he huskily commands, “look at me and tell me what happened.”

“We don’t want your memory to become distorted or further confused if you read other people’s reports,” Saskia softly says behind me. I nod my head, never taking my eyes off Cayden.

“Tell me what happened to your arm first,” I demand. Annoyance flares in his eyes.

“That’s not important,” he brushes me off.

“You want to know about things that happen to me? Then get used to me asking about things that happen to you. This is a two-way street.” I lean closer to his face and match his determined expression. Ryder lets out a low whistle, but Cayden and I ignore him. He inches even closer to my face and

reaches for something behind me. He's so close that our lips would meet with the slightest tilt of his head.

"There was a skirmish at the border while I was moving my soldiers around. I was fighting several people at once, and when I wasn't looking, someone nicked my arm. I killed them, finished the skirmish, and wrapped a cloth around my cut." He lifts a brow, "Satisfied?"

Not nearly, I want to say. But it's obvious he would prefer to filter through my attack, and I'm eager to sort through my memories.

I feel something slide against my leg.

It's my knife.

He's arming me.

The desire and heat already coursing through me increase tenfold. My thighs long to clench together, but he kneels between them, which isn't helping my case. I can't look at him while I filter through my memories, so I close my eyes and disappear into my mind. There's an impenetrable fog surrounding my thoughts, like the fog that surrounds Aestilian. But the fog around Aestilian protects it; the fog in my brain is hindering me.

"First, we went to the archives," I start slowly. I hear a pen scratching on paper. I suppose Saskia, as head of intelligence, will want to record my account. "Then we went to a tavern. Ryder...he was looking for someone. Finnian and I—" My eyes snap open as I recall the argument we had right before the attack and turn my body toward Ryder. "Did you talk to Finnian?" Cayden gently places a hand on my cheek and turns me back to him. Another memory resurfaces, the warmth I felt on my cheek while I was sleeping—it was Cayden's hand.

"I told you before you fell asleep that he's safe. He's at the castle," Cayden states in a calming voice. "What was the fight about?" His thumb gently strokes my cheek, a stark contrast to the anger in his eyes.

"It was stupid," I mutter, trying to brush it off.

"It's not stupid if it caused you to chase after him or upset you," he remarks. I involuntarily lean into his hand before I can think better of it. Instead of pulling away, he brushes his thumb over my cheekbone again. My throat tightens, and I force myself not to glance toward his lips.

Finnian mentioned that the advisors were talking about me, so I guess it's best that the three of them know in case their opinion of me complicates things. "Finnian was upset because apparently, the advisors think I'm

making myself into a target and practically goading assassins to make a move on me.” Saskia’s pen stills, and the tension in the room feels tight.

Cayden’s hand falls from my face and returns to my waist. He shakes his head while his eyes fill with malice. “Fucking idiots,” he snarls.

“You don’t think they’re right?” I inquire.

“So what if you’re showing the world that you’re a threat?” he counters. “Do you think I make a move and worry people will perceive me as a threat? I don’t. Because that’s how they *should* perceive me. You’re not making yourself into a threat; you already are one. You killed a vextree right in front of my eyes.” He sucks in a deep breath and dispels some of his anger. “I think the world should get used to being threatened by you. I rather enjoy it when you threaten me.” My chest fills with pride the more he speaks, filling the cracks that were chiseled by self-doubt. He manages to wring a small smile from me, and his scowl lightens when he glances toward my mouth.

“That’s a very good arrangement because I rather enjoy threatening you,” I quip.

He playfully rolls his eyes before getting back into the questions, “Did he see you outside of the tavern?”

Sadness pinches my chest. “Yes,” I mumble. They don’t need to know the exact specifications of how his expression hurt me. I flinch, not expecting to feel something on my leg again. But Cayden slides another knife into my thigh holster while stroking my waist. He bites the inside of his cheek and manages to look angrier but doesn’t say anything.

“I turned back to the tavern to find Ryder, and that’s when I felt the dart in my neck. Then the assassins came. I took out the one on the roof first. Then I fought the man and woman on the ground. They...wore masks.” Saskia’s pen keeps scribbling behind me. “I killed the woman with the man’s sword.” Another knife slides into my thigh holster, and I try not to let it affect me. I close my eyes, trying to recall as many details as I can. My memory is foggiest in this part. Cayden slides more knives onto my thighs, patiently waiting for more answers. “I heard Ryder call out my name, and the man looked scared. I think he recognized Ryder.”

“Do you remember any parts of his face you could see?” Cayden smoothly asks, but I note the restlessness in his tone.

I feel like a brick wall is caged around my brain. *Come on. Think.* An image begins to form in my brain: eyes filled with malice but accompanied

by something else. There was something on his face. My brows scrunch in concentration while I force my mind to conjure the image from the foggy depths.

“He has a scar,” I say before opening my eyes. It may be a minuscule detail, considering most soldiers have scars, but it’s worth noting. “Right here,” I reach my hand out to Cayden’s face and brush my thumb above his right brow, dragging it horizontally across his forehead. His throat constricts, and his eyes bore into mine. I let my hand linger slightly longer than necessary before taking it away. My breathing becomes uneven when Cayden leans closer to retrieve the remaining three knives behind me and slides them into my holsters. “I’m sure Ryder informed you of the remaining bit of the story. He can probably recall the details better than I can.”

Cayden nods and finishes arming me. He takes his hands off my waist and places them on either side of me, using the table to lift himself up from his knees, and gets close to my face. “My favorite part was when you said *hello, horsie*,” he jests before fully standing and walking over to sit at the head of the table.

I turn my body to face the table and flip off Ryder, who miserably fails at containing his laughter. The number of reports no longer intimidates me now that I’ve placed the details I remember in chronological order, but there’s still one thing that bothers me about these reports.

“How many people saw me drugged and weak-looking?”

“Weak?” Saskia’s tone fills with disbelief.

“You fought off three trained assassins, killing two, while drugged. If anyone calls you weak after doing that, then I’ll drug them myself and stick three assassins on them,” Cayden states.

“I second that,” Ryder remarks.

“Can either of you ever provide someone with a normal form of encouragement or comfort?” Saskia rolls her eyes.

“We’ll tell the assassins not to kill them,” Cayden reasons.

“Exactly. Just hurt them a little before sending them on their way,” Ryder adds.

“With the bonus of a corrected way of thinking.” Cayden points in Ryder’s direction.

“The both of you are a nuisance,” Saskia mutters while rubbing her temples.

“We could always pretend to be the assassins so that we don’t have to hire anyone and get the pleasure of correcting their thinking ourselves,” I chime in.

“Yes!” Cayden and Ryder shout in tandem.

“Don’t encourage them.” Saskia levels me with a glare before asking, “What do you have to do tonight?”

My smile cracks, and I tip my head down to fiddle with the ends of my hair. “I should meet with Finnian and Ailliard to tell them I’m alright; they’re probably worried. They also might want to go over some things about Aestilian since the treaty terms are finalized.”

“I’ll go with you,” Saskia suggests. I hesitate at her offer; she won’t hear anything about the location of Aestilian, but she would still be getting inside information. Information can be lethal in the mind of Saskia; her brain is her sharpest weapon. “All you’ll be discussing is provisions, yes?” she asks. I nod in response. “I can already draw my own conclusions based on how much gets sent to Aestilian. You won’t be discussing anything I can’t figure out. I can also be your buffer.”

I won’t lie; her offer sounds tempting. Even though I slept for almost two days, I don’t feel rested, and I’m not up for a verbal sparring match. “You’re sure?” I ask.

Saskia looks up from the paper she’s writing on. “You realize you’re my ally, too, right?”

“Of course, I am. That’s what I agreed to.” Not only does Saskia feel like an ally, but she also feels like a friend.

“No.” She rests her pen against the table. “You’re my ally against them,” she states while pointing between Cayden and Ryder, who wear mock expressions of betrayal. Their jaws hang open while they clutch their chests and glance between each other and Saskia. The laughter that bubbles in my throat, free of restraint, feels wonderful.

“Deal,” I say and reach out to shake her hand, wanting to rub a little salt in their wounds.

She deviously smiles while firmly clasping mine, “Allies.”

“This is dangerous.” Cayden abruptly rises from the table. “I’m leaving before I get stabbed.”

“Don’t leave me, you coward!” Ryder shouts and follows him out of the room, spilling coffee and yelping when the liquid burns his hand.

“Are they always like this?” I ask Saskia.

“Unfortunately,” she answers while getting up from the table. “We’ll leave for the castle in five minutes.” She walks out of the kitchen and heads upstairs.

All but a minute passes before Cayden comes back into the room wearing a thick black cloak around his neck and carrying another in his hand. He takes a seat on the bench next to me, but he rests his back against the table rather than swinging his legs around.

“You don’t have to do that. The castle is close enough,” I tell him as he fastens the spare cloak around my neck.

“I know I don’t have to,” he replies, finishing off the knot. *He’s doing it because he wants to.* “Making allies wherever you go, angel?”

Angel.

He’s said it countless times, but this time the word sparks another memory. I heard him in my dream. The darkness had his voice. His eyes narrow on me when I don’t answer right away, so I shove the dream to the back of my mind. The last thing he needs to hear is that I dreamed of him while I slept in his bed...and I think I slept in his arms, on his bare chest.

I cover my realization up with a small laugh. “Have you looked for the assassin yet?”

All traces of humor disappear from his features, and his posture goes rigid. “No, I sealed off the city. I haven’t left the house.”

“You sealed off the city?” I gasp, and my hands fly toward my mouth. Sealing off the city means halting all imports and exports, all travel, all correspondence to other cities in Vareveth and other kingdoms on the continent—it’s not something to do under minor circumstances.

“I took a vow to protect you. I intend to hold myself to that vow,” he says without looking at me.

I recognize the expression he wears on his face: it’s guilt. An emotion I’m all too familiar with. His leg starts to tap against the floor, and before my brain catches up to my actions, I reach a hand toward his leg and lay it flat on his thigh. His jostling stops. He turns his head toward me again—we’re completely level and incredibly close. He needs to stop internalizing everything that happens to me; the assassination attempts aren’t his fault.

“Cayden—” I begin to say something, but it dies in my throat when I take in his wanting expression. I inch closer to him. He tilts his head down, and his breath fans across my lips as he brushes them against mine. A whimper catches in my throat, and my eyes slip shut. He makes me feel like

I'm teetering on the edge of a cliff, about to freefall. The touch is sinfully light, it's hardly even a whisper between our bodies, but it ignites me in a way that no touch ever has.

My body pulses, tightens, and tunes in only to him. He commands every ounce of my attention. I want him. There's no point in denying it. I want him even though I shouldn't. I want him despite our circumstances. He knows he shouldn't want me. There are bigger things at stake than our wants and desires, but I can't seem to summon a single gods-damned reason not to close the gap between us when his hand makes its way to my cheek again, bringing my lips closer to his.

"Ready?" Saskia calls out as she bounds down the stairs. We separate from each other like water and oil. He shoots up from the bench before clearing his throat and running a hand through his hair. I swing my legs over and keep my face turned toward the floor in hopes he won't catch a glimpse of my burning cheeks.

"I'm sorry," I mutter.

His boots shift as he turns toward me. "No, Elowen, don't—"

"Hurry up!" Saskia calls out again, unaware of what she just interrupted. Oh my gods, we were really going to kiss. I start walking, leaving Cayden to catch up with me. My body still pulses even as we make our way to the front door and exit the house.

"We only have three horses here, so you're riding with me," Cayden says as we walk side by side down the path. He was unable to strip the huskiness from his voice when he cleared his throat. My bottom lip makes its way between my teeth. He lifts me in the air and places me on his horse and swings himself up after, wrapping an arm around my waist and gripping the reins in his free hand.

"I can walk if it's a problem," I offer, sitting rigid in the saddle, not wanting to inconvenience him further after sleeping in his bed or touch him after what transpired between us.

"There's no problem." He eases me back into his chest. The gentle gesture is probably the worst thing he could have done because I can feel the evidence of just how much I affect him pressing into me. He knows I can feel it; we're so close that he can also feel me involuntarily shift my hips closer while my thighs clench the saddle. Leaning against his chest is the last place I should be. He keeps a tight hold on the reins, much tighter than necessary, and nudges his horse in the side.

The three of us take off into the chilly evening. We wind through several streets; some taverns are just opening, and others already have lines out of their doors. Some people turn their heads and wave as we ride through, and others simply go about their tasks. I feel Cayden's arm tighten around me as we near the tavern. There's no point in shoving him away while we sit in the same saddle, and I would be lying if I said it didn't make me feel better having him here. Fighting assassins while drugged and alone isn't something I'd care to repeat.

"We need to talk about the heist," I say over the clatter of hooves on the cobblestones.

"Tonight." His lips brush the shell of my ear, and I can't suppress my shiver. My grip tightens on his wrist and my back arches slightly when he skims his lips against my neck. My face is permanently flushed by the time we enter the forest that spans between headquarters and the castle. He affects me in ways I can't hide when he's this close, and I think he likes it. Cayden slows the horse and slides down once the castle is in sight. He reaches up to help me to the ground, even though he knows I'm fully capable of doing it myself, and sets me in front of him. His hands linger on my waist before traveling up my body to rub my arms while he says goodbye.

"You won't disappear for another fifteen days, right?" I ask.

"Counting?" One side of his lips quirks up.

Yes. "We're behind on planning," I narrow my eyes at him.

"I'll be back tonight. I have some business to finish up." He drags his fingers down my arms and along my waist, like he's trying to absorb every touch that he can get of me, before climbing onto his horse again. Saskia loops her arm through mine, and I feel Cayden's eyes on my back as he watches me safely enter the castle.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN



The rest of the evening has been uneventful. Finnian, Ailliard, and Saskia got roped into a late advisor meeting to discuss the wording of the treaty. The terms are finalized, but both sides want to make sure no hidden clauses or loopholes are added. I saw Ailliard in the hall while I was walking to my room, and he wrapped me in one of those hugs you hope to get from your father. He couldn't stay long but kept saying that he's so glad I'm alright and that we'll have breakfast tomorrow morning since he's not sure how late the meeting will run tonight. It felt good to see him, but there's still a Finnian-sized hole carved in my chest.

I want to see him, and I will, but I'm so tired of hearing apologies after something bad happens. We're on the same side—we should be able to communicate without someone succumbing to juvenile anger. Assassins will come for me whether I show what I can do or choose to hide it, and I made a vow to myself when I left Aestilian that I'm done hiding. If the world is threatened by me, then I'll give them a reason to be.

I have a voice, and I make my own choices because I rule myself. It's my choice to fight, to get my dragons, and to stay for the war. Cayden didn't force my hand; he gave me a deal that both of us will benefit from, and I took it.

I glance toward the gaudy gold clock on the mantle, the time reads ten minutes past three o'clock in the morning. My fingers slide my moonstone pendant along the chain. I gave up on trying to focus on my book around one in the morning and have been pacing ever since. My heels tap against the floor while my hands rake through my hair and down my face. Cayden said he would be here tonight. I groan into my hands before dropping them

to my sides. Ever since we met, he's always shown up whenever he said he would—whether in person or through a steady stream of letters. My annoyance with him for not showing up died around midnight and was replaced by an unrelenting sense of worry. What if he's hurt? He didn't look well when I saw him last, and he said he had something to take care of before he came here. Cayden is the Commander of Vareveth; the tasks he does are doused in danger.

My teeth sink into my lower lip; I can find him. If he's not here, then he's probably at the border. The border is huge, but he must be close if he was able to get to Ladislava on short notice. There's also a part of me that knows he wouldn't put a lot of distance between us. The city is sealed off, and I can assume that Cayden didn't just spend two weeks at the border without strengthening his defenses. I pace around my room a few more times, contemplating my next move.

The issue I have with hypothetical scenarios is that once the seed is planted, I have a hard time snuffing it out. Another image of Cayden bleeding out in a ditch somewhere flashes in my mind. The army has a surplus of healers, but I know he's safest with me. Nyrinn's voice telling me not to trust court healers echoes in my mind while I grab the satchel she gave me. I need Cayden in order to get my dragons.

I need him.

Gods, I hate those three damn words. It's something I can tell myself thousands of times, but they'll never shake off the bitterness that shackles them. I want to rip my feelings from my chest and stomp on them, grind them under the heel of my boot. I want to bury them so deep in the earth that even if they take root, they'll never break the surface. I hate him for making me worry like this. I'm not used to relying on someone or needing someone to accomplish something; my only comfort is that he also needs me. I don't know if he needs me right now, but I'm going to find out. I won't pace my room, wondering if he's hurt, when I can find out for myself. Ever since we made this deal, he's always been there when I've gotten hurt—I can be there for him as well.

My mind begins drafting a plan while I replace my night slip with my thick leather gear and knives. My armor accessories can stay here since I don't want the reflective material to catch the moonlight. I won't be able to leave from my door because of the guards, and I also can't use the door that conjoins mine and Cayden's rooms because it's deadbolted on both sides.

My boots squeak against the wooden floor as I pivot on my heels and quickly walk to my balcony doors. The night air engulfs me as I peer over the railing. It's a steep drop to the walkway that borders the lake. My nails dig into the stone railing while I glance toward the twin balcony a few feet away. I've jumped from rooftop to rooftop with ease, but my previous jumps have always been closer to the ground. The most I would risk on those jumps was a fractured leg or wrist. If I fail at this jump...well, I'll be finding out if the gods are real or not far earlier than I'd like. I grip the breakfast table in my hands, carrying it over to the edge closest to Cayden's balcony, along with the iron chair that I place directly in front of it.

"Don't think about your guts splattering all over the ground because of some annoying commander that makes you want to rip your hair out and shove it down his throat," I say to myself while walking to the farthest side of the balcony.

What if he's fine and I'm doing this for nothing?

No. If he was fine, then he would've been here. I tuck the loose strands of hair that frame my face behind my ears and take not one, but three steadying breaths. I've made jumps of this width before. I can do this.

Don't think, just do.

Don't think.

Don't think.

"Cayden Veles, if you're not bleeding, then I'll make you bleed," I vow to the stars.

I take off in a sprint without giving my muscles a chance to catch up with my mind. I pump my arms, gaining as much speed as I possibly can before my boot hits the chair, then hits the table with a loud clang, and I thrust myself into the air. Time slows while I bridge the gap. The wind whips at my face and through my cloak while my body propels through the air. I sail over Cayden's railing, and my boots slap against solid stone. My face whips behind me, and I resist the urge to cheer while I face down my own balcony. Instead, a crazed laugh escapes my lips, and I raise my hand to flip off the gap I just jumped. Fuck you, gravity.

I pull two small knives from the holster on my calf and kneel in front of the double doors, making quick work at picking the lock. My palms tingle when the door swings open, but I'm only met with darkness and a perfectly made bed. His fireplace is cold, and none of the lanterns in his room have been lit recently; no traces of smoke linger in the air. I take extra care to

keep my steps quiet while I inch toward the door. His door is around the corner from my room, so the guards won't see me. I just have to listen for servants in the halls. My hand wraps around the knob, and I cringe at the sound of the bolt retracting. My face presses against the smooth wood while I strain my ears to listen for any approaching sounds.

When I know the coast is clear, I crack the door open and peer into the hallway. Only one side of the hall is visible, but it's a risk I'm going to have to take. It's either take a chance, sleep in here, or balcony-hop again. The door softly shuts behind me as I make my way into the hall, keeping my steps swift and light while keeping my head down. I'm used to missions like this; they're all I did for most of my life. I would spy through floorboards and ceilings for any crumbs of information I could get. Darkness can't scare you when you're one of the monsters that lurk in it.

I make it to the archway that Cayden and I have used while traveling to and from headquarters, but there's guards stationed on either side. Cutting a corner, I glide into the sitting room where Ailliard, Finnian, and I had breakfast. Moonlight streams through the windows, coating the room in a deep blue bath. I crack open the window farthest from the guards and slip out. The damp earth softens the sound of my landing. I squat down behind some bushes and keep as close to the castle as possible.

My hands pry some branches away from my face; the tree line isn't far—only a few yards. I just need to get the guards' attention away from there long enough for me to sprint. The branches bounce back in place after I release them. My hands brush against the ground around me until my fingers knock into something solid—perfect. I dig my nails into the dirt and pull a decent-sized rock free. Repeating the act, I pull another rock free. If I wasn't here, I would've thrown it at the guards' heads, but I don't think killing or seriously injuring Vareveth soldiers is a symbol of good faith. I doubt Eagor and Valia would be eager to sign a treaty with someone that killed their soldiers.

I slowly rise to my feet, stepping slightly away from the castle. I toss the first rock in a long, high arc. It sails well above the guards' heads and crushes several branches before smacking against the ground. The bushes are mirrored on the other side of the entrance.

"What was that?" the guard closest to me asks. They crane their necks toward the other side of the entrance, but I need them to turn their bodies as well. I glance down at the second rock. This better work. I toss it and hold

my breath while it sails through the air in the same arc as the previous one. I ready myself in a sprinting position, keeping my eyes on the guards.

The rock hits the ground with the same crunch and thump. The guards unsheathe their swords and turn their bodies fully away from the tree line. I don't wait to listen to what they're saying. I take off in a sprint, pumping my arms and legs as I did while preparing to jump over the balcony. If I don't make it to the tree line, then this was all for nothing. The night air burns my throat. I run as if a netherwraith is gaining on me, pushing myself to break through the tree line and continue sprinting until I'm sure that I'm far enough away from the castle. I run diagonally through the forest, in the direction of Ladislava, so that I won't enter headquarters at the top of the hill. My eyes scan the woods while I run, making sure no beasts are lurking. Too many years in the Terrwyn have conditioned me to stay alert.

Candlelit windows rise in the distance, and I know I've made up for the time I lost while sneaking out of the castle. I slow my pace and break through the tree line, sticking to the shadows the buildings provide. Thankfully, hardly anyone is on the road, but I still don't take my chances. Not only am I avoiding Vareveth soldiers, but I'm also avoiding any assassins that may be lurking. I'm not out for a fight; I'm out to find the idiot commander that never showed up in my room.

Sneaking and spying are second nature to me. I could never draw too much attention to myself whenever I left Aestilian, so I don't have to think much about my movements. Morning hours are gaining on me, but it's still dark enough that if I keep my head down, I'll look like an average soldier. I'm traveling alone, so I shouldn't draw too much attention to myself.

I exit the alleyway and round the corner to the horse pen that's located by the path to the border. Dodging the main gate, I walk the perimeter until I find a loose part of the fence. I shift a log out of its holes and gently place it on the grass. Thankfully, all these horses are saddled and ready to be ridden at a moment's notice. Saskia briefly told me that they change them out regularly. The horses don't keep their saddles on for too long, and they're always well rested and fed in case any soldier needs a horse in an emergency.

I grab the reins of the horse closest to me—a tall golden mare. She nuzzles my hand while I gently pat her nose and stroke her mane. I click my tongue and lead her out of the gap I made in the fence, briefly dropping her reins and placing the log back in its holes before swinging myself onto her.

I lead her through the trees, once again not trusting the main road. We start off in a trot as we get further away from Ladislava. After a few minutes, I grip her reins in my sweaty palms. This is the last hurdle before I get to the border. *To Cayden*, my mind echoes. There's no turning back now. Judging by the position of the moon, not much time has passed since I left the castle—maybe a half hour. I nudge my foot into the horse's side, and she takes off in a sprint. The wind whips through my hair, and I cherish the feeling of being on a mission again.

Not in a castle where there's guards waiting right outside of my room. But in a forest where there's just me, the moon, the stars, and the trees.

I lose track of how long I'm riding for, too content to be alone and free, when a loud boom shakes the ground. My hands pull on the reins to slow the horse down, and my throat tightens while my heart hammers in my chest. I'm filled with a mixture of anticipation, curiosity, and trepidation. I'm at the border. Once the papers are signed, this is my future. Once I get my dragons, I'm going to be on that battlefield. It's not something I want to see tonight. I just want to get to Cayden—to make sure he's not dead or seriously maimed. If he's okay, then I'll kill him myself for making me worry like this. My horse made good time, not a single ray of light peeks through the trees. The ride technically wasn't long, but anxiety stretches seconds into minutes and minutes into hours. I slide down and lean against a tree to survey the camp. I stayed fairly close to the main path, so Cayden's tent can't be far.

My eyes scan over the nearly identical tents but snag on one larger than the rest, with a sleek black horse tied in front of it. There's no doubt in my mind that it's Cayden's tent. I lead my horse out of the tree line and walk her over to an unoccupied post with a water trough in front of it.

"I'll come back for you later," I whisper into her ear and give her nose another pat. I turn away from her and keep my head down while weaving between tents to get to Cayden's. There are more people mingling here than at headquarters, but there still aren't many. I don't feel the exhaustion I should because my body is high on anticipation and adrenaline.

My clammy hands grasp the strap of my healing satchel when I reach the outside of his tent. The flaps flow with the breeze, and candlelight dances from the inside. He's in there.

Please, be okay, so I can yell at you.

Don't be hurt because...I'm scared of what I'll feel when I look at you.

I reach out my hands to grasp the fabric of the entrance, and without announcing myself, I step inside.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



My breath hitches at the sight of him, and my feet stay rooted in place as the tent flaps fall shut behind me. He doesn't look up from the desk he stands behind. The candlelight dances along his scarred cheek as he runs a hand through his wet hair. The black lace-up shirt he's wearing blocks my assessment of his torso, but if he's standing, then he must be okay.

The tightness in my chest eases—*he's okay*. All the images of him bloodied on the battlefield float away into the abyss of worries that never came to pass. It shouldn't be this relieving, but gods, it is. It feels like I can breathe again.

"Do you have the report?" he asks in a cold tone, still staring down at his desk. It's just as messy, if not more so than his other two desks. His voice sends a shiver through me. "Well?" he inquires, finally looking up. The annoyed expression on his face instantly melts and is replaced by confusion. He pinches his eyes shut before snapping them open and blinking in my direction.

"Elowen?" His voice is light, almost a whisper. He glances between me and the glass of amber liquid before fumbling it and placing it on the desk. "Are you okay?" The haziness clears from his vision, and he rushes around the desk. "Why are you here?" I can hardly make out his features in the dark tent. His hands quickly stretch in my direction before he pulls them back, clasping them behind him.

"I'm fine," I bite out, brushing past him to throw my healing satchel and cloak onto a chair in the seating area. My anger is beginning to boil inside of me now that I know he's fine and perfectly capable of sending a letter.

“Did you ride here alone?” His voice is also hardening in anger—good. I’m glad I’m not the only one pissed off; there’s no fun in that. I take my time surveying the tent, knowing it’ll increase his annoyance. It’s more like a miniature house than a tent, equipped with everything the rooms in the castle are. “Elowen,” he commands.

I finally turn in his direction and stare him down across the space. “For someone that loves to withhold information, you sure are demanding when it comes to supplying it.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He fully pivots to face me, and it feels as it did before we sparred. The both of us are constantly pushing and challenging each other.

“You wrote to me for a week. I got a letter every morning at the exact same time, and you didn’t think to write to me tonight? You could have given a messenger an urgent letter, and they would have ridden to the castle.” I cross my arms and dig my nails into my skin, trying to keep the shakiness out of my tone. My anxiety and anger are a deadly combination and course through me at the speed of a straight-shot arrow.

“I didn’t think it was necessary.” He stares me down with cold eyes.

“No, Cayden, of course it’s not necessary to tell me you’re unharmed when you don’t show up when you say you will!” I pace the floor, wanting to look anywhere other than him, the place where his idiotic brain is kept.

“You should have gone to sleep,” he argues. I shoot him my best death glare, and his lips flatten.

“People can die in a second, Cayden,” I bite back.

“Yes, which is exactly why I don’t know why you thought it was your best option to gallop, unguarded, throughout Vareveth!” His fists clench at his sides, but he still stays rooted in place, half-cloaked in darkness.

“Because I was worried, you fucking idiot!” My chest heaves and my heart beats uncontrollably. Something shudders behind his eyes. He briefly looks down before facing me again, recovering the guarded expression I rarely see past.

“Do you realize how close you’re standing to Imirath right now?” The sound of his heavy boots coming closer fills the space between us. “You don’t think that makes *me* worried?”

He stops a few feet in front of me when I hold an accusatory finger in his direction. “You don’t get to lecture me on being worried. You were here, where the fighting is at its peak, for two damn weeks, and couldn’t put any

specific details in a letter. I didn't receive any news of you or from you for the first week, and still don't even know what you did when you were gone because you never told me!"

"I don't get to lecture you on being worried?" he incredulously echoes, letting out a bitter laugh and shaking his head. "You know why I didn't write for the first week."

I hold up a hand to silence him. I'm not done. "Then, the first time I saw you was when you looked like you hadn't slept a wink the entire time you were gone, and were injured while fighting here!"

"Might I remind you that the first time I saw you after two weeks was when one of my soldiers rushed to inform me that you were drugged and attacked by three assassins!" he snaps. His arms are shaking in barely contained anger, and I suppose I look the same. "I held you in my fucking arms the entire time you were passed out so that I could keep your heart rate steady. I didn't trust just blankets and fire; I needed to physically feel that you were healing. On top of that, I had a healer check on you at least five times a day because I was going out of my damn mind! The sedative they used was a dangerous one. If too much of it got into you, then it could have stopped your heart. Gods, I hate needing you, and I hate feeling sick with worry whenever you're not near me. I've never needed anyone in my entire damn life. I was gone for two weeks because I moved my entire army around so that I could make it more secure for you. I had to be here because I don't trust anyone other than myself to consider your safety as highly as I do. Yes, I do get to lecture you on being worried because I worry about you every single day." The fire that blazes in his eyes cuts through the darkness.

My heart beats in a rapid rhythm; it feels like I just ran a mile. So, he *did* hold me the whole time. There was never a moment in the dream where the darkness wasn't touching me, other than brief moments here and there. Cayden stayed with me for almost two days, monitoring my heart rate, talking to me even though I couldn't respond, and playing with my hair. There's a swelling feeling in my chest that makes me feel like I'm suffocating, but why does it feel like Cayden is the oxygen? No, stop thinking like this. I have to keep pushing him. He must know that he can't just disappear with no word and expect me to be okay with it.

My response dies on my lips when he runs a hand over his face, and my eyes spot his busted knuckles. I surge forward and grab his wrist. "What happened?" I demand.

“It’s nothing,” he sighs.

“Bullshit! Don’t tell me it’s nothing when you have busted knuckles, and stop telling me it’s nothing whenever I notice you’re hurt. I also hate needing you, and you don’t make it easy to worry about you, but I’m stubborn and persistent and won’t be perturbed because you’re the most irritatingly guarded person I have ever met!” I stare into his harsh gaze with a version of my own. When he looks at me like this, it’s hard to believe I’ve seen behind the ice. I don’t care if he’s not used to someone challenging him, worrying about him, or demanding information from him. If he wanted an ally that would ignore him, then he picked the wrong queen. “If we can’t communicate with each other, then we’ll never be successful. This partnership will fail all because we’re too proud to open our mouths.” I shove my hands into his chest to emphasize my point.

“Fine, you want to talk?” He roughly grips my hips. “Let’s fucking talk,” he grits out while hoisting me in the air, hugging me to his chest, and walking forward.

“Put me down.” I helplessly thrash against his hold. He slams me down on his desk, and papers crinkle beneath my weight. He stands between my parted legs and places his hands on either side of me, caging me with his body. My hair tumbles over my shoulders as I lean back on my arms for support.

“You can’t just lift me and move me as you please. I’m not your doll,” I hiss.

“You can’t just sneak out of the castle to find me as you please,” he growls. I see the darkness swimming in his eyes now that we’re closer. He’s only been this livid a few times, but it’s never been directed at me. “You’re mine to protect, whether you like it or not.”

I roll my eyes, ignoring the extremely inconvenient fluttering feeling in my belly. Gods, emotions have the worst timing. “I wouldn’t hold your breath waiting for me to obey your orders. On second thought,” I briefly bring one hand forward to tap a finger on my chin, “that might be rather amusing.”

“Do you have any idea how infuriating you are?” he deadpans.

“Yes, and you’re just a ray of sunshine,” I echo one of the first things he ever said to me. I know he recalls the moment because his eyes flare in recognition and aggravation. “I’m going to ask you a series of questions, and you’re going to give me a yes or no answer. Understood, soldier?”

I may be on the bottom, but I'm in control. He can throw me around all he wants, but I didn't jump over a balcony only to be bossed around by an oversized grump. He can handle my anger just as well as I can handle his. His eyes shoot daggers in my direction, but he knows I won't relent.

"If I didn't show up when I told you I would, knowing I was in a dangerous place, would you be worried?"

"It's different for—"

"Yes or no?" I speak over him. Damn him for thinking it's different. His nostrils flare and he looks down at my lap. Maybe he's finally realizing that he made an alliance with a queen with an unrestrainable temper once it gets going.

His fingers drum against the desk as he lets out a hoarse, "Yes."

"Would you look for me?" I forge forward, not letting an ounce of satisfaction that he's complying show in my tone.

"Yes," he rasps. I know the answers to all of these questions, but something stirs in me when he admits he would look for me.

"I'm not asking you to stop protecting me," I soften my tone. "I'm not an idiot; I know I can't face down an entire army on my own. I'm just telling you that you need to communicate with me. I want to know where you are and what you're doing, and I want a letter telling me when you're not going to show up."

"Watch your words, angel. Someone might think you care." His head shoots up, and his eyes are laced with accusation and anticipation. His hands have stopped drumming on the desk, and the only noises to be heard are our heavy breaths and the distant clatter of soldiers on the border. I care, of course I do, but caring about him is a language I don't know how to speak. I'm flying blind, and I don't know my left from my right.

"I care about the alliance." I drop my eyes from his, but the position he's maneuvered us into prohibits me from looking away from him.

"Look at me," he commands. I draw my eyes away from his tense shoulder and ignore the stabbing sensation in my chest when I look into his eyes again. "If you want communication from me, then don't lie to my face."

My brain is imploring me to remember all the reasons why I should tell him to move and why I shouldn't act on the way he's making me feel. He's the forbidden fruit I can't have. But I can't look away from him. His eyes have claws that sink into my flesh and hold me hostage. When he's this

close, my body will always rebel against my mind. All I can think about is the brush of his lips on mine a few hours ago, and that's all it takes for the pulsing feeling between my legs to start up again.

"Tell me what happened to your hands," I whisper, "please."

The word feels foreign on my tongue. If I give an order, I expect it to be followed. But Cayden isn't someone I can order around. He's the person that will never stop pushing me. Communication isn't something that comes naturally to either of us; that much is obvious, but it's something I'm willing to work on since it benefits both of us. I just need him to meet me in the middle. His throat works through a swallow as teeth sink into his bottom lip. My hand longs to reach out to touch his face, to help him get out whatever is shackled behind his pride. His hands begin drumming on the desk again, and something hardens over his features.

"I found the assassin that got away," he states in a deep, low voice.

"What?" I flinch in surprise. "How? Who was it?"

His tapping increases. "It was one of my soldiers." I absorb the news and release a shaky breath, digging my fingernails into his desk and waiting for him to continue. "I remembered the scar you had mentioned. I started tracking him as soon as I dropped you off at the castle. I didn't find him until a few hours ago."

"Were all of them your soldiers?"

"No." He drags a hand down his face before placing it on the desk again. "They were assassins from Imirath, but my soldier let them over the border. I have people I can trust looking into the information he gave; Saskia is one of them." I narrow my eyes on him. "You'll be present to receive the report with me," he promises.

I nod slowly. It's a small step in the right direction. "I figured some of your soldiers might not like me—Princess of Imirath."

"I don't give a damn what you're the princess of!" I flinch at his sudden burst of anger. He very rarely loosens the leash he has on it. Sometimes, I think his anger will burn him from the inside out. He scans my face again, his eyes ablaze and harsh. "Do you know what happens to traitors in Vareveth?" he asks, inching closer to me. His hands slide against the surface of the desk, but I don't move back. I don't back down from anyone, especially not him.

"No," I answer steadily, despite a mixture of emotions running rampant throughout my body.

“A gruesome affair.” My lips turn down when the whiskey on his breath hits me. “It begins with the opportunity to physically fight the traitor; no weapons, no armor, just fists. Some people like to feel the blood of those that have wronged them or those they care about. It’s not customary for the commander to do it—they usually name someone to fight in their stead. But I believe in carrying out my own sentences, especially the personal ones. Once the traitor is beaten enough, the commander gets to choose a form of execution.”

He looks down at me like he’s waiting for me to push him away. My palms tingle and breathing quickens knowing Cayden was the one to fight my assassin. He said it was *personal* to him. The thought of him fighting on my behalf, going feral to the point of bloodied knuckles, definitely doesn’t make me want to push him off...quite the opposite, actually.

“What was the form of execution tonight?” I feel like I can hardly get any air into my lungs as I wait for his answer.

His eyes never waver from mine. He’s monitoring my reactions like a predator watching their prey from the bushes. “He said some very unsavory things about you, things I won’t repeat, so I cut out his tongue as punishment. Nobody will speak about you like that without repercussions. After that, I chained him to a tree and waited until the gallwings were attracted to the scent of his blood and let them finish the job. Not that there was much of a job to finish.”

“Gallwings?” My eyebrows shoot up. I’ve never seen them, but I’ve heard stories of the serpent-like creatures. The venom in their fangs makes your skin feel like it’s on fire—it’s a slow-acting poison that paralyzes you, and they love to toy with their prey.

“He drugged you, hurt you, and was going to collect the reward from Garrick without a second thought. The end he received was mercy from me because he received an end.” His voice sounds like retribution in its highest form.

My words hide from me as I search for the right ones. “You...you killed your soldier for me.” The words come out breathy and unsure. It’s one thing to tell me in private that he’s on my side, but it’s different to declare it through a public execution.

“I don’t regret it,” he states in a low, menacing tone. The intensity in his gaze keeps me pinned in place. “I savored every punch and every scream I stole from him because all I could think about was him hurting you. I

wanted to make sure that every damn person in this world knows their fate if they even contemplate harming you. Go ahead and tell me how horrible of a person I am for doing this to my own soldier. Tell me that you would never do it.” He licks his lips, gripping the edge of the desk with one hand and grabbing his drink with the other. “I will always protect you, and I’ll always hunt down anyone that harms you, even if you think I’m repulsive. Aren’t you glad we’re communicating?”

He tilts his head back and downs the rest of his drink before slamming the glass onto the desk and placing his hand where it was. But his arms don’t feel like a cage; they feel like liberation. I can show him the darkest parts of me, the twisted parts that I keep to myself, and he won’t judge me because the same darkness resides in him. Tonight has proven it. He’s not drinking because of what he did; he’s drinking because he’s waiting for me to tear him down and tell him he’s a monster.

Cayden may be the villain to others, but he’s not mine.

He and I have walked a fine line, turning away when we get too close to unveiling something too personal, but I’m not turning away from him now. I want to jump off the line and deal with the consequences when I hit the ground.

“I can’t say those things.” I lick my lips while straightening my back to get closer to him. His lips part, and a shudder travels through him when I reach out to cup his scarred cheek. “Because if I were you, and you were me—I would have done the exact same thing.” I recall the anger that twisted my stomach when I realized his arm was hurt, and I don’t want to be alone in my corruption.

“Don’t lie to me,” he whispers as I stroke my thumb along his cheek.

“I will kill anyone that harms you,” I murmur, resting my forehead against his. His hands shoot to my hips, and he holds me tight.

“Careful, angel. You give a man a taste of salvation, and he might keep coming back for more.” His arms are shaking for an entirely different reason now. They’re shaking from restraint.

“Is that what I am to you? Your salvation?” I whisper, brushing my lips against his.

“If you are to be my damnation, it’s an end I’ll happily meet.”

He closes the gap between us, and our lips meet in a collision of pent-up passion. The softness of his lips betrays everything about him. Everything else around me disappears from the world as if it never existed in the first

place; the only thing that remains is him. My hands snake around his neck and weave through his hair, deepening our kiss. A moan slips from my lips when his tongue enters my mouth, and any leash he had on himself vanishes. He pulls my hips forward and presses his hardness into the pulsing spot between my legs that aches for him. I whimper at the new sensation, and he groans against my lips. Gods, that's the best sound I've ever heard.

I arch my back, wrap my legs around his waist, and am rewarded with another delicious, throaty groan from him. He kisses me like I'm the last woman in this world. His body fits perfectly with mine as he lays me back on the desk, and I roll my hips onto his hardened length. I gasp into his mouth, and he takes the opportunity to kiss down my neck, biting and sucking as he pleases while rolling his hips into mine, echoing the same needy movements I'm giving him.

"Cayden," I moan as he sucks on a sensitive part of my neck. My fingers tighten in the strands of his hair, and my legs tighten around his waist.

He groans into my neck, "You're going to be the death of me."

Gods, it's true that the forbidden fruit tastes the sweetest. I've been kissed before but never like this. This is the kind of kiss that reinvents the way you think of kissing. It's the kind of kiss I'd kill for. I take my hands out of his hair and trail them under his shirt to grip his muscular back.

"Say my name again," he demands, nibbling on my earlobe. But his name catches in my throat from the overwhelming mixture of his lips, our bodies grinding together, and the weight of him on top of me. I'm embarrassingly wet, and I'm so close to pushing off this desk and dragging him over to the bed. "I told you to say my name," he commands again, sliding his hands down to firmly grip my ass and press himself into me harder.

"Cayden," I gasp, writhing beneath him.

"Perfect." His teeth graze over the sensitive skin on my neck and his fingers weave through my hair. "Did you enjoy the sight of me on my knees, angel?" he huskily whispers. I moan when he bites down and dig my nails into his back. "Did you think about what it would feel like if I fucked you with my tongue?"

My back arches off the desk as he licks his way up to my mouth. He crashes his lips onto mine again, and I pull on his shoulders, wanting him

even closer. He bends further to comply as much as he can, given the desk is too small for him to get on top of me. His hands feverishly roam over my body, like he's trying to memorize the feel of me.

I kiss him with the same ferocity with which he kisses me because, as he said himself, he's the one man that can handle whatever I throw at him and give it right back to me. He'll always echo my intensity and urge me for more. He's a challenge, an ally, and rival mixed together. His soul isn't too corrupt for me because I'll be sitting right next to him in the afterlife, damned soul and all, if it means I can experience this again. To prove my point, I trace the raised scars on his back with my fingertips, and I'm rewarded with another groan and extended roll of his hips. The feel of his bare skin makes me feel alive. I've never reacted to someone like this. It's addictive, and I can't stop myself from wanting more.

"Commander, I have— oh!" a voice filters in from the front of the tent.

Reality crashes into me, penetrating the universe we briefly escaped into, and my body stiffens. Cayden doesn't break apart right away; instead, he slowly parts our lips and lingers above me for a few moments, brushing his swollen lips against mine. I swallow the whimper that rises in my throat and force myself not to roll my hips onto his again, no matter how much I want to. He wraps his arms around my torso and straightens me up with him. I rest my dizzy head on his chest while we face the servant that carries a sealed envelope.

"You can leave the envelope on the table by the door," Cayden jerks his chin toward a small table with a letter tray on it. His hands move in languid strokes down my spine. I'm surprised he's still acting like this in front of someone else, but his hands feel too good for me to care.

"Of course, sir." The servant bows his head before turning to place the letter on the tray. "Would you like me to assemble any of the generals to discuss the details?"

I glance up toward Cayden and see him saying yes before he says it. His eyes are still shadowed with the same exhaustion they were this morning; he needs to sleep. I poke him in the back before he can answer, and he glances down at me, quirking a brow before turning back toward the servant.

"We need a few moments," Cayden states.

"My apologies, your graces." The servant nervously twiddles with the end of his tunic while slipping from the tent.

Cayden turns back to me once the servant disappears. He removes one hand from my back and tilts my chin toward him, brushing his swollen lips over mine and smirking when he hears the small gasp it wrings from me. Gods, he affects me so much it's embarrassing. Well, at least I affect him too ... I have *hard* proof of that. A smile almost breaks across my face at my dirty joke, even though it was terrible.

"Are you okay?" he huskily mumbles. My core continues to pound, and my chest swarms in a fluttery feeling.

"Yes." I match his quiet tone even though there's no need for us to stay quiet.

"Do you want to do the communicating thing you seem to have a new interest in?" His eyes are lighter than they were before, and the sight of that eases something in me.

"We don't have to do the communication thing right now," I laugh softly.

He presses his forehead against mine, and it takes everything in me not to start kissing him again. It's odd how natural this feels. "You're going to have to write me a communication rulebook, angel."

"You'll just have to keep up, soldier." His eyes drop to my smile, and even though he looks lighter, the exhaustion is prominent. "We'll take the meeting in the morning. You need to sleep." His eyebrows shoot up in surprise. I really love being the one to command the commander.

"Will we?" he asks, stroking the back of my head. "I think we're going to take it now."

"That's okay. You'll get used to being wrong." He halfheartedly glares at me. "You look exhausted," I add.

"Don't insult my beauty, Elowen." He takes his hand off my waist to touch his chest in mock offense. "I'll send him away on one condition."

"I'll allow it."

"You have to tell me how you got out of the castle." I'm glad the ice has melted from his tone, but I'm not thrilled with the curiosity that's now directed toward me.

"I won't allow it," I say, giving him my most convincing smile.

"That's my condition. Make your choice." He strokes my hair while waiting for my answer. I let out a sigh and look down. I know I can't talk my way out of this one.

“Only if I can bandage your knuckles while I tell you.” I cross my arms over my chest and stick my chin up, countering his offer with my own.

“So demanding,” he mutters while walking toward the entrance to send the servant away. I hop off his desk and walk on shaky legs toward my healing satchel.

“Do you need help with your corset?” he asks, walking over to his wardrobe. I nearly choke on my spit.

“Excuse me?” An image of him ripping off my corset flashes in my brain before I shove it away—stupid brain.

“You’re sleeping here; I doubt you want to sleep in a corset.” He grabs a green knit sweater and holds it out to me. I take the sweater and hand him my healing satchel, trying not to make eye contact while praying the dim light hides the redness of my cheeks.

“I can unhook this one from the front,” I gesture to the small silver hooks that line the center of my leather corset.

“My offer still stands.” A smirk lifts the corner of his lips, and me my sexually frustrated hormones shoot him a death glare. We went too far tonight, but I’m relieved our usual banter is resuming. “You can change in there,” he says, pointing toward two pulled-back flaps that lead to a dimly lit room. I walk over but pause in the doorway when I’m met with a second bedroom. My hands tighten on the sweater as jealousy rises in me.

“I’ll sleep on the couch,” I mutter in a flat tone without turning back toward him. I’ve heard of people keeping second rooms for their partners. I have no reason to feel jealous; he can do whatever he wants with whoever he wants, but a selfish part of me doesn’t want to look at it. He walks toward me, and I can feel his heat on my back. It makes me want to curl into him like a cat lying in a ray of sunlight, but I stay rooted in place.

“I’ve received a lot of compliments on this room,” his voice rumbles from behind.

“I bet you have.” Gods, I hate jealousy. I’ve never been jealous over a boy because I’ve never gotten close enough to one. I want to swim in a freezing river until my senses come back to me.

“Saskia really thought the bedding was your taste, but I’ll be happy to tell her she was wrong. Ryder might curse me for not going with the fabric he preferred.”

I whirl around to face him and nearly crash into his chest. “What are you saying?”

His eyes dance over my face in the way they usually do whenever I face him. “It was always my intention to bring you here, Elowen. Granted, you showed up earlier than I had planned, but I moved my bedroom into my meeting room while I was gone for those two weeks,” he says, pointing toward his bed behind him.

My eyes scan the dark room in front of me. There’s no exit. If someone gets into the tent, they’ll literally have to get through Cayden first. I look down at my boots, feeling embarrassed by my flare of jealousy and also overwhelmed by the kind gesture. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“I didn’t do it for entirely selfless reasons.” He reaches out to tilt my chin up. “Hurry up. I want to hear the tale of your grand escape.”

He spins on his heels, leaving me dumbstruck and uneasy while I rush into my room. I can’t see much in the dim light other than tiny flowers embroidered on the bedding. The irritating fluttery feeling comes back into my belly as I run my fingers over the flowers. The darkness is the only thing that can see my smile while I strip out of my leathers and toss his sweater over my head. Cayden, feared Commander of Bloodshed, pondered fabric choices with his two best friends on my behalf. I’ve never seen that man wear anything brighter than navy blue.

He’s sitting on his bed with my satchel resting next to him. Only now, he’s shirtless, which does little to calm my previous urges. I expected him to be muscular and fit, but seeing him in person rather than as a shadowed image in my brain is a completely different entity. My eyes soak in his broad shoulders dusted with freckles before trailing down his toned torso. He’s littered with all different kinds of scars; varying in shades from white to red, some raised and others smooth. I want to brush my lips against every one of them while he tells me how he got them. My feet pad over to his bed as I try to quell my thoughts, but that’s a nearly impossible task when I notice the way he takes his lip between his teeth as his eyes rake over me.

I grab my bag and dig for the gauze and antibacterial ointment Nyrinn and I made every Tuesday. You can never have too much of this stuff, and it always goes quick. I open the tin, and the scent of rosemary hits me. I love that smell. I dip my fingers into the tin and hold out my other hand, waiting for Cayden to place his in mine.

He clears his throat, “Tell me about how you snuck out first.”

I roll my eyes. Not wanting the ointment to drip on his bedspread, I give in. “I jumped to your balcony,” I casually say.

“You jumped to my balcony!” Both of his hands fly through the air before they stop and point accusingly in my direction.

“Would you like a treat for good listening skills?” I tease while grabbing one of his hands. I lightly apply the balm, not wanting to hurt him. He destroyed his knuckles; I wonder what he looked like when he was that mad. I feel him tense up, as if he knows what I’m thinking and is preparing for my disgust. My thumb rubs against his wrist in silent reassurance. One of my favorite parts about whatever is happening between us is that we can understand each other without words. “I even moved the breakfast table to get a higher jump. If I was going down, I was going with a big splat.”

His shoulders relax at my joke, but his head falls into his hand, and he lets out a defeated groan. “Remind me to take away your breakfast table.”

A small smile stretches on my face as I work on wrapping his knuckles. “Tell me when you’re injured or when you’ll be late, and you won’t have to.”

“The consequence of bad communication is worrying about you jumping off a balcony?”

“First of all, I jumped *across* a balcony. Second of all, that seems like a good motivator.” He rolls his eyes as I tie off the bandage and let go of his hand. He pulls his hand to his face and examines my work. “You’re shocked I’m more than a pretty face with a dragon link?”

“You could say that,” he says as I reach for his other hand.

A frown turns my lips when I notice the bruising that has already begun to form on this one. I gently take his hand in mine and curl my fingers around the top part of his wrist, wanting to avoid causing him further pain but not being able to verbally express my thanks. I don’t trust myself not to crawl into his lap if he looks at me with an expression riddled with self-hatred again. I feel his eyes on me, so I stay focused on my task.

“After I got away from the castle, it was a pretty smooth ride. Oh! Speaking of rides, I borrowed a horse from your horse pen in Ladislava. She’s tied somewhere in the camp.”

“If I wasn’t so annoyed with you, I’d actually be impressed.”

“It’s an honor to almost impress you, Commander Veles.” I look up and mock bow at my waist, savoring the light expression he now wears.

“Do you make the ointments yourself?” he asks, tucking a strand of stray hair behind my ear. His blinks are turning heavy the more he fights the sleep deprivation that weighs on him. I place a hand on his shoulder and

gently try to lay him back against the pillows. He looks at me with a leveling expression, "I can stay up a bit longer."

"I can jump across another balcony," I suggest, giving him the same leveling stare.

"Evil woman," he sighs while lying back. As soon as his head hits the pillow, I see how prominent the exhaustion is on his face. He fights to stay awake, waiting for my answer.

I give in and start, "I make them alongside another woman. Her name is Nyrinn."

"Hm?" he murmurs, trying to inquire for more details. But he can't manage to get the words out.

"She's the best healer I've ever met, and she's the one that gave me the satchel."

Cayden mumbles something incoherent as a response, it sounds something like me being his best healer, and I know sleep has overtaken him. I stay focused on my task and finish wrapping his hand, placing a kiss on his knuckles once I'm done. I lean forward and gently placing a kiss on his forehead.

"Goodnight, soldier," I whisper.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



I don't know what I expected the border to look like...but it wasn't this. I expected something darker and drearier—wounded soldiers everywhere and unanswered cries for help on a never-ending loop. But it's fairly pleasant once you get over the fact it's a war camp.

Cayden, who now walks beside me, explained that there are three lines within the camp. We're in the third line. The first line is defense, the second line is medical, and the last line is supplies and residential. They even have taverns and markets within this line. No permanent structures, just larger tents where soldiers can congregate. The mood here reminds me more of Aestilian than the Inner Kingdom does. It's nice to be in a place where I don't have to worry about breaking an ancient vase whenever I turn a corner. The most valuable thing I could have broken in my house was a plate, which is Finnian's vice; mine is water glasses. They should really have handles. If I was back at the castle, I would have sought Finnian out to have breakfast together.

I hate the way our strife gnaws at me. I'll think of something to say whenever I see him; I don't need to rehearse words for him. I sent a letter to Ailliard last night to inform him I won't be in the castle today since I'm taking a meeting here. His response came this morning, telling me he'll take today to venture out into the kingdom since he hasn't had the chance yet.

"There's something I have to tell you." Cayden's words send anxiety shooting through me. I hate when people say they *have to* tell me something, it would be much less nerve-wracking for them to just say what they need to say rather than add a build-up to their statement. "Saskia and Ryder know."

I stop in my tracks, and my mouth hangs open. “When did you tell them?” He doesn’t have to tell me he’s referring to the heist; I just know.

He grins at my expression. “I let it slip when you were passed out.”

“What does *let it slip* mean?” I suspiciously inquire. He’s more careful than that. If Cayden was a book, maybe you’d get a glimpse at the prologue if you were lucky. I’m not upset he told them; I’m just curious to know how they reacted.

He shrugs his shoulders as we fall in step beside each other again. “I said something too evasive, and Saskia hung onto it. Apparently, Saskia already figured out what we were planning, and she and Ryder had a bet about who would slip up and reveal it first.”

“Did they bet that you would?” His smirk tells me everything I need to know. “Those bastards,” I curse. They bet that I would be the one to slip up. “Finnian wasn’t included in the bet, right?”

“They wouldn’t put you in that position,” he confirms, easing my nerves.

I press my lips together and nod. I figured they wouldn’t, but the clarification is comforting. A tremor crawls up my spine when I think about telling Finnian. I’m going to do it the next time I see him. It’ll already be an emotional conversation, and it’s not right if he’s the only one out of the five of us that doesn’t know. Cayden looks over at me and raises a brow; he must have noticed my shiver.

“The breeze is just a little cold.”

It’s not a total lie. The sun may be high in the sky, but it keeps its warmth locked away from the rays that reach us. I made the decision to keep Cayden’s sweater on after I stepped outside in just my leather fighting gear and started shivering. The sweater is so long on me that it covers my thigh holsters and makes me appear unarmed. His eyes darkened when he saw me, but he thankfully said nothing about what he felt. He just asked me if I was ready to go and walked me to the market for breakfast, where we got coffee, and I made him try a new pastry—fluffy bread filled with dark chocolate.

Our tent is only a few feet in front of us. The word *ours* sounds too personal and too untoward for our situation, but it’s the word that fits. I brush off the weirdness and just focus on the warmth I’ll feel when I get inside.

“Not so fast, angel.” Cayden’s hand lightly brushes against my elbow, and I jump slightly.

“Sorry,” I mumble while playing with the sweater sleeves. He retracts his hand, but I don’t have the courage to look at his face. I suppose I’m still a bit on edge from the kiss last night.

“Don’t apologize.” He gestures to the tent on his right, keeping his hands to himself. “This is where I take meetings now.”

Another meeting to discuss another person that tried to kill me—a new tradition. I enter the tent with Cayden at my back, and I’m stunned when I see a fire blazing in a bronze pit behind a large, round table. There should be smoke wafting through the tent with a fire that high.

“It’s enchanted,” Cayden states behind me. “No smoke is produced.”

“It’s ingenious.” I walk over to warm my hands and prove, with my own eyes, that there’s truly no smoke.

“There’s one in your room,” he says, walking further into the tent and taking a seat at the table. “It adjusts to the temperature in the air. If it’s a cold night, then the fire will adapt to keep your room warm.”

“Really?” I can’t keep the smile off my face as I look into the fire. Some people don’t realize how brutal it is to be without fire or warmth. It’s something I’ll never take for granted.

“However; you’re always welcome in my bed if you’re feeling particularly cold,” he suggests. I glare at him over the fire, but my half-hearted glare only increases his smirk.

“Morning.” Saskia’s voice filters throughout the tent, but I can’t tear my eyes away from the flames. Something is pulling me in, locking me in place. “Where’s Ryder?” she asks, but I don’t hear what Cayden answers. Their voices drift away from me, and the only things I can hear are the crackling logs and flames.

The flames dance in front of me, and I lean forward. There’s something in there—images dance within the orange and yellow flames as they did the night Cayden and I witnessed the fire cult’s ritual. I see several sets of dragon wings flapping and overlapping with each other as the flames flicker. Sweat gathers on my forehead, but I can’t back away. The wings morph into five sets of eyes flashing through the flames: black, blue, orange, red, and purple. The eyes stare at me as if they can see into my very soul. They beckon me to get closer, to reach out to them. I’m thrust from my trance when someone squeezes my shoulder. I jump back from the

flames; my pulse is beating uncontrollably, and blood rushes in my ears. I gather myself enough to offer Saskia a weak smile.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” Concern flashes in her eyes.

“No,” I lick my dry lips and shake my head. I must look like I’m crazy. “Not a ghost.” There’s a pulling sensation in my chest. I have this feeling like I want to run to something, like it’s summoning me. My clothes feel too tight, and my head feels light.

Saskia scrunches her thick brows. “Did you see something in the fire?” She glances behind me, but the visions have vanished.

I plan on telling Cayden about the visions when we have a moment alone, but Saskia is the head of intelligence and knows about the heist. It may help if she knows about the visions, too. I open my mouth to tell her but snap it shut when light streams into the tent. Ryder and a man with graying hair walk in. The man bows his head toward Cayden, who nods in acknowledgment before his eyes land on me again. His boot taps lightly against the ground. He was probably watching me the whole time I was standing by the fire; he never misses anything.

“You two haven’t formally met,” Ryder says in my direction. “This is Braxton. He’s one of the Generals of Vareveth.”

Braxton walks around the table and stands before me. “Your Majesty,” he says, bowing at the waist. A memory rings in my brain as he straightens up.

“You were at the tavern,” I speak aloud. He was the man in the street that Ryder gave orders to.

He shifts uneasily on his feet. “Regrettably, I was the one General Neredras was looking for.”

“He had information about soldier movements that should have been delivered directly to Ryder,” Cayden shortly states.

I instantly sense the mood shift in the room and look back to Cayden, who stares at Braxton with the icy expression he normally wears. He said he had soldiers he trusted looking into the information the traitor gave, but I can tell Braxton is on the outs by the way Cayden is glaring at him. I quickly glance at Saskia, using my eyes to tell her we’ll continue our conversation after this is over, and walk to the chair next to Cayden. He pulls it out for me without breaking his glare toward Braxton. I lightly kick his leg under the table, and a corner of his lips quirks up behind his hand. He reaches down and squeezes my thigh briefly before retracting his grip.

Saskia, Ryder, and Braxton take their seats at the table. Saskia has a quill and paper at the ready, and Cayden gestures for Braxton to begin.

“The good news is that the major threats seem to be rooted out.” The words don’t calm me because any threat is a threat, and anyone that prefaces a sentence with good news usually has bad news to follow it.

“The bad news?” Cayden inquires, eyes narrowed in Braxton’s direction.

“I don’t understand how they could have managed all of this without having a contact here,” Braxton states. Saskia stops her scribbling and looks in his direction.

“You think a spy leaked where Elowen would be?” she asks.

“I think Her Majesty was followed the minute she left the castle, but that’s not what I’m referring to,” Braxton begins his thought, but Cayden finishes it for him.

“You think someone close to Garrick snuck over the border before, or while, I moved my soldiers around. Someone that wouldn’t be part of the action but would organize assassination attempts. It would have to be someone undoubtedly loyal to Imirath.” Hearing my father’s name is like throwing a bucket of ice water over me.

“Do you think it was a soldier in his personal guard? Those are the soldiers he trusts most,” I remark. My hands grip the arms of my chair while I wait for his answer, even though I can already assume it. His personal guard is filled with the soldiers that tortured me; he trusted them to keep quiet.

“That would seem most likely,” Braxton confirms.

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep my rising anger contained. One of my abusers is most likely walking the streets of Vareveth, watching my every move. It makes my skin crawl, and I shift uncomfortably in my seat. My hands settle on my thighs, laying them flat over my knives. The kingdom is still locked down, and it feels like my abuser is locked in a cell with me. Only this time, I’ll be the one to seek them out.

“They’ll most likely be lying low since their last attempt didn’t go as planned,” Ryder says.

“Which just means more time to find them,” Cayden adds with a far-off stare.

“Sir,” Braxton addresses Cayden, “the traitor didn’t give us much information before—”

“We’ll figure it out,” Cayden cuts him off, and I realize he’s talking about the four of us working as a team.

Satisfaction briefly settles on me before it’s replaced by that same tugging feeling in my chest. It’s becoming sharper, more painful. My eyes are drawn to the fire as the flames dance again, forming a new image. Saskia starts asking Braxton more questions, which Cayden and Ryder observe, but I can’t focus on anything other than the fire. It’s trying to tell me something. The chain of my moonstone necklace suddenly feels warm. My hand travels up my body to reach for it, but I jolt in my seat when the hot chain burns me. I quickly undo the clasp and drop the necklace on the table.

Cayden tugs my chair closer to his and leans his head toward me. “Are you okay?”

I drag my eyes away from the flames and glance around the table. Ryder and Braxton look confused, but I meet Saskia’s eyes across the table, and they’re filled with the same concerned look they were a few minutes ago.

“I think I caught a cold last night,” I address everyone at once. Braxton seems convinced and begins talking to Saskia again, but I can tell Cayden doesn’t believe me. I meet his eyes and shake my head; I can’t talk about this in front of Braxton.

I feel the tug in my chest again, and my head whips toward the flames. Cayden grips my wrist and tries to get me to look at him, but the flames hold my attention. The vision has formed—it’s the amulet the priestess gave me. The orange and red flames have banded together to produce a spitting image of the ruby Cayden has on his desk. My breathing picks up the longer I look at the flames. I need the amulet. I must do this now. I can feel it in my blood.

I stand from my chair and rip my wrist out of Cayden’s hold. Everyone’s head whips in my direction. “My apologies, I’m not as well as I thought I was. I’m going to go lie down,” I speak through my racing heart.

I rush out of the tent before Cayden can inquire further about what’s going on. He’ll protest me putting on the amulet; he’ll say it’s too risky. But I’m not letting us fail if this is something I’m meant to do. The priestess told me to put it on when I’m sure, and I’m positive I need to put it on right now. I plaster on a false smile for anyone I pass while swiftly closing the distance between myself and my tent.

“Elowen!” Cayden calls out a few feet behind me.

I don't look back at him; I quicken my pace and rush into our tent. I sprint toward his desk and rip the amulet from the surface. It pulses in the palm of my hand in tune with my own pulse.

The fire your soul was forged in will reclaim you, and to dust you shall return, replays in my head as I tug the two sides of the chain apart. My heart is in my throat; I must be ready.

"Put that down," Cayden's cold tone meets me. He begins to rush forward, but I raise the amulet closer to my neck, and he halts in place. Saskia and Ryder rush into the tent behind him and exchange a worried glance before looking back at me.

"You heard the priestess," I try to reason with him.

"I don't give a damn about what the priestess said. We can figure this out together." He's speaking to me like I'm a rabid animal that he's trying to calm down.

"Have you been having visions?" Saskia asks.

"Saskia, don't be ridiculous," Ryder mutters, but Cayden never takes his eyes from me. It's now or never—I nod my head in confirmation. Cayden shakes his head, not wanting to hear any of this.

"What happened to your love of communication?" Cayden fires at me.

"I couldn't put it in a letter. I was going to tell you about the visions after we finished with Braxton." I raise the amulet closer to my neck, and my anxiety skyrockets. "The priestess said it was essential."

"*You* are essential!" Cayden shouts, looking as crazed as he believes me to be. "Elowen, please. It's not worth it." The more I look at him, the more I want to believe him, but the ruby calls to me.

I raise it closer to my chest, "Some risks have to be worth it." I clasp the necklace around my neck as Cayden shouts in protest, and Ryder tries to hold him back.

My vision goes black, and I feel myself falling through endless darkness. My stomach rises in my throat, and wind whips around me before everything goes eerily quiet.

The sensation of damp stone presses into me and seeps through my clothes. My eyes peel open, and golden flecks shimmer in the air that surrounds me. I raise my arms in front of me and watch gold serpents slither around in circular motions, glitter falling from them as they continue their movements. I've woken up in a dark corner, but the serpents don't dim. I try to rip them off my arms, but my fingers travel through their transparent

bodies. Heavy footsteps are coming my way. Panic seizes me, and I pull two knives from my holsters, preparing to fight.

These damn serpents are going to take away any element of surprise I might have, so I tighten the grip on my knives and jump out to meet whoever is approaching. My feet land in the center of the hallway, and I thrash my arm forward, but the guard approaching doesn't even look at me; they walk *through* me. I press a hand into my chest to make sure I can still feel my body; I can. The serpent moves to slither around my palm while I stare down at it.

I'm invisible.

I appear transparent to my own eyes, but I'm just empty air to anyone that looks my way. The snake on my right arm slithers in front of me, leading me somewhere. The amulet obviously took me here for a reason, and I don't know how much time I have before I'm pulled from my vision. I hope I'm here long enough for Cayden to calm down—he's particularly annoying when he's moody and protective.

My feet follow the trail of the snake, keeping my footsteps light out of habit. I never thought the amulet would lead me to following shimmering snakes down a dark corridor, yet here I am. The snake turns a corner, but I stop dead in my tracks when I realize where I am. The amulet pulses on my neck, urging me to move forward, but I can't. I don't even realize I moved backward until my back presses against the stone. My legs give out, and my heart rate spikes. I wrap my arms around my legs and bury my head in my knees.

I can't be here.

Not Imirath.

Not in the dungeon.

Not looking into my own cell.

The stones probably still have stains of my blood on it. I choke down the hot acid that burns my throat when the memories of the time I spent there resurface; the chains, the starvation, no light, the beatings, the begging for it all to stop. *Go away, go away, go away*, I chant in my mind as my repressed memories fight against the tight hold I keep on them. My transparent limbs start to shake and I break out in a cold sweat. The amulet increases its pulsing, and I try to reach for it so I can rip it off. I want to go back to Vareveth, but my hand can't reach it. No matter how much I struggle against the invisible barrier, I can't penetrate it. I scrub my hands

over my face and run them through my hair. My limbs may be transparent, but I can feel the sensation of my nails biting into my palms.

I close my eyes and lean my head against the stone wall behind me.

This isn't me anymore.

I am more than the memories that plague me.

The amulet took me here for a reason. I need to find that reason. I whip my eyes forward and stare into the dingy cell. I'm not the girl they locked up. I'm the woman that was forged from the bars I melted in my mind and welded into blades.

I unwrap my arms from my knees and stand on stiff legs. I shake out the tingling feeling in my hands while the snake unwraps itself from my left arm and slithers forward. My chin rises, and I surge further into the dungeon, never stopping in my tracks when I finally pass my cell. I've reclaimed my life, and I will not let my past render me from getting an advantage in the present. The darkness has befriended me in ways the sun never could, and right now, I truly am nothing more than a shadow. I'm not afraid of darkness because I've mastered it.

I am Elowen Atarah, and nobody will put me in a cage again—not my mind, nor anything else.

The snake leads me up the stairs, and I'm able to travel through the door without opening it. I used to take this path on the rare occasions I was allowed out of my cell. It was only when I fell ill from the conditions in the dungeon. They would move me to a room on the first floor with no windows. I also had to make an appearance in the throne room on occasion, but I was always blindfolded for that. A smirk crosses my lips—my father's blood would be boiling if he knew I was here, unmasked and alive.

My nightmares conjured up images of what I thought the castle would have looked like, but all the images I conjured don't match up to reality. In my head, I imagined a dark castle filled with tortured souls and barbaric decor, but the truth is much softer. I don't focus too much on the decor, considering my main focus is remembering where I'm going, but flashes of gold, purple, and brown mesh together and create a warm atmosphere. It's ironic that anyone on this floor would have viewed the castle as inviting while the heir to the throne was chained in a dungeon. A pretty cage is still a cage.

A chandelier the size of a boulder hangs from the ceiling of the next room I enter. The diamonds glisten and catch in the light as I walk further

inside—it's a ballroom. My breath hitches, and I dive behind a column when I see soldiers standing in front of a large staircase. But I'm unsteady on my feet, and the amulet tugs me forward. I'm in plain sight of the soldiers, yet none of them even look in my direction. I hold my breath for a moment, not wanting to make a single noise. I don't know how this amulet works. I know I'm invisible but walking in front of several enemy soldiers isn't exactly something one would do with ease—invisible or not.

I rush past the soldiers, who don't even glance in my direction, and take the stairs two steps at a time. They split at the top, and the snake makes a sharp turn to the left. The amulet nearly chokes me as it swings my body to follow. The snake's golden light burns brighter the faster we go.

I make several turns and focus on remembering every single one I take. Guards line the hallway, and I'm worried the amulet is pulling me because the magic is running low. What if the amulet leaves me here if the magic runs out before it shows me what it wants? My feet break into a sprint at the thought. I don't stop until the snake stops in front of a door. The amulet stops tugging on me, but the pulsing has sharply increased.

I reach forward to push on the door, but the snake that guided me here hisses, and the snake around my arm tightens. My brows scrunch in confusion—why bring me through the whole castle to not go through the final destination? I glance around, and my eyes snag on symbols etched into the stone doorframe by the lock. They're so small, most likely overlooked by anyone that passes this door.

The chain of the amulet burns against my skin, and the snakes circle around me until I'm submerged in a funnel of gold that rises all the way to the castle ceiling. My hand reaches up to adjust the amulet, but darkness surrounds me as soon as my hand brushes the ruby.

CHAPTER THIRTY



My body jolts forward, and I feel like I've awoken from a nightmare. I rip the amulet off my neck and throw it across the room. My vision is peppery, and my heart beats as if I ran to Imirath and back.

"What the fuck were you thinking, Elowen?" Cayden growls, kneeling next to me. His strong arms are wrapped around me, and I rest my head against his chest, unable to stay upright.

"I saw it," I whisper, staring at the amulet strewn across the floor. Cayden stiffens at my words. My mind can't fully grasp what just happened. I was in Imirath's castle, the place I haven't been in several years and have never intended to see again.

"What exactly did you see?" Saskia asks in a soft voice, kneeling on my other side along with Ryder.

"I saw Imirath. I was in the castle," I tentatively say, forcing the words to pierce my veil of confusion. My eyes are drawn to my arms, but there's no sign of the shimmering snakes. "I was invisible."

"Are you sure it was Imirath's castle?" Saskia gasps, but Cayden lightly tilts my head toward him before I can look at her. There's nothing gentle in his eyes. I don't blame him for being upset with me. The risk I just took could have been detrimental to our plans, but I also needed to do it for the sake of those plans succeeding. I stare into his hazel eyes and let myself calm down. I made it out of the castle. I've made it out before, and I'll make it out again, but this time, I'll make it out with dragons.

I push away from Cayden. If he's hurt, he doesn't let it show on his face. He just loosens his arms and lets me slip away. "What happened when

I put the amulet on? Did you see anything?” I wonder if they saw the serpents or felt the amulet pulsing like I had.

“When you put it on....” Saskia tries to find the right words. “It looked like you dropped dead.” So that explains why Cayden was holding me; he probably tried to catch me before I fell. “Then you started crying out like you were in pain, and then you just went back to looking lifeless. Cayden tried to take the amulet off you, but it burned his hands. That’s when we concluded that it might harm you if we took it off,” she finishes.

My hands reach out and take Cayden’s bandaged ones in mine, tracing my fingers over the already fading burns on the exposed skin of his palms. The burns must have started to fade once I took the amulet off, almost like a magical warning to not pull me from the vision. His gaze rests heavily on me, but I don’t look away from his burns. Even though he’s annoyed with me, his fingers curl around mine, and warmth floods my cheeks.

I must have started crying when I saw my cell. That’s the only time I tried to fight with the amulet. “Oh gods, did anyone hear me?” That wouldn’t look good for us. Braxton knew I wasn’t feeling well, and then I started crying after the three of them stormed in here.

“We have runes set in place,” Ryder informs me.

“It’s mainly a precaution for confidentiality, but it served its purpose today as well,” Cayden adds on.

“Runes!” I shriek while scrambling to my feet. I rush toward Cayden’s desk to find a piece of paper to scribble on.

“You saw runes?” Saskia asks.

“Yes, the snakes led me there,” I confirm.

“Of course,” Ryder mumbles. “I love those trusty snakes.”

“They were actually very nice until they hissed at me.” A little pushy, but still nice.

“I shall behead them on your behalf,” Cayden mutters.

“Shut up; they might hear you!” I snap at the two of them. They exchange a confused look before nodding slowly. Saskia snaps her fingers in my direction and tosses a pen through the air. I lift my hand to catch it and lean against Cayden’s desk. I conjure the runes from my memory and scribble them as best I can. I’ve never been an artist, but after I add a few lines and dashes to my swirls, I think it looks okay. Saskia leans over my shoulder to check what I’ve created.

“These are silencing runes.” She takes the paper from the desk and holds it closer to her. “Where did you see them drawn?”

“They were on the door frame the snakes led me to, but I couldn’t actually get through the door.”

“Did anything happen to the amulet when you got close to the door?” Cayden asks.

“It was like the closer I got to the door, the more powerful the amulet grew. It kept pulsing on my neck. It felt alive.” I drum my fingers over my lip, “I think it’s the room where the dragons are kept. There were too many soldiers for it to be anything else. The roar one of your spies reported could have happened when the door was open, but what else would a magical amulet lead me toward inside that castle? Nothing else matters to me.”

“Fair point.” Cayden looks at me with a calculating expression before nodding his head. “Can you relay every turn you made from the moment you got into the castle to when you got to the door?” he asks while dipping his quill in a pot of ink.

Saskia walks over to a trunk in the corner and pulls out a folder of maps. She carries them over to Cayden’s bed and lays them out to fact-check them. The details flow from my mind with ease. I’m thankful for my memory at times like these. Sometimes, remembering everything is a curse, but when it comes to strategy, it’s an advantage. I list off every twist and turn to Cayden and Ryder while Saskia filters through maps, recalling soldier placements, the number of soldiers, and how many servants were roaming. I don’t let my eyes drift toward Saskia when she directs questions at me, knowing there is a risk of seeing a map and losing my train of thought. I keep my eyes between Cayden and Ryder, who both drag their quills over blank sheets of paper to log my movements.

The tent is quiet for a few moments after I finish. Ryder makes his way over to Saskia to help her filter through maps, and Cayden is finishing up whatever he’s writing. We have just gotten inside information. A smile tugs at the corner of my lips, but it breaks out into a full grin when Saskia turns around with a few maps in her hands.

“That was brilliant, Elowen!” She briefly smiles at me before returning to her maps. I’ve never worked as a team with anyone other than Finnian, and I doubt the three of them have ever invited someone else into their circle, but something about this feels natural. “I’ve been piecing maps together based on my spy reports, but you’ve just given me what I’ve been

missing,” her smile grows wider with her words. She grabs the list from Cayden, and her eyes flash back and forth between it and her maps. Her smile is replaced by a contemplative expression. “Do you think you’d be able to detail a route from the back gate to the dragon chamber? I think the back gate may be your best option.”

“The back gate?” I ask slowly.

“It would give you the most coverage. I have more maps in my tent, but your knowledge can verify them,” Saskia says, grabbing papers from the desk and looking up at me expectantly. I feel the smile melt off my face, and I put together a passive expression in its place.

“I won’t be able to create a route from anywhere in the castle other than the dungeon.” The tent falls so silent that I hear Cayden grip the side of his desk. Ryder’s nostrils flare as understanding washes over his features, and Saskia’s face drops. It’s better they know now that they can’t count on me to create maps for every entrance. Honestly, Saskia probably knows more about the castle than I do. “It was a fact you all need to know so that we can strategize around my lack of knowledge. Nothing else about it needs to be discussed.”

“I can draw up finalized maps, and then we can go over them together. I’ll come back later tonight.” Saskia puts her maps back into the leather folder she pulled them from. I’m glad she moved on quickly; sympathetic expressions are one of the many reasons I don’t disclose information about my time in Imirath. I don’t need or want sympathy. I both need and want revenge.

I plaster a fake smile on my face, which is second nature to me at this point, “That sounds perfect.” Cayden stares at me with a harsh, icy expression and holds out my moonstone necklace. He can see right through what I’m doing. “I’ll leave you to your maps,” I say while taking the necklace from him, walking around the desk, and closing the curtains between our rooms.

Once I’m alone, I put my necklace back on and fiddle with the pendant. I always thought I would shatter to the point of no return if I saw my cell again, but I’m still standing. Just because I’m cracked doesn’t mean I’m broken. I never got the chance to examine my room last night or this morning, so I kick off my boots and squish my toes on the soft carpet. The carpet, and fire that now burns in the center of my room do a good job of keeping the cold out.

The seating area consists of a long couch and two armchairs, all made of the same worn brown leather. Knitted throw blankets drape along each piece of furniture—all donned with throw pillows ranging in shades of blue, purple, green, and red. A small smile forms on my lips when I think of Cayden juggling the colorful throw pillows, clad in armor with a sword strapped around his waist.

A simple gold lantern sits in the center of the coffee table and is bordered by stacks of books. I sink onto the couch and pull the stacks toward me. The first is a series of journals: *Healing Remedies*, *Medicinal and Poisonous Herb Guide*, *Gardening and Harvesting Instructions*, *Tales of the Last Dragons*, and *Breeds of Dragons Recorded Throughout History*. My heart swells in my chest as I reform the stack and push it back in its place. I pull the second toward me and can't stop my jaw from unhinging. I can't believe him! I spread out the colorful clothbound novels and confirm my suspicions; it's a stack of romance books. My smile morphs into a full-on fit of laughter. Now, I imagine Cayden browsing the romance section of a bookstore to find me the most scandalous novels.

I remake my romance tower, but keep the deep red novel separate, and carry it over to my bed. Which I now can see is a hue of sage green with gold embroidered flowers. I sink onto soft surface and lift the book to my nose, inhaling deeply. I whip my head around to make sure nobody saw that, but thankfully I'm alone. The three of them left Cayden's room almost immediately after I shut the curtains.

I lay on my stomach, prop myself up on my elbows, and flip to the first page. The words give me wings and carry me away from reality. Books have always been my light when the world feels dark. I always had healing and training, but nothing could make me feel as alive as a book. Some of my favorite nights were the ones when I didn't stop reading until my candle melted down to the candlestick and the sun bled through the night sky.

My neck is incredibly stiff, and I roll onto my back after the second hour of reading, resting the book on my chest. My arms have also gone numb, so I let them limply rest next to me. Finding a comfortable reading position is so hard. I'm only allowing myself a five-minute break because I have a feeling the characters are about to kiss...or do something else. A giddy feeling rises in my chest, and I kick my legs in the air, just thinking about what will happen in the story. I pick the book up again when the feeling returns to my arms and hold it over my face.

“New book?” I drop the book on my face and mutter a curse into the pages before whipping my head around to face the entrance. A familiar freckled face with reddened wind-kissed cheeks greets me. We don’t move for a few seconds. We just take each other in. Emotion swells in my chest at the sight of him, my best friend. Pain twists his features, and his eyes glisten with unshed tears. “Elowen...”

I slip off the bed and rush forward, not wanting to hear his words just yet. My arms wrap around his lean torso, and I breathe in his familiar citrus scent. Finnian may look like autumn, but he smells like summer. He wraps his long arms around me and rests his chin on top of my head.

“I don’t like fighting with you,” he murmurs after holding me for a few moments.

“I know,” I say while detaching myself from him so I can look into his face. “I must be hard to stay mad at.”

He breaks out into a smile and wipes the corners of his eyes before guilt overtakes his expression again. My momentary smile also falls as I lead him over to the seating area. I sink into the couch and crisscross my legs. My hands already feel twitchy with anxiety, so I pull the lavender throw pillow onto my lap and flick the tassels around while I wait for Finnian to talk.

He taps his hands against the arms of the chair he occupies before resting his elbows on his knees. “I never should have left you.”

“You’ve never stormed out on me,” my fingers tug harder on the tassels, “we don’t run from each other.”

“I know. I just...” Finnian rubs his hands over his face before his bloodshot eyes find mine again. “You must know that the thought of losing you to all of this,” he gestures to the tent, but I know he means more, “It terrifies me. I lost my family to violence—every single one of them.” His eyes look like a tormented sea. He hardly ever talks about his family, and it makes me want to rush over and wrap my arms around him. But I know how hard it is for him to get these words out, and I don’t want to interrupt. “I used to pray for my family to come back to me, and I think they did in some form because I met you,” his voice cracks on the last word, and his throat bobs. “You’re the sister I prayed to the gods for.”

My eyes fill with hot tears that soon break free and fall down my face in silent streams. I don’t cry often, but Finnian’s words and presence pull on my heartstrings. He knows I understand the motives behind his anger, it was taken out in an irrational form, but his feelings will always be valid. I don’t

need to tell him something he already knows, so instead, I meet his pleading eyes over the space between us.

“You’re my brother,” I whisper, and something hammers in my chest when he smiles through his tears. He reaches out a hand, and I stretch mine to meet him halfway, giving it a tight squeeze before we pull apart.

He clears his throat. “I should never have left you; you don’t need to try to reason it to make me feel better like you always do—it’s just a fact. You’re my best friend, but you’re also my queen, and I didn’t prioritize your safety. It’s something I haven’t stopped feeling guilty about since I got back to the castle that night. When Ryder found me and told me what happened, I tried to come to the house to see you, but he told me to stay away until you expressed your wishes.”

“Ryder found you?” I inquire.

“Vareveth soldiers escorted me to the castle, but he found me later that night after Cayden got to the house you were staying at. He figured you’d want Ailliard and me to find out before the rest of Vareveth. He also grilled me for any information I had and for leaving you at the tavern.” I knew someone told Finnian and Ailliard while I was passed out, but I didn’t picture it being Ryder. Being interrogated by Ryder or Cayden would be like staring certain death in the face.

“I wanted to find you when I got back to the castle, but you got sucked into an advisor meeting, and I ended up here,” I gesture around the tent.

His eyes light up. “Ah, *here*. Yes, it’s rather cozy here, isn’t it? I think somebody’s paying attention.”

“Stop!” I hold a hand up and halt his love of gossip in its tracks. “There’s something I need to tell you before we finish this conversation.” My hands are sweating so much that the tassels I continue to pull on have dampened. Finnian stiffens in his chair but keeps an open expression, encouraging me to go on. “I’m getting my dragons back.” I should feel more anxious after saying those words aloud, but I actually feel like a weight has been lifted off of me.

Finnian blows out a breath, and the tapping of his foot is silenced by the carpet. “How?”

“The plans still aren’t finalized, but Cayden and I will be infiltrating the castle.”

“You’re going into Imirath?” His blue eyes are laced with terror.

“I have to,” I say in an even tone, “I won’t send someone else to do the dirty work if I’m not brave enough to do it.”

“I hate when you get noble,” he mutters, resting his head in his hands. He slowly breathes in and out a few times before shooting out of his chair.

“Finn—”

He cuts me off with a shake of his head and gets down on one knee in front of me, taking my hand in his and meeting my eyes. “You have my bow and my unyielding loyalty from this moment until my last, both as my queen and my best friend. I’ll do anything I can to help you with this.” His eyes are filled with unquestionable promise, and I can’t hold myself back from wrapping my arms around his neck and pulling him close. “I’m sorry I didn’t hold myself to this oath from the moment we left Aestilian, but I’m here now.” His arms tighten around me to emphasize his point. I can’t form the words for how grateful I am to have him here, with no secrets between us.

“Who knew you were so poetic?” I detach myself from him to dry my eyes. He looks relieved at the sound of my joke.

An easy smile forms on his face, and his stiff shoulders relax. “I thought an oath would really end with a bang.”

I laugh and shove his shoulder hard enough that he falls back on the carpet. He shoots me a mock death glare before draping himself across the chair in a much more Finnian-like position than when he first sat down.

“How did you get here?” I ask.

“Your guard dog found me, and may I add that he’s far grumpier when you’re not around,” he jests.

I ignore the guard dog comment. “Cayden brought you here?”

“He also said I had twenty minutes to *fix my fuck up* and that he would *make me regret it* if I made this worse.” He uses air quotes around Cayden’s words. I roll my eyes and stifle a laugh—overprotective prick. “Did something happen?” Finnian raises a brow as a suggestive smirk forms on his lips.

“No!” I shoot out a little too quickly.

He purses his lips and nods his head while gesturing from my room to Cayden’s. “Close quarters, wouldn’t you agree?”

“He’s attractive, but it’s not like I can’t handle myself. I’ve seen attractive people before,” I try to end this conversation. If Finnian knows Cayden and I kissed, he’ll never stop analyzing Cayden’s every move while

he's around me. I think Finnian likes making up scenarios more than I do, and I make them up before I fall asleep every night.

"Elowen, in all the years I've known you, you've never outright said someone was attractive without following it up with a *but*."

"Yes, I have!"

"Someone that's not fictional." He levels me with a glare.

"Cayden is attractive, but he annoys me. There you go."

"That just adds to the tension, darling."

"Nothing can happen!" I shoot out, cheeks reddening. The kiss is replaying in my head at the worst moment.

"Just because something can't happen doesn't mean it hasn't happened." Finnian looks like he's about to shoot out of the chair in excitement. "You're blushing! Look at you, you look like a strawberry."

"Don't compare me to fruit I love when you're analyzing me against my will! You know feelings will only complicate things that are already messy to begin with." I haven't even formally signed alliance papers. I can't imagine how awful it would be to be locked in an alliance with someone you've had a falling out with.

"Messy can be fun," Finnian offers.

"Finnian!" I shout while dropping my head in my hands, just wanting him to stop talking about this.

"Elowen," he drags out my name in a sing-song nature. It's his gossip-prying tone.

My head whips up at the sound of the curtains to my room opening. Cayden strolls inside with his hands tucked into his pockets. His eyes dance between Finnian and me and narrow on the sight of my tear-streaked face. "Is the room to your liking?" Cayden asks.

Finnian leans forward and grabs a book from the coffee table. I've never seen him read a book, which makes his movements that much more ridiculous. He holds it up to his face and wiggles his brows. "How punctual," Finnian mumbles into the pages.

I give him a pointed look that tells him to keep his mouth shut. "I never want to go back to the castle," I say while hugging the lavender pillow to my chest. I feel more at home in this room than I do at the castle. This room feels even more like me than my room in Aestilian. We break eye contact when Finnian snorts. His shoulders shake with laughter as he clutches a

pink clothbound book in his hands. Oh gods! He's reading one of the romance books. Why couldn't he have picked up a book on poisons?

Cayden's satisfied look morphs into a mischievous grin, "I see someone is enjoying the selection of literature that comes with the room."

"Your books have become far more graphic than when we were younger," Finnian doubles over laughing while clutching the book. I scramble off the couch to grab it from him, along with the rest of the stack from the table. I bring them over to the couch and wrap my arms around the stack while flipping Finnian off, which only makes him laugh harder. "I'm sorry I interrupted your reading when I came in. That is some good stuff," he says through his laughter.

"Calm down, you little smut-guarding vextree," Cayden jests, grinning my way. I wish I was a vextree; I'd poison them both.

"She wasn't reading smut yet. She didn't have on her smut-reading face," Finnian declares.

"She has a smut-reading face?" Cayden sounds far too intrigued for my comfort.

"I do not!" I jump to my feet, keeping my book stack behind me.

"It's hilarious!" Finnian ignores my protests and turns his body to face Cayden. "She always turns as red as a tomato, but sometimes, she'll dart her eyes around the room to make sure nobody is reading over her shoulder. She also squeals and kicks her legs in the air—my personal favorite."

"That's ridiculous," I feign ignorance and do my best to appear unbothered. Yes, I'm fully aware I just did Finnian's favorite move while I was on my bed, but Cayden doesn't need to know that.

"Let's test it out," Cayden says, pivoting on his heels and striding over to my bed.

No.

He flips the book open to the page I'm on.

No. No. No.

The characters were about to have a moment! I've gone through too much pining for him to ruin their moment like this. His face breaks out into a smile after he flips forward a few pages.

"This was one of my favorites," Cayden declares, never taking his eyes off the book as I advance on him. He tilts his head up, so he's able to continue reading while I attempt to climb him like a bear climbs a tree. He shoves my legs down when I try to hook them around his waist.

“I’m not above biting you,” I grit out, struggling against him.

“Don’t tease me with empty promises, angel,” he says through his laughter.

I reach up and put both of my hands on his face, trying to divert his eyes away from the lusty paragraph he’s glued to, but he keeps maneuvering the book within his sight and out of my reach. “What an interesting position the author has described! Do you want to try it? I think we could make it work.”

I rip my hands from his face, letting out a growl of frustration, and stalking toward Finnian. “I’m going to kill you too!” He’s laughing too hard to respond as Cayden continues to read the filthy paragraph aloud.

“Oh! I got to my favorite part.” I freeze in my advance on Finnian and whip my head toward Cayden, who wears a rare broad smile. “She refers to herself as a cream-filled pastry. I bought you this one because you love pastries!”

Finnian claps his hands behind me in silent fits of laughter, sucking in a deep inhale and bursting into a fit of unbecoming snorts. I rush forward while Cayden looks down at the book. By the time he glances up, he doesn’t have time to support my weight as I tackle him onto my bed. My legs straddle him, and just as my fingers brush against the soft cloth of the cover, he wraps an arm around my waist and slams me onto his lap. I struggle against his hold while reaching for the book, not realizing I’m grinding against him until I feel him harden beneath me.

My movements immediately still, and I meet his eyes. “If you wanted me in your bed, you could have asked nicely, angel.” He still wears a broad smile, and I realize how good it looks on him. I’ve seen many expressions on him, but there’s something so beautiful about catching a smile from someone that rarely deals them out. Yes, happiness is Cayden’s best look, even if it’s the rarest. The selfish part of me is glad I’m one of the only people that gets to see him like this.

To the rest of the world, he’s the fearsome and harsh Commander of Vareveth. But when he’s here, he’s the man that buys me romance books and throw pillows. His laughter is hoarse, deep, and rich; it’s like the sound has to make its way through rusty pipes after years of neglect. I’ve never heard him laugh like this before or seen an unrestrained smile, a genuine smile, on his face. He must notice something change in my gaze because he

licks his lips, and the humor in his eyes is beginning to heat into something else entirely. Feeling a surge of confidence, I lean closer to him.

“Oh yeah?” I murmur, bringing my lips inches from his and sliding my hands forward. I see the moment he forgets about the book entirely; his pupils consume his irises.

I slide my hands further up the comforter and wrap them around the book. He realizes what I’m doing too late because I shoot away from him with the book in my hands and bring it down to hit him on the forehead.

“That’s what you get, prick!” I shout, hugging the book safely to my chest. The heat stays in his eyes, as does his arm around my waist, but an easy smile settles across his lips. A thunderstorm crack is felt in my chest when the magnitude of being the source of his happiness in this moment hits me. “Has anyone ever told you how annoying you are?” I ask, smiling down at him.

“Yes!” I hear two voices yell in unison. I turn toward the entryway of my room and spot Saskia and Ryder.

“Don’t take her side.” Cayden sits up and stands from the bed, sliding me down his body to set me on the floor. I try not to focus on how good that felt, but it’s hard not to when I was just in his lap, and his hands remain firmly on my waist.

“I can’t argue with logic,” Ryder says with a shrug of his shoulders.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-ONE



My heels click against the tile floor as Ailliard escorts me to the ballroom. The last few days have been filled with heist planning and book translating. I think there's more caffeine in my body than water or blood at this point. So far, the two best options to infiltrate the Imirath castle are the dungeon door and the back gate that Saskia mentioned. If we go through the back gate, we'll have the cover of the castle gardens, but we don't have their guard rotation schedule. Neither option is fantastic, so Saskia is gathering more intelligence from her spies before we finalize the route. I offered to put the amulet back on but was met with a sharp and unanimous no. Magic can be unpredictable, especially when we don't know the source of the amulet's magic. Cayden kept his word on communicating more information to me. Both he and Ryder spent time debriefing me on numbers, strategies, tactics, and the names of different members of the army.

My dress glitters in the candlelight that illuminates the hall. Saskia and I sent designs to one of her favorite shops, but she must have altered mine because the embroidery that was added makes the dress far more beautiful than what my mind originally conjured. The ball gown consists of an emerald green satin corset embroidered with gold vines that creep upward from the bottom of my skirts. The bottom flares out around my waist and flows with me as I walk. It's sleeveless, but the few strands of gold beads that drape over my upper arms creates the illusion of them. It's enchanting. It's the type of dress I've only seen in my dreams. When I first saw myself in the mirror, gold crown and all, I didn't feel out of place. I felt like I

wanted to reach into my memory and give an old version of myself a hug so that she could know we have finally made it.

After leaving Aestilian, I've killed a vextree, seen my cell again, faced down assassins, and secured a steady food supply for my people.

I'm not a prisoner.

I'm not a princess in hiding.

I'm the Queen of Aestilian and I'm reclaiming my life.

"Give me a rundown of what I'm walking into," I say, sauntering over to one of the mirrors in the hall to fluff my hair and check my lipstick. Hyacinth gave me voluminous curls and a more dramatic eye than I usually go for, but her skillful hand applied everything to perfection. The black winged liner makes my eyes stand out like dying embers surrounded by charcoal at the bottom of a hearth.

"When you walk in, you'll be entering the ballroom from the top of a staircase, so don't fall," Ailliard jests. I snicker before he continues. "Eagor and Valia want to make a show of it, so the treaty will be signed in the middle of the evening. You, Cayden, and the Dasterians will be at your own table because everyone wants to see you together as a united front."

"I'm beginning to think the majority of politics is a show." I gesture down my green and gold dress, the colors of Vareveth. Not that I mind, it's one of my favorite color combinations.

"You wouldn't be entirely wrong," he agrees. "When it comes to dancing, there will be many Lords of Vareveth present tonight, you should dance with a few of them, but you don't necessarily have to. However, you should definitely dance with Eagor; that'll most likely be the first dance of the evening." He steps forward when I turn away from the mirror and clasps my hand in his, bringing it to his mouth to place a kiss. "You'll be fine. If you need to get out of a dance, then just signal me over, and either Finnian or I will cut in. Enjoy tonight. You fought to be here; nobody has the right to revel in this ball more than you do."

Pride wraps around my heart and tightly squeezes it; tears prick the corners of my eyes. My life could have been so many different things, but I don't dwell on all that could have been because I intend to make something of the life I have. Ailliard can read the thankfulness in my eyes, but I don't trust my throat to get the words out. Words seem to fail me when I need them most.

He pats my hand before letting go. Garrick never looked at me with anything other than disgust, and that probably distorted my image of love, but I feel like Ailliard is looking at me as a father would. "I have to go; I want to get to my seat before you make your entrance."

"I'll try not to fall," I say as he slips around the corner to enter the ballroom through a different entrance. His laughter floats down the hall in his wake.

Noise filters through the tall double doors I stand behind. The gold detailing swirls in rich strokes across the white paint. I've never been inside of their ballroom; Valia wouldn't let anyone other than servants near it while they prepped for the ball. Braxton, one of Cayden's generals, steps forward to knock on the door, alerting someone on the other side that I've arrived. The knock is answered with another knock. Whoever is on the other side must have been pressing their ear to the door if they were able to hear that. Three loud taps vibrate against the floor, and the chatter dies down. I smooth my hands down the front of my dress and square my shoulders after tossing my hair behind them.

"Esteemed guests of King Eager Dasterian and Queen Valia Dasterian. It is with the utmost honor that I present to you, Her Majesty Queen Elowen Atarah of Aestilian, Princess of Imirath, The Dragon Queen!"

I raise my chin as the doors swing open, engulfing me in a symphonic song played by the orchestra Valia must have hired. Strings are plucked, and keys are played, producing an angelic tune. My feet glide forward into the golden light produced by several chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. The ballroom itself bewitches me. Thick green vines creep up the walls and drape across the ceiling, some even hang down, and all are dotted with small white and purple flowers. It looks more like an enchanted forest than a ballroom. From the top of the stairs, the guests that crowd the dancefloor appear as a sea of vibrant colors and jewels, ranging in shades from the brightest pinks to the deepest blues.

My eyes drift to the dais, which looks like it's made of twisting tree roots. In the midst of several Vareveth advisors stands Ailliard, Finnian, Saskia, and Ryder. Finnian's smile beams across the ballroom. The white and sage green tailored suit he wears makes his ginger hair stand out like the first rays of sun over snowcapped mountains. Saskia is next to him in a crimson velvet gown, looking every inch a queen. Her box braids are piled in a bun atop her head, and her face is framed by two loose braids

accessorized with gold beads. Ryder's curls are perfectly sculpted, much like the midnight blue tunic he wears that hugs his muscular frame.

The last person I'm looking for is already gazing up at me from the bottom of the stairs. Meeting Cayden's ardent eyes sends a shiver through me as I descend the steps closer to him. I'm practically floating. He looks more like a dark prince than a commander, standing there in an impeccable black tailored suit. The only pop of color comes from his lapels trimmed in emerald green and embroidered with the same gold vines that are on my dress. Saskia must have altered his jacket as well.

We match.

When my eyes make their way back to his face, I take in his parted lips and reverent eyes. Color has risen on the apples of his cheeks. I'm sure people have noticed the coordination between our outfits, but I don't look at them to gauge their reactions because Cayden's reaction to me is like a thorn-covered rose—beautiful, yet harmful. The more I fight the magnetic pull to him, the stronger it gets. I don't understand how I can feel so close to someone when there are oceans between us. My hand slides into the one he stretches in my direction, and I'm not sure he registers what he's doing when he brings my knuckles to his lips and places a chaste kiss. Fire licks at my skin. The room breaks out into applause, but my only focus is on the infuriatingly attractive commander in front of me. I don't know when the switch happened, when my attraction became this powerful, but I need to learn to control it before it destroys everything we're solidifying tonight.

"Beautiful." His features are coated in a hypnotic trance before he blinks it away. I don't think he meant to say that out loud. He straightens up, keeping my hand in his while interlocking our arms. "Welcome to the ball, your majesty." His husky tone makes my toes curl.

"Have you read over the treaty?" I ask as we make our way through the parted crowd on the dancefloor. Ailliard brought me a copy before he escorted me from my room, and I left it on Cayden's desk when I was done with it.

"I did. You got everything you wanted, right?" Nobody can hear us over the harmony the instruments produce.

"I did. You?" I inquire.

"You're sweet tonight." He keeps his face stoic, probably because all eyes are on us. "All I wanted was you too."

I squeeze his arm to stop myself from either laughing or smacking him. That wouldn't look good for us. The only people that understand our dynamic are Finnian, Saskia, and Ryder, who are probably shocked we can last this long next to each other without either of those things occurring.

"I'm surprised so many people came," I observe. The ballroom is packed. I think the full population of Aestilian is close to the length of the guest list.

"Of course, they did." He takes his eyes off the dais to glance toward me, "You look as enchanting as revenge." Leave it to Cayden Veles to turn revenge into a compliment; it's the perfect compliment. It's one I understand because there's nothing he wants more than revenge. My lips turn upward, but I've already been smiling into the crowd, so it's not much of a shift. The only shift is the authenticity behind my smile.

"You look like a figment of wickedness," I say. He truly looks like an evil prince coming to whisk me away into his realm of terror and tragedy. The cuts on his knuckles are still healing, but it just adds to his roguish flare. It's a peek into what lies beneath his clean-cut clothes. He's sin, temptation, and even lust wrapped into one package. I can tell he liked the compliment because the corner of his mouth has tipped up a minuscule amount, but he'll never crack in front of a crowd. He never smiles unless it's in private.

We walk past the dais and make our way up to a small platform where Eagor and Valia stand. Brown tree roots and vines twist together, forming a gazebo. Iron lanterns hang from the roots and cast a cozy yellow glow throughout the space. They take their seats when we reach the top, and the rest of the ballroom also filters to their tables. Cayden steps around me and pulls my chair out before taking the spot to my left.

Neither of us bows to them. Bowing means submitting, and I am inferior to no one.

"Elowen, my dear girl," Valia greets me while fluffing her periwinkle gown around her. My mind hangs onto the condescending term of endearment, but I choose to overlook it. "How do you like the decor?"

"It's beautiful," I answer honestly. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Did you ever go to a ball in Imirath before you left?" she asks, springing discomfort on me, not that I show it. Appearing unbothered and unaffected is a skill I've mastered over the years. Giving someone insight

into how you feel gives them power over you. Valia is like a vulture, always waiting for the next thing to pick at.

“I’ve heard they’re rather dull affairs,” Cayden responds, taking the attention off me. I tap my foot against his shin under the table to communicate my thanks; he nudges me with his knee in return.

“They’re often dull affairs wherever you go,” Eagor tacks on. Valia looks displeased but keeps her mouth shut. I wonder if he notices his queen’s forwardness.

The first course is placed in front of us, a creamy pumpkin bisque. I bring the spoon to my mouth, and a mixture of cinnamon and nutmeg creates a delicious burst of flavors on my tongue. I could eat this every day; maybe I will if it’s available.

The servants clear the plates once everyone is done. A short yet loud note plays, and the ballroom falls silent. Eagor stands from his chair with a champagne flute in hand. All of us have a champagne flute next to a chalice filled with wine. He turns to the crowd, lifting the champagne toward his guests.

“Here we go,” Cayden mutters under his breath, taking a large gulp of wine. He smirks in my direction when I clear my throat to cover up a giggle.

“First, Queen Valia and I would like to thank you all for coming here tonight. There is no one else we would rather celebrate the formation of this alliance with.” People clink their knives against their glasses, but the noise dies down when Eagor raises his hand to silence the crowd again. “Vareveth has suffered for too long at the hands of Imirath. We have lost too many soldiers and too many citizens to this strife. Tonight, we toast to those we have lost and those we have gained.” Eagor turns away from the crowd and raises his glass in my direction, “Queen Elowen, we also toast to new beginnings with you—to The Dragon Queen!” He raises his glass toward the crowd before taking a long sip of the bubbly liquid.

“To The Dragon Queen!” echoes the crowd.

I raise my glass and take a sip, the bubbles always go right to my brain, so I make sure not to have too much. A tune begins to play as couples filter onto the dance floor, signaling the first dance. Cayden stiffens in his seat and takes another long drag of wine from the gold chalice that somehow looks small in his hand. He keeps his eyes on the table, not looking at me.

“Your Majesty, will you do me the honor of the first dance?” Eagor circles the table and extends his hand toward me. Cayden’s hand tightens on the arm of his chair, and his jaw is clenched incredibly tight. I tear my eyes away from him and look to Eagor. The thought of being close to him, to have his hands on me, tightens my throat, but not in the way my throat tightens around Cayden. I’m comfortable with Cayden. Nonetheless, I place my hand in his and hide my discomfort by plastering on a smile and gliding onto the dancefloor.

Eagor rests his free hand on the small of my back and I rest mine on his shoulder. The dance begins, and I allow Eagor to lead me through the motions I have practiced since I was a young girl stepping on Ailliard’s toes. My dress swishes around my ankles on every spin.

“I hope you’re enjoying your time in Vareveth so far,” Eagor says above the music.

“It’s lovely,” I answer as he places his hands on my hips to briefly lift me when the music calls for it. The assassination attempts weren’t exactly lovely, but there have been good parts.

We sidestep before he dips me in his arms. “Did you know there was a chance we would be married if you never left Imirath?” My smile gets tighter, just like my corset feels. Why couldn’t he have just made a comment about the weather? Every part of me is urging me to put distance between us. “My mother and your father only brushed upon negotiations, but those ceased after you disappeared.” Peace and Garrick don’t mix. Even if the marriage occurred, my father wouldn’t have relented forever. The soldiers that came to my cell would poke fun at the peace offers he received. He’s a tyrant with no moral compass. You can’t reason with the unreasonable.

“Thank the gods,” I mutter. The thought of being vulnerable enough with someone, to let them see every part of me...well, I don’t think anyone could love all the parts there are to me. Especially not someone like Eagor.

“Sorry, what was that?” Eagor inquires.

“I said that’s very odd,” I say above the music. My stomach rolls as I give him a broad smile. It’s getting harder to keep it looking genuine. “It’s a good thing it didn’t work out because now you have Valia.” He spins me in tandem with other couples, but his hand is lower on my back than it was when we first started dancing.

“She and I are a marriage of convenience, not love.” He flashes a pearly white smile. I really hope this song is almost over. “The both of us have other...arrangements. We keep it quiet.”

Gods, the room feels too tight. I feel trapped. I can't punch him; I can't walk away. The only thing I can do is smile and finish the dance. Aestilian needs food. I just need him to sign the damn papers. I can't make an enemy of him minutes before the stroke of his pen will determine the difference between my people surviving or starving. I can suffer for them a bit longer.

“I'm sure that's convenient for you both.” It's a miracle I keep the sneer off my face when his thumb begins to stroke the top of my hand.

“There's a brothel, a very expensive one close to the castle. Sometimes royals and people buried in riches go there for a night to forget who they are and seek something new.” It's taking everything in me not to vomit on his shoes. “The atmosphere is reason enough to even meet someone there for a private room.”

“Why are you telling me this?” I inquire.

Don't start shaking; just keep smiling.

Don't start shaking; just keep smiling.

Don't start shaking; just keep smiling.

“You've lived hidden away for your adult years. I'm unsure of how much experience you've had, and I want to make sure you go to the right place to seek it.” The instruments play a shrill note, and he takes the opportunity to press his fingers into the center of my back; hard enough for me to feel them through the thick material of my corset. “You're a very beautiful woman, Elowen.”

“So I've been told.” Anger, disgust, and malice boil in me. “I assure you that you don't need to fret over my life experience. I've had plenty. In fact, do you know what I do to prisoners in Aestilian that make untoward advances on my citizens or me?” My smile keeps him intrigued, and his eyes are filled with eagerness. “I castrate them,” I whisper in his ear.

It's a lie, but the fear it instills in him is a large dose of satisfaction. Let him believe me to be as vicious as a feral beast with fangs and venom. I have my own tactics for torturing predators, methods I don't need to disclose to him. Once the alliance papers are signed, his use to me expires. If he makes an unwelcome and nonconsensual advance on me, I'll make a crimson waterfall flow from his neck and throw his body to a netherwraith.

The dance ends, and a set of doors on the opposite side of the ballroom opens.

“Shall we sign the treaty, your grace?” I smile sweetly at him.

“Y-yes!” he stammers while extending his arm to me. Let this be the last time Eagor Dasterian looks at me as anything more than a political ally. I won’t fault him for his eye, but I will fault him on his judgment, execution, and approach.

We glide through the doors and meet Cayden and Valia inside the room. The noise fades behind us. I slip from Eagor the second the doors shut, and my feet carry me toward the large oak desk in the center of the room; it’s the only piece of furniture in here. Cayden and Valia already signed the treaty. After quickly glancing over the words to make sure it’s identical to the copy I read, I sign my name and seal my fate with my own hand. An immeasurable weight that I didn’t even realize the magnitude of rises off my shoulders. My people will have a steady food supply. The treaty includes a clause that states, even if I die, the food chain must exist for five years after my death.

Now, it’s time for phase two—my dragons.

Eagor scribbles his name below mine but hardly has the chance to rest the quill on the desk before Cayden grips his tunic and shoves him into the nearest wall, rattling the frames. Valia shrieks next to me, and even I clutch a hand to my chest in surprise.

“Unhand me!” Eagor exclaims, but Cayden doesn’t let go.

“What did you say to her?” Cayden demands in a voice laced with lethality. It’s dark and cold, just like one would imagine death to sound.

“What are you talking about?”

“You said something to Elowen. She looked uncomfortable. I could read it from across the room. You’re lucky I know her well enough to know she wouldn’t have wanted me to haul your ass off the floor in front of everyone,” Cayden growls.

“Cayden, it’s fine,” I try to reason with him, but he’s too far gone in his anger.

“You’ve lost your mind! Remember your place, Veles!” Eagor shouts.

Cayden lets out a humorless laugh. “If it wasn’t for me, your people would’ve revolted against you. So, Dasterian, I suggest *you* remember *your* place.” Valia and Eagor’s shocked eyes flash toward me, both laced with astonishment that Cayden let that information leak in my presence. I join in

their astonishment, but I'm also filled with a strong sense of satisfaction. It really feels like we're a team. "If I see you reach another hand toward her, I will happily cut it off," Cayden adds.

"Would you restrain your beast?" Valia directs her anger toward me.

I slowly crane my neck in her direction, my eyes laced with just as much venom that Cayden conveys in his tone. "What did you call him?" I take a step toward her, ready to pounce, and smirk when she jolts back, crashing into the wall.

"Angel," Cayden's voice drifts my way, stopping me in my tracks. The way she's cowering by my mere presence is making my blood rush. Cayden shoves Eagor into the wall once more; I can tell by the dull thump and Eagor's groan. "An insult to Elowen is an insult to me. She's my ally, and you will watch your tongue unless you'd like to face the consequences. This is your first and only warning. Now apologize."

I don't expect him to follow Cayden's command, but sure enough, he complies as I continue to pin Valia to the wall with my eyes. "My apologies, Queen Elowen. It won't happen again."

"Wise choice." Cayden pats Eagor's cheek before retracting his hands and turning toward me, extending an arm in my direction. I loop mine through his and slip from the room after Valia and Eagor. The ball goes on as if Cayden didn't just exert power over his king. The adrenaline in my body depletes, and my mind fills with several questions I want to ask. I pull him over to an unoccupied drink table while the tune of another dance drifts our way, taking myself out of his hold and standing in front of him once we're alone.

"Before you reprimand me, I think you should take into consideration that I waited until *after* the alliance papers were signed," Cayden reasons. His stance tells me he's expecting an argument.

"Cayden—"

"I won't just ignore your discomfort," he cuts me off.

"Cayden!" My hands latch onto his biceps, and I resist the urge to shake him. The laughter that rises in me is overpowering. It vibrates through my body and doesn't stop, especially when his deranged state melts into pure confusion as he looks down at me. I shove his body in front of mine so the rest of the ball can't watch me delve into hysterics.

"Can you please explain why you're laughing about me almost choking Eagor?" His confusion is still there, but it's accompanied by a softness that

I haven't seen the entire night.

"You thought I was going to yell at you?" I calm myself enough to get the words out. "I was going to ask about how you saved him from a revolution."

"I didn't overstep?" he cautiously inquires.

"No, you did the thing I wanted to do on the dancefloor," I answer.

The softness turns sharp again, "Tell me what he said."

"Cayden, stop. I don't want to run the risk of you polishing the floor with his blood in front of everyone."

"It was that bad?" He reels toward the dancefloor, but I wedge my body between him and his path, curling my hands into his lapels—the lapels detailed with green and gold. The things Eagor said would *definitely* push Cayden over the edge if my body language alone was enough for him to shove Eagor into a wall.

"I held back on Valia for you. Hold back on Eagor for me." He drags his malice-filled eyes away from the dancefloor and looks at me in a way that makes my body tingle. "Please, I don't want any spectacles. If Garrick has spies here, then I want them to believe I'm in a secure position." I want him to hear my name, hear how well I'm doing, and sweat. Something resigns in Cayden's eyes, and he slowly nods his head, giving up on his anger for now.

"You are in a secure position; I'm your ally." He trails his fingers down my arms, resting his hands on my waist.

I uncurl my hands from his lapels when I know he won't make a run for it and smooth my hands over the fabric. "I know, you're officially shackled to me for the foreseeable future."

"You already had me." Something in his tone makes me pause and look up from his lapels. His face has inched closer to mine, but neither of us make any moves to get closer than this. He seems content to just stay there, looking at me.

A new voice comes from my left, "Queen Elowen, I was wondering if you would do me the honor of the next dance?" I remove my hands from Cayden and turn toward the voice, but his hands stay locked on my waist from behind. The voice belongs to a man with shoulder-length auburn hair, green eyes, and tanned skin. He's handsome, but I don't feel like having a repeat of what happened with Eagor.

"Queen Elowen's dance card is full, and she has promised her next dance to me," Cayden states, stepping around me and extending his arm in

my direction. I blink slowly before regaining my senses. Maybe he'll just escort me back to the table, although that's probably a bad idea considering Eagor and Valia will make it back there at some point.

"Yes, my sincerest apologies." I smile at the man and glide away with Cayden, but he stays on track to the dance floor.

"You told me you don't dance," I say, curtsying to him when a note signals for me to do so.

"I had a change of heart," he replies, bowing when a note instructs him to do so.

A third note plays, and we move into the proper position, the same one Eagor and I took. But it's different this time. Instead of my body demanding me to put more space between myself and my partner, it's demanding me to lessen the gap. Butterflies swarm in my stomach, and goosebumps dance along my skin. When he looks into my eyes, it feels like we're the only two people here.

"You have one of those?" I gasp, waiting for the music to begin.

The corner of his mouth quirks up. "Don't tell anyone. They won't believe you."

People are staring at us. Is it really so rare for Cayden to dance that it draws the attention of the entire room? Even Saskia and Ryder looked shocked, much smugger than the rest of the ballroom, but there's a smidgen of surprise.

Cayden must note my rising anxiety due to the attention we've drawn because he removes his hand from my back to tilt my face back to his, away from the crowd. "You keep those pretty eyes on me. It's just you and me, angel," he whispers into the small space between us, placing his hand on my back again.

The first note is played, and Cayden whisks me into the fray of tulle and measured steps. He leads me as he leads his army, definitive and steadfast. It's the kind of measured grace that emanates from someone that studies steps rather than lets their body flow. Cayden isn't the type of person to flow; he's the type of person to command the tide. He spins me under his arm and twirls me, pressing my back into his chest while we continue to follow the steps.

His breath fans against my collarbone, and I lean my head back, resting it against his shoulder. We're closer than the other couples, closer than what's deemed appropriate, but trying to pull myself away would be like

trying to uproot a tree. He glides our intertwined hands across my stomach, and his lips grace the shell of my ear. His fingers tighten around my hand when he feels me shudder against him. We're both teetering on the edge of a dangerous fall, and sometimes I wish a small breeze would push me over and make me forget about everything else, kind of like the night we kissed.

I keep trying to force myself to believe it'll never happen again, but it's so damn hard when his hands feel like they were made to run against my body. He spins me again, and my gaze glances toward his lips before meeting his eyes, which are now almost black. I like the way he challenges me and pushes me but knows when and how to relent. He never makes me feel like I'm weak or something that needs to be coddled.

"Tell me about what you said in there." I jerk my chin toward the doors we came out of. The music is loud enough that nobody else around us will be able to hear.

"Eagor and Valia weren't smart with their funds," he begins, spinning me again. "The commander before me benefited from their carelessness; he pocketed a portion of the funds designated for the army and took a larger salary. I was his First General, and I challenged him."

"What did challenging him entail?" Cayden never speaks of his past. It's hard to remember my steps when his story is enrapturing me more than the music.

"His pride made him stupid. He was able to choose the terms since his position was superior to mine." A cruel smile slides onto his face, but rather than perturbing me, it just makes me more intrigued. I want him to show me every part of him that's stained his hands, so I don't have to worry about my hands sully his. "He chose a fight to the death; you can put the details together yourself. I remedied the Dasterians' mistake after I ascended in rank and kept their secret. They've been in my debt ever since."

He hoists me off the ground when the music builds to a crescendo. It feels like the harpist is plucking the strings of my heart, demanding it to beat out of my chest to the tune of a song I've never heard. Cayden and I feel like a melody long forgotten, hidden in a dusty attic somewhere and neglected for years. Only now, someone plucks the sheet off a shelf and plays the notes on a rusty piano.

My arms wrap around his neck, and my head tips forward on its own accord, pressing our foreheads together. Then, at a sinfully languid pace, he glides my body down his and sets me on the ground again. The song is

over, our chests are heaving, and our breaths are mingling. His arms stay wrapped around my waist, and mine remain locked around his neck—our own private universe amid chaos. We're dancing with our hands tied, but we put the ropes there ourselves.

Stars dance in his eyes as he looks down at me, and the front pieces of his hair tickle my forehead. "Dance with me again," he demands.

A smile plucks at the corners of my lips. "Some people may deem it improper."

"Do you think I give a damn what people think?" He levels me with a glare. "I personally think we would be doing our appearances a large favor."

"Is that so?" I quirk a brow.

"It'll show that I'm invested and that you have good judgment for dancing with me instead of any other man here."

"I don't know," I tease. "I've seen some very eligible dance partners in the crowd."

"None worthy of you," he states, and my heart truly feel like it has grown wings.

"Well, if it's for appearances, then I suppose we must." I slide one hand down his neck, dancing it across his firm shoulders, and down his lapel before grasping his hand in mine. "I don't want to go back to our table."

His eyes flash with something dark before he blinks it away. "Then it will be my honor to dance with you the entire night."

"What if I get tired?" I ask, smiling up at him.

"I'll carry you out of here," he says, smiling down at me. We're still in our own world amongst the crowd. But in this world, our world, Cayden Veles doesn't have reservations toward smiling.

"Even if I step on your toes?"

"Always." He whisks me away into a new dance. His hold never falters the entire night, and he always pulls me close to him after spinning me away, molding our bodies together as stars mold constellations in the sky. We don't stop dancing until the night is over and I can no longer feel my feet. He twirls me until the only person in the ballroom I can see is him.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-TWO



Steam rises from my cup of coffee as I lounge on my bed, flipping through one of the herbal healing books I brought back from the border. The dragon books were staring me down while I chose this one, but I'd rather not accidentally read an account of a dragon burning someone that wronged them.

Now that Aestilian is taken care of, the only thing to focus on is the dragons. The guilt I feel for leaving them has amplified tenfold over the course of this morning. It's part of the reason I had breakfast in my room rather than one of the sitting rooms. It's intimidating that I'll know how they've been living within the next few days.

I hear footsteps approaching down the hall, but I don't have to see Cayden know it's him. Not only have I developed a keen awareness of his presence, but I can also recognize the pattern and weight of his footsteps. His door creaks open and shuts while heavy boots patter over to our connecting door that remains open. He saunters through, armed to the teeth. After the ball was over, he escorted me back to my room, but neither of us took it further than that. We left our night as dedication to the alliance, and neither of us will tear down that facade. It's easier to take comfort in an illusion than bare the naked truth.

"You look comfortably murderous today," he says with a smile in his eyes as he looks me over. I'm wearing an oversized burgundy sweater and brown leggings with knives strapped down my legs and a sword belt around my waist.

"There's no rule that says I can't be cozy and stabby at the same time." I shut the book and climb off my bed to put my boots on. He mentioned he

has something to show me, so I assume it's ready now. "It throws people off. It's like a sneak attack."

"I never said I didn't like it." He shrugs his black and silver armor-tipped shoulders. "I find it endearing."

I finish tying the laces on my boots and stand from the chair while walking over to him. "Did you find it endearing when I held a knife to your neck?"

"No, Elowen." There's nothing soft in his gaze as he stares down at me. There's hardly anything soft about him. I'm convinced he's made more of ice than flesh. He licks his lips, and his gaze darkens when my traitorous eyes fall to them, "I felt something entirely different when you held a knife to my neck."

He doesn't wait for my reply before cutting across the room and stepping into the hall. I follow his path down a spiral staircase that stretches all the way to the bottom floor of the castle. Our boots slap against stone as we descend into the depths. I'm slightly dizzy when we reach the bottom, but I shake it off and keep following Cayden's path through an exit.

"Start loading the heaviest things first." My head turns in the direction of a voice and commotion. A woman stands several feet in front of us with a scroll in her hands, calling out directions to workers loading a wagon.

It's Aestilian's wagon. Crates of food line the grass surrounding the wagon, ready to be lifted. Vegetables, fruits, meats, bread, grains, oats, and spices all peak out at me. I used to watch crates of food be carried into taverns and restaurants while I was on missions, unable to carry all that food back to Aestilian. It was an overwhelming feeling of helplessness, but right now, it feels like a storm that has rained on me for years is finally passing, and daylight is caressing my face. I may be here, but Aestilian will live on. The guards that retrieve the wagon will probably have to leave it at the foot of the mountain and send down groups to carry up portions, but I don't care how they get it up the mountain. They're getting it. I didn't fail them.

The children in the orphanage won't go to bed hungry. The mothers, fathers, caretakers, and older siblings that stand in as parental figures won't have to forgo dinner in favor of their children. The guards will be fed. Nyrinn's hands won't shake while she stitches someone. If I wasn't in public, I would fall to my knees and succumb to a mixture of happy and relieved tears. The alliance is holding my life and kingdom together, and I

can't let it slip away. This is why the alliance must come before my personal wants. There are too many people relying on me.

"I figured you'd want to see it," Cayden says beside me. I can tell he's looking at me by the way his voice fans across the side of my face.

I clear the emotion from my throat, "Thank you for taking me here."

"I received word this morning that your guards made it over the border. The purpose of the ball wasn't a secret, so I suppose they knew the food would be ready for them to bring back to Aestilian."

My eyes take in the wagon one last time before I turn away and walk toward the door we came out of. "Yes, they knew to come once they got word the alliance was finalized. The ball has been in the works for a few weeks; they probably planned their journey to get here soon after the papers were signed."

Cayden reaches out a hand to stop me before I ascend the staircase, "Please hear me out before you turn me down." Oh gods, *that* has my attention. I spin away from the stairs and lean my back against the wall across from him. "We're in an alliance officially now. I think it's smart to send my soldiers with yours when they take the wagon back to Aestilian. They'll have less of a chance at being attacked or robbed."

My jaw clenches; I hate that he voiced the thought I've been having for the last few days. It feels like he has open access to my mind. We think too similarly, it's disturbing sometimes. Even if it's a good idea, I don't want my people to see soldiers while I'm not there to warn them. My fingers lock around my moonstone pendant, dragging it back and forth along the chain.

"Your soldiers can cross the Fintan with mine, but they can't go into Aestilian since I won't be able to give my people a warning."

Once they cross the Fintan, the most they'll have to worry about is the Terrwyn Forest. My people have managed the dangers of the forest since the time Aestilian was founded; they can take it from there. Cayden nods his head, seeming pleased by our compromise. Something uncertain still lingers in his gaze, but I don't want to argue with him about this, so I drop it and head up the stairs. I make it up the first two flights before the sound of heavy footsteps echoes in the corridor.

Cayden moves around me and places a hand on his sword while stepping out to see what the source of the noise is. He removes his hand from the hilt, "It's Finnian."

“Finnian?” I step in front of Cayden and poke my head out of the stone archway. My eyes dart to Finnian’s familiar figure sauntering down the hall. “Why are you awake so early?” It’s closer to midday than it is to morning, but Finnian always takes the opportunity to sleep in. Judging from the look of his disheveled hair, he hasn’t been awake for long.

“The guards are here,” he breathlessly informs me, slowing his pace long enough to get the words out.

“That quickly?” I turn toward Cayden. I thought I would have more time before they showed up.

“Communication always has the chance of being delayed,” he shrugs. “The soldiers that monitor the border between here, Feynadra, and Urasos were dealing with a lot of traffic due to the ball.”

The pair of us follow Finnian, turning corners and swiftly walking down hallways. Passing sitting rooms, dining rooms, and rooms filled with sculptures and paintings. We finally make it to the main hall where I first entered the castle. The sound of water trickling from the fountain is an afterthought to Ailliard’s booming laughter. I don’t know why my heart is beating so rapidly; it’s not like I’m meeting new people for the first time, but I feel like a different person. There’s nothing wrong with changing; I wanted to change, but not everyone views change as a positive thing. I feel stronger now, surer of myself and my future. I can’t pretend like I want to go back to Aestilian. Three familiar faces stand in the room alongside Ailliard—Nessa, Lycus, and Jarek. The three of us walk down the steps and round the fountain to the small gathering.

I quickly embrace Nessa and Lycus while Jarek talks to Ailliard, I would feel wrong not to. But I step back toward Cayden before I feel pressured to embrace Jarek. Instead of only standing beside him, I do what I’ve done many times before, loop my arm through his and smile. If he’s surprised, he doesn’t let on. He even bends his arm to make it look like he’s properly escorting me.

“This is Nessa and Lycus. They were two of the guards that helped me leave Imirath.” I gesture to the pair of them before retracting my hand and placing it on Cayden’s arm. “This is Commander Cayden Veles of Vareveth.”

Nessa’s thin pink lips spread into a grin, causing her deep-set eyes to crinkle. She tosses her silky raven braid over her shoulder and extends a

hand in his direction, "It's a pleasure to meet you." Cayden uses his free hand to extend the same pleasantries to her, and then extends them to Lycus.

"How was the journey?" I ask.

"Uneventful," Lycus answers in a gruff tone. Uneventful is good. I'm glad they didn't have a repeat of my journey here. "You look well."

"So do you," I smile, and mean it. Both of them do.

"The elixir worked wonderfully. It's freezing at home now, but we managed to store a decent amount of food before the first frost came," Nessa beams. My hand subconsciously squeezes Cayden's arm, unable to halt the gratitude coursing through me. I sneak a glance in his direction, and even though he's not smiling, his eyes have shed some ice.

"How long will you be staying?" Cayden asks. "I can alert the servants on the way to my next meeting."

"Only for the day. We're going to rest and then leave tonight; we want to get the food back as soon as possible," Nessa says. However, I have a feeling she also wants to get home to her wife, Esmeralla, one of the other guards that escaped Imirath with me. Their wedding was the first one performed in Aestilian. It was a beautiful affair in front of the lake, a bright summer day filled with flowers and mirth.

I wish a pang of sadness hit me regarding of their short stay, but I feel guilty for the relief that washes over me in its stead. Lying to Ailliard is easy; he's just one person. It's harder to lie to three. Ailliard thinks I'm going to the border tomorrow and staying there for an extended period to take meetings regarding the war and to gain insight into their strength and numbers. In reality, Cayden and I will be crossing the border into Imirath very soon. Ryder has been monitoring Imirath's movements to help us scout the best place to cross. We also have plans to meet with Saskia tomorrow to finalize the route.

"Nessa! Lycus!" Ailliard calls out to his friends. "Come here quickly. I just remembered what I wanted to tell you." They excuse themselves with warm smiles and head over in Ailliard's direction.

My face turns to Cayden, and I find him already looking at me with open, observant eyes. "Thank you for the elixirs."

His mouth quirks, "It was a small price to pay."

My smile widens as I absorb his words, "I'm not a commodity."

"No, but you are a prize."

“Stop!” I whisper-shout, pinching his arm. Color rises in my cheeks, which he drinks in like a dehydrated man. Both corners of his lips tilt up, making my insides do a somersault. His smile drops the instant footsteps come in our direction, and his regular cold exterior is back in place.

“Queen Elowen,” Jarek greets me. His gray eyes scan over my body, and I feel Cayden stiffen under my hold. My hand tightens on his arm, silently telling him not to shove someone else into a wall on my behalf. Eagor was fine and also welcomed, but I don’t want to have to diffuse a fight between my ally and my citizen.

“Jarek, nice to see you again.” I extend a hand in his direction with the intention of shaking his, but he brings my hand to his lips and places a kiss on my knuckles. I’m doing my best to keep smiling, but it probably looks more like I smelled something bad. His lips on my knuckles feel wrong. It makes my skin crawl. Even if I had a clean slate with physical touch, and if my relationship with it wasn’t confusing, this would still disgust me. My blood boils in my veins, and I pull my hand back as soon as Jarek’s lips retract. I hardly suppress the urge to wipe my hands on my pants.

“Jarek, I didn’t think you’d come.” Finnian creeps up next to me, standing on my other side. It’s like I’m sandwiched between two guard dogs. He must have gone outside to check on the wagon because his cheeks are wind kissed.

“I didn’t want to miss out.” Jarek’s eyes slide to me again, and his tongue pokes out of his mouth to wet his lips. I think that one move just rendered me infertile. “Vareveth looks good on you.”

“Yes, it does,” Cayden states next to me. Finnian coughs to cover up his laughter.

Jarek takes a long look at Cayden and slightly puffs out his chest. It looks so damn ridiculous, and this time I can’t hide the disgust from my face. Cayden doesn’t feed into whatever Jarek is trying to prove and steps into his line of vision, shielding me with his body and giving Jarek his back, a clear sign he doesn’t view Jarek as a threat.

“I have to run to a meeting to discuss our person of interest.” He’s referring to the final assassin. We have to pile together whatever leads we have and try to come up with something. It’s risky to cross the border without taking the threat out. “It’s a closed-door meeting, but you’re welcome to join,” Cayden offers.

The assassin weighs heavily on my brain, there's nothing I want to do more than slip away and ponder theories, but I need to take care of Aestilian first. I will trust Cayden to find something amid the reports from his soldiers. "I need to square things away here first. Can we talk later?" I ask.

He nods and raises his voice loud enough for Jarek to hear, "I'll be back in *our* room later, angel." Then he does something completely unexpected. He subtly angles his body so Jarek can see him grasp one of my hands, the hand Jarek didn't kiss, and bring it to his lips, just as he did at the ball. "Have a nice afternoon, Elowen. I look forward to spending the evening with you," he says before locking eyes with Finnian and jutting his chin toward me. I see Finnian nod in the corner of my eye. The smirk on my lips and the way I'm shaking my head give away that I know exactly what he's doing.

"Overprotective prick," I mouth to him.

"Just doing my job," he mouths back, winks, and brushes past Jarek as if he's nothing more than a chair.

"Jarek, I'm sure we'll see you later, but you should rest. We must finalize the shipment," Finnian declares, offering me his arm and escorting me out the front door before Jarek can get another word in. Servants are already descending into the main hall to direct them to their rooms. We step to the left and walk down a small staircase that leads to the side of the castle the wagon is on.

"Well, that was fun to watch," Finnian says.

"What do you mean?"

"The battle of the bulges," he winks, and my face distorts in disgust.

"Gross, Finnian!" Why am I laughing? Gods, that's such a disturbing image.

"What? Cayden won!" He lets me lean on him when my laughter turns painful, and my arm clutches my stomach. "I'm just saying that it would've been less obvious if one of them peed on you—to claim you as their one true mate." He sticks his hands in the air to resemble bear claws. Gods, he's such an idiot sometimes.

I cover my hands with my ears and regain my balance enough to run away from him. "I can't hear you!" I shout. It's easy for him to catch up with me since my laughter makes my breathing short, and his legs are far longer than mine, but he keeps chasing me, never reaching his full speed. "We're not friends anymore!"

“Fat chance, Ellie!” I hear him exclaim through my hands.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-THREE



The day quickly passed by. Ailliard and I finalized the food to keep in storage, along with a schedule on how to disperse it and spread it out over the winter months. Finnian, Nessa, and I are sitting in front of her fireplace, drinking tea and catching up on our lives since we parted.

“How’s your little girl doing?” I ask Nessa. She and Esmeralla adopted one of the girls from the orphanage. She’s close to five-years-old.

“Moriko is good.” An easy smile filled with love spreads across Nessa’s face. “Esme’s been knitting sweaters for her to wear this winter. She asked for one with a flower on it because it reminds her of you.” Warmth blossoms in my chest; I remember making a flower crown for her a few months ago.

“I’m sure she’ll look beautiful in it,” I smile. Moriko is a short little thing with more curls than body. She’s shy, but an absolute sweetheart once she warms up to you.

“She’s at the age where she likes to hide around the house until we find her. It reminds me of you and Finnian when you were younger,” Nessa says. A soft knock taps on the door and I rise to answer it as Finnian laughs softly behind me, probably getting the same flashbacks of our childhood as I am. I crack open the door and greet the servant that knocked.

“A letter from Commander Veles, Your Majesty.” The servant bows at the waist before turning down the hall. Curiosity licks at my brain, and I quickly break the seal to unfold the letter.

ELOWEN,

I'VE COME TO THE CONCLUSION THAT THE ASSASSIN IS IN THE INNER KINGDOM. RYDER AND I ARE HEADING OUT TO DO SOME INVESTIGATING IN A FEW MINUTES. THE GROUP OF SOLDIERS THAT WILL CROSS THE FINTAN ARE ASSEMBLED AND WAITING BY THE WAGON. I PICKED THEM MYSELF.

*I'LL SEE YOU SOON, ANGEL,
CAYDEN.*

The Inner Kingdom is the most populated area, meaning that the assassin is hiding in plain sight. They're not worried that we'll find their secret hideout because they've assumed an authentic identity. I press my lips together and filter through all the new theories formulating in my mind.

"The castle is much bigger, but it's not the best place to hide in," Finnian's voice filters from behind me.

"No, too many people are watching you in a castle," Nessa agrees.

Realization slams into me like a freezing gust of wind. *Sometimes royals and people buried in riches go there for a night to forget who they are and seek something new*, Egor's words clank through my head.

The brothel.

If two people are in the same place, doing something they don't want others to find out about, nobody wants to be the first rat. People don't go to brothels to observe others; they go there to hide and immerse themselves in their own desires. Nobody would question an unfamiliar face in a brothel because they're there for *something new*.

I must catch up to Cayden and Ryder.

This ends tonight.

I grab my stomach and suck in a sharp breath. Two sets of concerned eyes flash over to me. "Oh no, is it your monthly?" Nessa asks.

I nod my head and force a pained face to cross my features, "Would you mind if we said goodbye now? I'd really like to lay down. Finnian, it's just as bad as it was before we left Aestilian." He understands what I'm saying immediately—it's a distraction.

"Oh, darling. I'll walk you back to your room and stay with you the rest of the night. You don't mind, right, Nessa?"

"Of course not," Nessa says, embracing Finnian. "We'll be leaving soon anyway."

Any guilt I feel for lying is minuscule in comparison to the anticipation buzzing through me. My mind is urging me to turn away and start sprinting down the hall. It'll take me so long to find Cayden and Ryder after they slip into town. Technically, I could go without them. I've done plenty of missions by myself and with Finnian. But I don't want to deal with Cayden's attitude if I take a risk like this before the heist, and I also promised him communication. I can't expect him to hold up his end if I don't hold up mine. Being emotionally mature is really annoying sometimes.

Nessa embraces me in a hug, and I do my best to pretend I'm relaxing into it, but nothing about me is relaxed right now. She releases me after a few seconds that feel closer to an hour. "Take care of yourself," she says.

"I always do," I smile. "Give Esmeralla, Moriko, and Nyrinn my love."

"I'll give Nyrinn your letter as soon as I get back." Nyrinn wrote me a letter to catch me up on her life, and I wrote one in return. I'm glad to hear she's doing well.

"Come on, darling." Finnian places a hand on my back, "Let's get you to bed." We walk to the door, even though my limbs itch to sprint. I take off as soon as Finnian and I enter the hall. He doesn't call after me, doesn't question me; he just runs right next to me.

"I know where the last assassin is!" We make it to the staircase and practically throw ourselves down the steps.

"What? How? Where?" Finnian fires at me.

"Brothel," I force the word out. "Just trust me."

He keeps silent, pushing forward. We surge toward the exit that leads to the stables; Cayden and Ryder will take horses in case they have to get somewhere fast. The pair of us rush out of the castle and into the crisp night air but are met with two sets of horse hooves clattering down the path, already out of sight.

"Fucking gods," I bite out while shoving my hands through my hair.

"We'll figure it out," Finnian soothes, stepping in front of me. "What did the letter say?"

"They think the assassin is in the Inner Kingdom, and they're going to look around."

"How did you get a brothel from that?" His orange brows rise in confusion.

“I didn’t. I figured it out from something Eagor said to me at the ball. They’re hiding in plain sight, in a place where nobody would question their presence. I’m an idiot for not placing it together sooner.” My hand smacks into my forehead.

Finnian tugs my hand away and places his hands on my shoulders. “Don’t say that. It’s not too late to figure it out. We just have to find where Cayden and Ryder rode off to, and then we’ll take it from there.” The Inner Kingdom is packed; there’s a chance we might not find them. “Why do we need them? You and I have done plenty of missions before.” Considering the plan I have in mind, his question would normally flood me with embarrassment, but I’m too anxious to give a damn.

“I need Cayden to be a distraction with me.”

“A distraction?” he inquires.

“I want the assassin to think that he and I went there for an escape,” I rush out. “Eagor told me a bunch of royals do it. There are private rooms available to rent. I need you and Ryder to watch our backs.”

Finnian blinks slowly, processing the whole thing. “You’re sure you want to be bait for an assassin?”

“Yes.” I’ll do anything if it means getting a shot at one of the guards that tortured me. When I said I’m done hiding, I also meant that I’m done letting people wrong me without consequences. If sitting on Cayden’s lap in a brothel is what I must do to lure an assassin out, then so be it.

“Fine, I’m in,” he sighs. “We’ve done other questionable things, so what’s another thing added to the list?” A grin spreads on my face, and I shove my hand into his to drag him over to the stables.

“Queen Elowen!” A castle guard steps into view. “You’re not supposed to leave the castle unguarded.”

“She’s not unguarded; I’m here,” Finnian points out.

“You’re not a Vareveth guard,” the woman states.

“I’ve been guarding Queen Elowen for most of my life. I don’t need someone from Vareveth telling me how to do my job.” His voice is laced with the same anticipatory anger I’m feeling as I bounce on the balls of my feet.

“Stand down, soldier,” another voice calls out, close to the stables. I spin in place and come face to face with Braxton. Yes! I rush over to him, leaving the guard in my wake. “Didn’t Commander Veles tell you he was leaving?”

“Yes, but I need to know where he went,” I answer.

“It’s urgent,” Finnian adds. Braxton glances between the pair of us; we probably look disheveled and unhinged. “Do you want to be the person that stands between Queen Elowen and Commander Veles?” Finnian tacks on.

Braxton winces, “They told me they’re starting with a tavern on the main road. It’s huge and has a big red sign: *The Pint*.” What a clever name. “Take the horse I’ve already saddled if you’re alright with sharing. I would hurry; the two of them make quick work with whatever they do.”

“Thank you!” I shout over my shoulder as we rush past a very confused Braxton. We move so fast that he’ll probably wonder if this was an illusion when he’s lying in bed tonight. I quickly swing myself up, and Finnian follows, wrapping his arms around me and flicking reins. My body is running so rampant on adrenalin that the only thing I can focus on is getting to the brothel.

“I think we should split up.”

“Why would we do that?” Finnian’s voice rumbles against my back.

“It’ll give me time to scope the place out, and it might look better for Cayden and me to show up separately,” I say.

“The last time we split, an assassination attempt happened.” Finnian is forced to slow the horse as we round the front of the castle and make it to the main road. We’re in a rush, but don’t want to run anyone over in the process.

“I know, but look around,” I gesture to the mass of people around us. “It’s too crowded to make an attempt on me here in the street. The tavern Braxton mentioned is only a few doors down from the brothel. You won’t even be ten minutes.”

Finnian takes a few seconds to weigh my words. “I see your point. I’m just hesitant to let you go in there alone.”

“I know,” I reach out to hold his wrist and brush a thumb over his skin, “but I trust you to find them quickly. Trust me to stay alive for the few minutes you’re not with me.”

He slows the horse when we come upon the brothel. It looks like any average building along the main road, burgundy banners hang from the windows, and deep, sensual music descends into the street. Luring in the curious souls passing by. You can’t see into the windows, even though the shutters aren’t drawn, but that just adds to the mysterious flare.

For the first time since we started this journey, my adrenalin cracks slightly, and I realize what I'm about to do. I'm about to pretend that I'm having sex with Cayden Veles...and yet, it doesn't scare me or intimidate me. I can be completely honest with myself. There's no sense in hiding from the truth. The reason Cayden and I can pull this off is because it's believable that we're sleeping together. Most of the kingdom thinks we are, and neither of us has done anything to quiet the rumors. We have more important things to worry about. If I tell Finnian I don't want to do this, he'll turn the horse around and take me back to the castle with no questions asked. But every part of me wants this.

The world needs to get used to the fact that if someone crosses me, I'll bury a knife in them and let their blood drench my hands. I won't turn the other cheek; I won't forgive and move on. I'll just become something for them to fear because I'll become worse.

I slide off the horse and glance up at Finnian; he still wears an uneasy expression. "Wait for Cayden before you go snooping around. Once you see him, you'll know I'm watching your back. Promise me that you'll wait."

"I promise."

"Make your performance believable," Finnian smirks.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-FOUR



The sensual music grows when I push the door open, as do my nerves. But my nerves aren't high enough to make me regret my decision, not even for a second. Breathy moans filter into the foyer. A woman in a black corset and gold robe sits behind a large desk, donned with two red lanterns on either side. The light in here is low, adding to the mystifying flare.

"Your Majesty, I was hoping you'd come to *The Golden Rose* one day," the woman's deep voice drifts my way. She stands slowly and bows her head in my direction.

"I wanted to get away from the castle, and I've heard wonderful things about your establishment." Her smile increases. I must have nailed down the fact that she's the owner. "I'm expecting someone," I add.

"Commander Veles?" She takes a long drag from her pipe and slowly blows the smoke through her puckered lips. I bite my tongue to stop myself from letting my smile falter. Does she know Cayden? Ugly and illogical jealousy wraps around my throat, choking me. "I've heard he's very intrigued by you. You know, gossip here and there. He's not my usual kind of customer, but I saw the two of you at the ball. It doesn't shock me that you want a night for the two of you to escape."

My jealousy fades in an instant; I really hate that emotion. "Does your establishment have any rules? I would hate to be a bother."

"You won't need any of my employees, I'm assuming?" No. But I'm curious to know how she deduced that.

"Why do you assume that?"

She barks out a sharp laugh. “Darling, the man practically shot daggers through his eyes toward anyone that looked at you during the ball.”

“He’s very protective.” I huff out a laugh in return, even though my heart is beating uncontrollably. “We won’t be needing anyone else.”

“Follow me.” Her gold robe trails behind her as she leads me through the curtains to the left of the desk. The lighting is still dim, but it’s bright enough to make out the shapes of intertwined bodies. Plush chairs and couches are littered throughout the room. Different sizes to accommodate different sized parties. Some couches look like they could fit up to eight people, and some of them do. Bodies twine and grind together to the point that I’m not sure where one starts and the other ends. The sensual music and atmosphere should be grasping my attention, but all my mind can conjure is the memory of the kiss. I call it *the kiss* because no other kiss can compare. My body heats as I recall what his lips felt like on me, what his hands felt like...what his tongue felt like.

“This is the main room. You’re free to join, but your private room is room number eight,” she says while walking us down a dimly lit hall and leaving the room of pleasure behind us. “There are outfits in the closet for you to get more comfortable. All different sizes and colors but let me know if you need anything, my lady.”

“Thank you.” I toss her an excited smile and don’t let it falter until I shut the door behind me, pressing my forehead against the wood. The pulse between my legs aches, but it doesn’t ache for anyone out there; it aches from just the memory of Cayden. Gods, I need to get a hold of myself, and I need to change; he’ll be here soon.

I slip out of my boots and walk over to the closet in the corner of the room. It’s filled with several two-piece outfits, all in varying colors and sizes. I hold the costume up to the light to see what I’ll be putting on. It’s a cropped crimson top with thin straps, paired with a matching set of panties that has sheer material sewn into the waist to make it look like a skirt. It’s made of a stretchy material, most likely for easy access. There’s no point in me going on a stealth mission if I don’t take the effort to disguise myself. The red panties start just below my belly button and firmly cling to my bottom. The panels of the crimson sheer fabric part on both thighs, giving me a double thigh slit, and pools on the floor around me.

I walk over to the mirror to get a better look at myself. My hands grab a pair of silk slippers that match my costume on my way there and slip them

on. My hair falls around my shoulders in dark waves, and I touch up my makeup with the selection they have. My eyes catch on my thighs and how on display they are. There's no way I can hide my knives.

A knock rattles against the door. "Elowen, can I come in?" Cayden's voice follows the knock; it's deep and calm. The brothel owner must be standing there with him.

I look at myself in the mirror again, swallowing through the tightness in my throat. "Yes."

The door opens and roughly shuts. I hear his sharp intake of breath followed by a thump against the door. My shaky hands slide down the front panels of the sheer skirt, and I slowly turn to face him. His chest is heaving, his hand is gripping the door handle so fiercely that his knuckles are white, and his head is tipped back against the door. It looks like he's muttering something about strength while looking toward the ceiling.

"Can you please tell me why we're here?" He squeezes his eyes shut before tilting his head toward me and drinking me in with his eyes. "And why you're dressed like I need to kill someone?"

My blood is pumping so fiercely that I hardly hear him over the roar in my ears. "Nobody touched me."

"But did they see you before I had the privilege?" he asks, not dispelling the roughness in his tone.

"Did Finnian tell you why we're here?" I curl my hands into my skirt to keep myself from reaching out to him. We're on opposite sides of the room, separated by a few feet, and the distance feels suffocating. The candlelight that dances over his features makes him look like something that crawled out of a dark fairytale. His armor and swords are a stark contrast to my mostly sheer outfit. My foot takes a step forward on its own accord, and his nostrils flare. I stop in place.

"Yes," he grounds out, eyes flashing away from me again. The room is quiet enough that I can hear him taking in labored breaths.

"Do you think it's a good plan?" I tentatively ask.

"Yes."

"Cayden." His eyes slip shut when I say his name. "We don't have to do this if you're uncomfortable."

He barks out a sharp laugh, eyes flying open, "I'm not uncomfortable, angel. I am many things, but I am far from uncomfortable." Awareness knocks on the door to my brain. He's not pressing himself into the door

because he's uncomfortable...he's staying away from me to restrain himself. He wants me, but he doesn't want to get close to me until I audibly say I want him.

"Are you sure?" I ask in a sickly-sweet voice. I know I could use this moment to continue down the road of emotional maturity but teasing him is too appealing. "Because I'm sure there are plenty of others that would love ____"

He pushes off the door with predatory speed and wraps my legs around his waist before carrying me over to the bed and pressing me into the plush mattress and expensive fabrics. His pupils have almost dominated his entire irises, the same way he dominates me in this position. My legs stay locked around his waist, and I bite my lip to stop myself from moaning at the sensation of his bulge pressing into me.

"You know there's nobody else that can pull this off better than me." His forearms rest on either side of my head, making it easy for him to glance down at my parted lips. "There's a simple, undeniable fact about why *I'm* the one doing this with you and nobody else."

"Because you would threaten their lives?" I ask, sliding my fingers over his forearms.

"Angel, I don't make threats. I take action." He licks his lips and doesn't hide the sinful smirk that slides onto his face. "The reason that I'm the one doing this with you is because it's believable, and if anyone is on the fence about us, then we'll make them believe it."

"Yes," I admit; there's no point in denying it when I've already come to the same conclusion. "It's just a game."

"Tell me your terms," he says, dipping his head to skim his lips over the sensitive skin on my neck. My legs tighten around his hips, and he groans into the crook of my neck. I've never been attracted to anyone else in the way I am to him. I've never felt this kind of pull before.

"Do whatever you have to do to make it believable. Lie to me, touch me, just make it look like we're truly here for pleasure and nothing else. We can just pretend tonight, say whatever you have to say. Make me believe you." I raise my shaky hands to the buckles on his armor, slowly undoing them.

"Believe me, when this night is over, nobody in this kingdom will doubt how much I want you." His lips trail my jawline, and my nipples harden

against the soft fabric of my shirt. "I'll make it undeniable, but I also have a condition."

"What's that?" I choke out, his lips are sending my senses into overdrive.

"Seal the deal with a kiss in here first." His hands slide against the bedding, one weaves in my hair and the other snakes around my waist. "You wouldn't put a plate in front of a starving man and tell him to take it slow."

I tilt my head up and meet his lips. His exhale fans against my cheek as if he was holding his breath until I kissed him. His hand tightens in my hair and around my waist, shoving my softness into his hardness. It's nothing like how our first kiss began. This one is urgent and feverish. His tongue doesn't seek permission, it dominates me with every stroke. His lips move against mine, matching my passion and amplifying it, forcing me to give him more of myself.

I yank on the buckles of his armor. I want it off. I want to feel him. My frustrated growl vibrates against his lips, and he softly chuckles, removing the arm from around my waist and helping me with the buckles and straps. Gods, I needed this. I've needed more of him since the night I discovered what kissing him feels like. Dancing with him at the ball was slow torture—being so close to him and not being able to do this.

He removes his hands and his lips from me to straighten out, and a pathetic sound of protest leaves my lips. He tips his head down, giving me a quick peck before straightening out again, detaching the armor and arm guards from his body, and pulling his undershirt over his head. My eyes dance over every inch of him, every scar and freckle, every groove in his muscles.

"Don't look at me like that," he commands, voice thick with lust.

"Why?" I rasp.

"Because we'll never leave this bedroom."

I slide down to the edge of the bed and let my legs hang over the side. His hands tilt my chin up to look at him and move to massage the back of my head. "What about my knives? I never go anywhere without them," I inquire.

"I'm keeping my sword on me, but I can tuck your knives into my holsters if it makes you feel more comfortable." He detaches himself from me when I nod. I watch his back muscles shift while he walks toward my

discarded pile of clothes and knives, picking two from the pile and sliding them onto his thighs. A wave of desire washes over me at the sight of him wearing my knives.

“Ready?” I ask, rising on shaky legs and walking toward the door. He snakes his hand around my waist and kisses the top of my head in confirmation.

“I’ll be watching your back the whole time.”

He doesn’t wait for me to audibly reply before opening the door and leading me down the hall. The scent of rose lingers in the air, most likely to mask the smell of all the people in here. I can understand the appeal of a place like this; everywhere I turn has a dark aura that makes me want to escape and hide for a few hours, letting the darkness mask every one of my sinful acts. People crane their necks in our direction, taking in the pair of us. I figured we would get a few stares, but this feels like we’re the main event. I wonder if my assassin has spotted me yet.

Cayden sits down on one of the loveseats that are made for two people. My heart pounds in my chest when he looks up at me and lightly places his hands on the back of my thighs. He trails his long fingers up and down while he sits up to get closer to me. He presses his lips where my top ends and kisses a line down my stomach to where my panties begin. Each kiss ignites something in me. I exhale shaky breaths through my parted lips. I don’t want him to know how much his kisses affect me. He’s only just begun touching me, but I can already feel my panties growing wetter. He makes me feel like I’m a living flame, and he’s the oxygen that’s feeding me.

The touch on the back of my thighs becomes assertive, and he yanks me forward to straddle his lap. He looks at me with the same soul-devouring expression he gave me when he first saw me in this. I hover above him; I don’t want him to feel the pulsing sensation in my core. We agreed that this would be fake, but my body’s reaction to him is undeniably real.

“Are you sure this is okay with you?” I ask, my limbs stiffening with nerves.

“No, it’s not okay.” I feel myself shrink inside, and my cheeks heat in embarrassment. I place a hand on his shoulder to push myself off him, but he places both hands on my hips and brings my body down to straddle him completely, with no space between us anymore. “This is perfect,” he nearly groans.

He tightly wraps his arms around my waist and leans back in the chair, bringing me with him. His hard bulge presses against my soaked core. My cheeks stay heated for an entirely different reason. He slides his fingers up and down my spine, causing me to arch into him. I grind my hips on top of his, and he leans his head against the back of the love seat, letting out a low groan before sitting up and bringing his lips to mine. I weave my hands into his hair and continue to grind our hips, loving his reaction to me.

He was right to get our crazed kiss out of the way. This kiss is slow, sensual. It's the kind of kiss you share when you know you'll have more. The kiss in the room was a frenzy of passion and tension, and it made me want to rip his clothes off. But this kiss makes me want to peel his clothes off slowly and put my mouth on every inch of his body as the clothes drop to the floor.

I continue to slowly rock our hips together and dance my fingers over his broad shoulders, savoring the feel of his skin. Our lips part slightly, but neither of us back away. I rest my forehead against his and open my eyes, only to find his already open and gazing at me. Our eyes slide shut after a few seconds, and lips meet again in a brief closed-mouth kiss that feels remarkably intimate.

He leans back in the chair, and my body leans with him. My head rests against his shoulder, and I curl myself into him while his fingers dance up and down my spine in long, relaxing strokes. To anyone else, we look like a regularly intimate couple.

"You're good at your job," I mumble. Our hearts are beating in tandem.

"I have a gorgeous motivator," he whispers into my ear and kisses the side of my head.

My teeth sink into my lip to suppress my smile, and I nuzzle into him before sitting up, even though being held by him feels surprisingly right. The assassin needs to believe we're completely enraptured with each other. We may have stopped moving our bodies together, but the tension has in no way lessened. The longer he looks at me, the more it builds between us.

His hands travel from stroking my back to stroking my thighs. I shudder and grip his shoulders as he inches closer to my panty line. A corner of his lips lift in a smirk. He slides a hand on the back of my neck and the other behind me to pull me closer to him again. His lips make their way to my neck while he has me in this possessive hold. It only makes me wetter. I can't suppress the moan that leaves my lips when he bites a sensitive spot. I

grind our hips while his face stays buried in my neck. My hands snake around his shoulders and lean back. He leans with me, taking advantage of the power I'm giving him. The hand he has on my hips travels to my ass, keeping me grinding. Sparks fly behind my eyelids every time my core brushes over him. His hold on me feels like he's telling everyone in here that I'm his and that they can look if they want, but they can't take me from him.

"Do you think—" Cayden bites my sensitive spot while I'm speaking, which cuts my sentence off in a moan. I lightly smack his shoulder. "Don't be a bastard," my tone is as breathless as I feel.

"What did you call me?" His hand squeezes my ass, urging me to speak.

"Bast—ahh!" He sucks on the spot while bringing us up to lean back in the chair again.

He pulls his head from my neck and looks me in the eyes, "Call me names again, and I'll bend you over in front of everyone." The mere thought of him bending me over makes my thighs tighten around him. If he wanted to dissuade me from calling him names, he only made me want to call him every curse I know. I must look as eager as I feel because the smirk widens on his lips, knowing I'm thinking exactly what he wants me to. "What did you want to ask me, angel?"

I glide my hands down his torso, tracing his muscles with my fingers. He's not muscular in a bulky way; he's leaner than that. My fingers dance over the sea of scars that litter his skin. I still want to know their origins. Awareness creeps over me—I want to know more about *him*. Not the Commander of Vareveth. I want to know more about Cayden Veles.

"Angel?"

"Hm?" I ask, still mesmerized by his torso.

"You wanted to ask me something." The humor in his tone makes me glance up. Oh gods, that's embarrassing.

"Sorry," I laugh. He leans forward to rest his forehead against mine and gives me a quick kiss that makes me want more. "I was going to ask if you think we're believable."

"If you're asking that," his hands slide down and grip my ass again, "I need to step up my game."

He lifts me from his lap and tosses me onto the loveseat next to him. My hair fans out across the soft pillows while he climbs on top of me. The couch is just big enough to fit his long legs. He presses his tongue flat

against my stomach and licks upward, between my breasts and up my neck. My body squirms beneath him, desperate for friction, but he pins my hips onto the loveseat. My lips part in a moan, and he takes the opportunity to shove two fingers into my mouth. He raises his head from my neck to look down at me. No man has ever looked at me with the blind want he does.

“Suck,” he commands.

I wrap my lips around his fingers, swirling my tongue around them. His eyes zone in on my lips, and I wonder if he’s thinking about me sucking a different part of him. He brings his hips down and finally rewards me with the friction I was desperately searching for. Grinding his hardened length into me as I moan around his fingers. My arousal keeps building and building, unrestrained.

He pulls his fingers out of my mouth and replaces them with his lips. I roll my hips onto his, each groan that slips from him sends another shock to my core. He rewards me with sharper thrusts, and I dig my nails into his back. “Lie to me. I want to taste it.”

He’s intoxicating and overwhelming. I can’t lie; my head is too dizzy and drunk on him. “I want you,” I confess against his lips. “I want you so much it hurts.”

“You have me, beautiful,” he murmurs. He detaches his lips from mine and trails kisses down my stomach, dragging me into a sitting position as he slips from the couch. For the second time since I’ve met him, Cayden Veles is kneeling between my legs. The man that bows and kneels for no king or queen doesn’t hesitate to do so for me. Oh gods, he’s going to realize how wet I am.

“Cayden,” I breathlessly warn him, but it sounds more like a moan. He tosses my legs over his shoulders and leaves love bites along my left thigh.

“Don’t think; just do exactly what you’re doing.” The sensation of his tongue against my thigh has my core clenching around nothing. When he’s done with that leg, he tosses the center pane of sheer fabric to the side and buries his head between my legs. My head hits the back of the couch, and I slap my hand over my mouth to suppress my scream.

“You’re perfect,” he mutters. I moan as he nibbles on my panties, and shocking sensations travel through my body. They’re so thin that I can feel the pressure of his tongue through the cloth. I thread my fingers through his hair, and he groans. Gods, I’ve never hated panties more than I do in this moment. “So fucking perfect,” he moans between my thighs.

He pulls his mouth away and kisses his way back up my body, nibbling on my breasts through the thin material of my shirt. My back arches off the couch to give him unlimited access to wherever he wants. When he finishes, he keeps me pinned to the seat in front of him, our heavy breaths mingle in the space between us, and I'm so close to running back to our room.

THE MISSION.

We need to be on display.

It's getting harder to remember that we're on a mission, but that doesn't mean I can't have my fun.

"Sit," I command. He arches a brow but complies. Watching him obey my orders will never get old. He pulls me onto his lap before I can slip from the couch like I originally planned, but I hold my hand up to his lips before he can kiss me again. His frustrated groan vibrates my hand, and I giggle at his annoyed expression.

I want to make him squirm like he made me squirm. He's not the only one with power here. My lips skim the side of his neck, and he shivers under me. I love knowing I have the same effect on him as he has on me. I kiss my way down, stilling on the spots that make him moan, running my tongue over them, biting them, sucking on them. His hands grip my hips as he grinds me onto him, sending jolts of pleasure through me. My lips continue their pursuit, kissing between his pecs and down his abs while sliding to my knees in front of him. I leave a trail of love bites from his neck to his waist. I've never knelt in front of a man before. I always thought it would feel like I was giving up power, but it's different with Cayden. He makes me feel empowered, even in this position. It's the way he looks at me like I truly am his salvation and ending wrapped up in one package.

"Do you like the sight of me on my knees, soldier?" I look up at him through my lashes.

"Elowen," his tone is rough and heavy. I lock my gaze on his glazed eyes as I trail my hands up his thighs and use one hand to palm his bulge. "*Fucking gods*," his eyes roll back in his head. I flatten my tongue against his torso, dragging it across his waist as I continue to palm him. He shudders when my tongue grazes the section of his waist where his bulge is. He's so hard that the tip of his cock is protruding above his pants. My thighs clench together at the sight of it. He's just as aroused as I am.

I want to taste him.

I angle my head so I'm able to lick his tip while I continue to palm him.

"Fuck, that's it, angel." His hands fly to my hair and keep me here. I rest my cheek against his stomach so I can glide my tongue around the smooth

tip. I don't move to take his pants off since we never agreed to public sex. I just want him to focus on the pleasure he's feeling. His groans of pleasure fill the air, which urges me to keep going.

He rips my head away from his bulge and wraps his hand around the back of my neck, smashing his lips onto mine. There's nothing slow about this kiss. This kiss is pure want and carnal need. His tongue darts into my mouth as our lips move eagerly against each other. He bites my bottom lip, and I moan into his mouth.

"Get up," his voice is rough, full of command, devoid of anything soft. He crashes his lips onto mine again and lifts me, wrapping my legs around his waist the second I get to my feet. He leads us out of the room, but I don't care where. I just need this contact.

A door slams behind me, and I'm shoved into it. A lock clicks in place. His kisses take on a new level of ferocity now that we're in our room, and his hips slam into mine. He bites the sweet spot on my neck again, and I can't stop myself from nearly screaming.

"Please let me touch you," he groans against my neck. "I need to touch you. Let me take care of you." One of his hands moves to the pulsing sensation between my legs, and he presses his thumb into the spot above my panties where I need him most. I can't speak through the relief it gives me to feel his finger there. "I need you to use your words, beautiful. Tell me if this is okay."

"Yes! Please...yes," I choke out.

"Thank the fucking gods," he mutters before carrying me to the couch in the room, placing me on top of him. He pushes my panties to the side and slides two long fingers into me.

I shove my head into the crook of his neck and let out a loud moan. My body trembles while he strokes his fingers in and out of me in a slow, torturous rhythm. "You're so wet," he practically moans. "Is this all for me?" I keep my head buried in his neck. Yes, this is all for him. There were at least forty people in that room, but not even one of them drew my attention. He drives his fingers deeper into me. "Answer me," he demands.

"Yes," I moan.

I don't know how he affects me so much.

I hate that he affects me this much.

I kiss my way up his neck and don't stop until my lips find his again. His kisses consume me, his fingers overrule me, and all I can feel is him.

We've done so much teasing tonight that I'm already close to my breaking point. My body feels like it's on fire, and he stokes the flames with every stroke of his fingers.

"Ride my fingers like you would ride my cock," he mumbles against my lips.

"Have you been fantasizing about me, soldier?" I quirk a brow and reach for his belt. "Perhaps it is I that will turn you into a screamer."

He lets out a dark chuckle and rips my hands away from his waist, halting his fingers inside of me. "Elowen, when I fuck you, it's not going to be in some seedy brothel. It's going to be somewhere that I can make you come so many times that your throat will be hoarse from screaming my name." His fingers resume their movements at a languid pace. "I'm going to fuck the idea of me only being your ally right out of your pretty little mind."

I grow wetter at his words, and I know he can feel it too. His breaths have turned shallow, and he looks like he regrets denying me and wants to pin me on the couch and take me right here.

He swallows and locks his jaw. "Ride my fingers," he grits out.

I do as he says and rock my hips onto his fingers. I roll them slowly, wanting to feel his fingers press against every nerve they can while also giving him his fantasy about how I would ride him. A shudder travels up my spine when his fingers press into the spot I want them. I place my hands on the back of his neck and bounce right there.

"You have no idea how much my tongue envies my fingers right now." I don't respond to his words because I can feel myself about to finish. He drills his fingers into me, no longer wanting me to ride him. I feel like I can't breathe. This pleasure is overwhelming. "You said tonight is fake, yes?"

"Yes," I whimper.

He presses his sweaty forehead into mine. His eyes are crazed and blaze with a fierce intensity. "You're not going to give me something fake because this is so fucking real right now. Moan my name because I'm making you feel like this."

I open my mouth to say his name, but I'm cut off by the sheer magnitude of what he's doing to me. Another whimper slips from my lips as a rolling sense of pleasure courses through me. He licks his lips, "One day, my tongue is going to replace my fingers, then my cock will replace

my tongue. You'd like that, wouldn't you, angel? You want me to fuck you until all you can think about is how good I make you feel."

"Cayden," I moan, digging my nails into the back of his neck, unable to answer his questions, and too sure of myself to deny the truth they hold.

"I'm right here, and you're almost there." He uses his other hand to rub my clit, and I bury my head in his neck again to muffle some of the sounds coming out of me. He yanks on my hair and forces me to look at him while my pleasure is driven to its peak. My eyes roll back in my head, and I scream his name as he drills his fingers into me, wringing every ounce of pleasure he can get from me. I collapse against him, a mess of whimpers and moans as I cling onto his sweaty skin for dear life.

He releases my hair and slides his hand down my spine in long, languid strokes. I gather myself enough to sit up and look at him. I thought I would feel embarrassed if something like this happened between us, but I feel the farthest thing from it. I feel like I want to stay here for a while longer. He presses a kiss to my temple and takes his fingers out of me. I thought he would wipe them on his pants, but he brings them to his mouth, and his eyes roll back in his head when he tastes me.

My gaze flashes toward his belt, "I want to do something that you'll enjoy too."

"Believe me, you just did," he says while continuing his comforting strokes. "Your pleasure is my pleasure."

"Are you sure?" I ask while picking at the sheer fabric of my skirt, feeling guilty for not giving him anything in return.

He takes my face in his hands. "I'm absolutely certain," he assures me, bringing my lips to his and repeatedly placing soft and sweet kisses. His thumbs glide across my cheeks, and I smile against his lips.

"I think we did a good job," I wink.

He laughs softly, dancing his fingers over my back again. "We did. One of the guys took someone down outside of the door."

"How do you know?" I shoot upright. All my relaxation has been replaced by high-alert nerves.

"I could see the light dancing under the door. It's why I didn't take you over to the bed." He was watching my back the whole time. I had completely forgotten to focus; I was too overwhelmed by him.

"Is that the only reason, soldier? Remember what I said about the importance of communication." I cross my arms over my chest.

“No, angel. That’s not the only reason I didn’t take you over to the bed.” His smile transforms into a smirk filled with pleasure and promise. “You and your communication,” he shakes his head, bringing his lips forward for another kiss. “I think you should take some of your own advice and find me before you run headfirst into a brothel.”

“But I didn’t jump over a balcony this time! See, I’m improving.”

He rolls his eyes while standing up and setting me on my shaky legs. He keeps his arms around me while I get my bearings and presses his lips to my forehead. “There are holding cells under every building along this street. Ryder would have taken whoever it is to the cellar for questioning. We’ll head down after we get dressed.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



Cayden opens the door, and I'm immediately blasted with an icy chill that leaks up from the dark cellar beneath the brothel. The rickety steps that stretch in front of us look like they're close to falling apart. I'd worry about stepping on a nail or splinter if I wasn't wearing thick boots.

A shadowed figure moves to the base of the steps. "He's restrained," Ryder's cool voice rises to meet my ears.

My feet quickly carry me to the bottom, and I give my eyes a moment to adjust. Several torches line the walls, illuminating the damp room. Finnian leans against one of the walls, arms crossed and body tense. There's nothing in here other than a dusty table, a few brooms in the corner, a slop sink with a broken mirror above it, and a man standing in the center of the room with his head bowed. Dark hair slips from the leather band that holds it back. His arms are spread wide above his head and chained to two separate ceiling beams.

"Have you questioned him yet?" Cayden inquires.

"It was Elowen's plan. We wanted it to be her call on how to proceed," Ryder answers, looking to me on what to do next. The chained man chuckles when Ryder says my name. I lock my jaw but don't look over yet.

"His room will have to be searched. We should also question the partners he was with if you can get the owner and her workers to agree. Lips always get loose during pillow talk," I list off instructions.

"I'll start with the room," Finnian volunteers, springing off the wall. I figured he would want to; he doesn't usually stay for this part.

“Knock on the door when you’re done searching. I’ll help with the questioning since I know what Saskia would want to ask,” Ryder tells Finnian.

Finnian pauses on the bottom step, looking back at me to confirm that I’ll be alright without him here. I nod and watch him climb the steps and shut the door. Finnian has never judged me for the ways I revel in revenge, but that doesn’t mean he has to watch. Something in my brain snapped, along with something in my chest hardening, years before the world should have revealed its cruel ways. There are moments when I can suppress the rage inside of me, but this isn’t one of them.

“I hope the information you’re going to give me is worth the trouble it took to find you,” I calmly state, turning toward the man. Chains rattle as he shifts in place, slowly lifting his head. My stomach drops to my toes when his eyes meet mine. It’s the same pair of soulless eyes I was forced to stare into as a child.

“Hello again, *princess*.”

Robick—my father’s head guard.

He’s the guard that beat me the most and took the most pleasure in it. His voice makes my stomach churn and palms moisten. My body pulses as fiery rage courses through me. Cayden and Ryder stiffen on either side of me and exchange a glance above my head, obviously picking up on the fact I know this man.

The sight of him makes my skin crawl. I remember his hands on me, and have the overwhelming urge to throw my body in a bucket of acid to rid my skin of memory. My lip curls in disgust while I take in his features. He has aged, but might appear handsome to someone other than me with his sapphire eyes and a strong jaw. But that’s the thing about abusers; they hide in plain sight. You can’t always detect them as someone can detect poison in a drink. Rage and anger are the two emotions I’ve felt most in my life. They’re two of the first emotions I remember experiencing, and when you experience something for this long, you learn to weaponize it. The world is a cruel place, and anything you don’t learn to control can be used against you.

I pluck two knives from my thigh holsters and twirl them in my hands while taking a few steps toward him. “I must confess that I much prefer you to be the one in chains,” I remark. Cayden and Ryder unsheathe their swords behind me.

“I suggest you start talking,” Ryder stiffly states.

Robick laughs and drags his eyes away from me to face Ryder. “I won’t tell you anything. I know I’m going to die.”

“I will make you beg to die,” Cayden declares in a tone that makes it sound like he’s seconds away from pouncing.

“Commander Veles,” Robick drawls lazily. “I could tell by the scar.”

My fist collides with his nose before he can say anything else. The chains rattle as his head flies back from the force of my hit. It’s a hit that I’ve imagined landing for years, and this is just the start of it.

I turn away from Robick and sheath my knives on my thighs. I’ll use those later. I don’t care if Cayden and Ryder are here to witness this; I’m not giving this moment up. This is a moment I’ve wanted since I learned the definition of revenge. My hands wrap around a wooden broom in the corner, and my brain conjures the sound of a cane slapping against my back, as clear as if Robick is hitting me right now. I use my heavy boot to break off the bristles at the end of the wooden pole and turn back to him.

“I see someone has hard feelings,” Robick says while I walk over to him. “Do you remember how you used to beg me to stop?”

My hands grip the pole, aiming the side with sharp wooden splinters toward him, and deliver a swift hit to his ribs. He cries out in pain; it’s one of the sweetest sounds I’ve had the privilege of hearing. I pull the pole back and deliver another hit. The crunch of his ribs is another sound that will be etched in my brain forever.

“I will not tell you anything,” he rasps.

“I haven’t begun questioning you.” I deliver another hit, noting the blood-stained splinters with delight. “This is just for my enjoyment.”

I swing it into his stomach before dropping the pole to the floor and circle to the front of his slumped frame. My fingers roughly lift his chin, blood drips from the corner of his lip, and I stare into the face of the man I had feared for so long. The presence I dreaded above all others. The others certainly didn’t mind taking part in the beatings, but their priority was to obey their king. Robick beat me because he enjoyed it. He would laugh at the sound of my ribs breaking. His eyes would light up when he first drew blood at the beginning of a session.

I roughly drop his chin and watch him slump against the chains. My eyes glance toward the ceiling and spy the two loops the chains are threaded

through. My gaze follows the thick chains to where they're locked on the floor.

"Ryder, lower the chains. Cayden, bring the table over," I command. Two sets of footsteps echo on either side of me, both responding immediately. My ears zone in on the sound of Robick's heavy breaths.

He's nervous.

Good.

Now, it's my turn to enjoy it.

"Which is his sword hand?" Cayden asks in a menacing tone, already catching onto what I want to do. Robick's throat bobs, another sign of his nerves.

"His right hand."

Cayden places the table on Robick's right side and resumes his original position behind me, alongside Ryder. I pivot on my heels to face them, and both sets of eyes flash to me. Ryder's body is rigid; his hand tightly grips the hilt of his blade. My gaze drifts to Cayden, and the stare he's giving me resembles death incarnate. It's the face his enemies would fear seeing and have nightmares of in their next life. No form of salvation or reincarnation would be enough to escape the wrath of Cayden Veles.

"You both have my permission to leave if you wish."

"I'm not leaving," Cayden snarls.

"I'm staying," Ryder matches Cayden's anger.

I glance between the two of them, making sure they're set in their decision, but don't pick up on a shred of doubt between either of them. Turning away, I unsheathe a knife. Its weight in my hand brings me a comfort that I've never received from anything else.

When training became too hard,

When I didn't want to run an extra mile,

When my arms burned from target practice,

When my nightmares made my throat raw from screaming,

I thought of a moment like this.

Standing before my past as the woman who rose from it. I gathered all the broken shards of myself and forged a sword sharp enough to slay any enemy.

My hand closes around Robick's wrist, pressing his hand into the table. It creaks under pressure. "How many dragons do I have?" I ask. Robick stays quiet, as I suspected he would. "Don't want to talk?" I lightly glide

my knife down his cheek, and he whimpers. “We can count together. The answer is right here,” I drag my blade across the top of his hand. His body shakes as he fights to keep any noises of pain and fear trapped behind his tight lips.

“Queen Elowen asked you a question,” Ryder growls.

Robick barks out a laugh that sounds closer to a sob, “She’s not a queen.”

“She’s more of a ruler than your king will ever be,” Cayden states through clenched teeth.

Robick glares at Cayden with a burning hatred. He opens his mouth to bite back a response, but I press my knife into his thumb and slice it off. Whatever words he was about to bite back are cut off by a guttural scream. I toss his thumb to the floor like one would discard a piece of lint they found on a sweater. Blood trickles out of the gash and coats the wooden table.

“I have five dragons,” I say above his screams. “One.”

I cut off his second finger and revel in his cries that echo in the space around me. “Two.”

I move onto his third finger. “Three.”

The pattern follows until all five fingers are scattered in the pool of blood that’s formed on the floor. My boot connects with the table, kicking it to the side once I’m finished with his hand. I reach out my blood-stained fingers to grasp his chin, smearing his own blood onto his lips. He tries to recoil, but I hold firm.

“Are you working with anyone here?” I demand. Robick sucks in short breaths and tears streak down his face, but he doesn’t answer. I reach over to his hand and press onto the fresh gashes that ooze blood like a waterfall.

“No!” he declares through a deafening scream. “I’m the last one.”

I search his eyes for any sign of a lie but detect nothing other than hatred and pain. He hates that he cracked, and he hates me even more. I suspected we had taken care of the rest of the assassins considering an attempt hasn’t happened in a while. His blood streaks down my face and trickles down my leathers, but I don’t feel the urge to wipe it away.

“How do I unlock the chains on my dragons?”

He doesn’t wait for me to apply pressure on his hand before answering, “You can’t open them with a key.” His lips turn upward. “You need an object that you’ll never find.” He makes the mistake of glancing toward my neck. I know an object related to the dragons that goes around there.

“The amulet,” I state. Disbelief blankets his face before he tries, and fails, to mask it. The priestess said it was essential, in more ways than one apparently. “Pain makes you stupid.”

“Age has made you stupid,” he spits.

“Indulge me in your reasons, oh wise-one.” I brush a hand through the air, encouraging him to proceed.

“Only a fool would go against your father. You’ll die in this war.”

“A death with a blade in my hand is far more enticing than a death in chains.” My eyes flick down to the shackles on his wrists, and my lips rise in a bloody smirk.

“You were born into chains for a reason, and you’ll return to chains when you fail. He tried to save you from making the stupid decision of going against him,” Robick snarls.

“Saving me?” I raise my brows. “So that’s what he was doing; forgive me for not recognizing his generosity sooner. Is that what he was doing when he forbade you from taking the torture down a different route that you wanted? I thought that was because his outdated brain still believed in the concept of preserving my virtue.”

The only thing that stood between me and being sexually abused was my father’s belief in the old ways. He believed that even though I was his prisoner, I was still his princess. If they managed to break the dragon link without killing me, I needed to be a virgin for my husband. It wasn’t because he had some semblance of a heart when it came to the torture of his child. I was seven when Robick asked this of my father.

Cayden’s sword clatters on the ground, and his footsteps rush forward. He slips between Robick and me and lands a punch so severe that the chains strain against the bolts that fasten them to the ceiling. “You sick bastard!” he shouts, wrapping a hand around Robick’s throat and continuing his fierce punches. Robick thrashes against Cayden’s hold but can’t escape his iron grip. Just when I think Cayden is about to snap Robick’s neck, Ryder is there, pulling him back.

“Not yet,” he hisses at Cayden, trying and failing to restrain him. He manages to get Cayden’s hands off Robick, but Cayden is about to lunge for him again.

“Not yet,” I echo Ryder’s words, and Cayden looks over at me. His eyes blaze with a rage I have never seen in them. Those eyes would make someone end themselves before he ever got hold of them. He hesitates but

nods. Ryder releases him from his hold when he knows Cayden won't pounce again.

"I may have been born in chains, but make no mistake when I tell you that you will die in them," I state, turning back to Robick. He's gasping for air like a fish out of water. "I want to thank you for a lesson you taught me."

As I got older and realized what it was like to feel hatred in the place of desperation, I stopped begging for myself. Whenever he beat me, I only ever begged him to stop when he brought my dragons into it. I never begged for myself. I begged for them. He told me he would torture them just as he tortured me. My child-brain didn't register the fact that it would have been impossible for him to hurt them as he hurt me. The dragons would have killed him. The only thing I could think of was how badly I failed to protect them and that I'd do anything, even beg, to save them. I was beaten to the point I couldn't form sentences. But even when I couldn't form sentences, I could still feel my dragons.

"You taught me that desperation to save someone is the greatest leverage." I walk around his body and direct my next statement to Cayden and Ryder, "Did you know the king's guards all have a series of numbers sewn into the inner collars of their shirts?" A confused expression crosses Ryder's face, and he looks to Cayden, but Cayden doesn't tear his rage-filled eyes away from Robick. It looks like he's not even registering what I'm saying. He's a predator waiting to jump on his prey.

Robick strains against his chains, splashing more blood onto my face in the process, but he can't escape the bloody knife I bring to the collar of his shirt. I drag the tip of my knife along his skin as I cut the piece of fabric that has the numbers on it, flipping it over in my hand. I'm careful to keep the fabric as blood free as possible and hold the silver thread up to the light. It's used in case one of them dies on the road or on a mission, their body can be identified by anyone in the Imirath army, and their family will be contacted.

"Leave my family out of this," he chokes out.

"You didn't leave my dragons out of it," I argue, walking between Cayden and Ryder again.

"I can tell you things about the dragons, please!" I smirk at his words.

He's desperate.

He's begging.

"We actually know quite a bit. So if you're intending on leaving your family out of this, then you better give us something good." We don't know

as much as we can, but he'll offer me more if he's trying to find some new kind of information to tell me.

"Do you know what room they're kept in?" he asks.

"You will speak to me in statements, not questions," I declare.

"They're kept in the East Tower," he says in a quivering tone. He's giving basic information; I need something better.

"Perhaps your family would like to know how you stripped an eight-year-old bare before you hit her with a cane." I wave the piece of his shirt in the air to express my growing impatience. Ryder sucks in a breath and Cayden takes a step forward before catching himself and staying by my side. Shame bubbles in my throat when I say it out loud, but I need information more than I need pride. "Perhaps I'd like to lock them up."

"There are runes on the door!" he shouts.

"Tell us something we don't know, or I'll be happy to cut this meeting short," Ryder growls.

"The runes can be deactivated by the key to the door; the alarms won't sound if you have the key!"

"Tell us who has the key," I demand.

"It's with the Head Guard of Imirath. They change the guard weekly so the key is never with one person for very long. There's a red ruby on it to differentiate it from the others." His voice calms slightly after he realizes he told me something I don't know. He has expended his use to me.

"I appreciate the information. I'll tell your family you were a complicit traitor." I tuck the piece of fabric into the back pocket of my pants.

His eyes fill with a mixture of anger and desperation, "You agreed you wouldn't touch them!"

"I never agreed to anything. The information you gave me spilled from your lips freely," I note with a shrug of my shoulders.

"You're a bitch!" he spits, rattling against the chains to no avail.

"Oh, that's disappointing. You don't have anything a bit more creative?" I goad him.

I won't punish anyone for their father's sins, I understand that better than anyone. But he can die with fear in his heart, believing he failed them. My strife with him dies with him. It doesn't continue onto innocent parties. He continues to pull on the chains in hopes of slipping away, even though he would have to get through three of us, weaponless and wounded, before

he could get to the door. I watch him cry out in frustration and flail his body against the chains.

I've seen him grovel, I've made him bleed, but now I want to *watch* him bleed. I recall the sheer force Cayden conveyed in a single hit, how his rage only amplifies his strength. Physical strength isn't my greatest asset. I can fight, but my fighting skills are rooted in analyzing a situation and outwitting my opponent. My strengths reside in the realms of aim, stealth, and scheming. I don't have the strongest build; I don't land the hardest punches, but Cayden does. Cayden can make him suffer in ways that I can't, and I can witness it. I sheath my bloody knife and feel Cayden's eyes track my movement.

"Your turn, soldier."

Cayden doesn't wait a moment longer at my side. He erupts in a wave of violence and ferocity. Feral growls slip from his lips as blood splatters onto his face and coats his hands. The same hands that have gently rubbed against my skin also have the power of destruction and ruination. He lands punch after punch, holding tight to Robick's shirt to bring him back into his line of fire. He shoves him back against the chains and shoots his foot up to kick Robick in the crotch.

"I'm going to make you wish you were dead long before Elowen ends you," Cayden snarls. Robick slumps in his chains, no longer able to stand on his own. Cayden walks around him and releases the chains from the iron hooks on the floor. Robick lands in the puddle of his blood. It splatters onto the walls and Cayden's boots, upon which he pulls back and delivers a swift kick to Robick's ribs.

Robick rolls over, and Cayden gives him time to struggle to his feet. Ryder takes a step closer to me now that the chains are unhooked. He's still shackled around his wrists, but Cayden is giving him the illusion of hope before he pulls it away. Robick clumsily pivots on his feet and attempts to rush toward me. I don't flinch, he won't reach me, and I'll never give him the satisfaction of flinching in his presence again. He doesn't even make it a step before Cayden locks an arm around his neck, bicep bulging as the hold tightens.

"Did you think I would let you get close to her?" Cayden hisses. Robick tries to claw against the hold, smearing blood onto Cayden's arms. "You can die knowing that no matter what you did to Elowen, she won. You are nothing," Cayden's voice drips in poison. Robick elbows Cayden in the

ribs, but he doesn't even flinch. He releases his hold and throws Robick onto the hard floor, face down in the puddle of blood again. Robick gasps and flips over to prop himself on his elbows.

"You'll get what's coming to you." Robick glares in my direction.

"As will you," I smirk.

"Don't fucking look at her," Cayden snarls, dropping to his knees and pinning Robick between them. Cayden unsheathes my knife from his thigh, roughly fists Robick's hair, and slowly drags the blade over both of Robick's eyes. He lets out an ear-piercing scream as his body contorts in pain beneath Cayden. Cayden doesn't move from his spot; he just continues to stare down at the freshly blinded Robick.

"This is for insulting her tonight and for anything you said to her in the past." Cayden reaches down and forces Robick's mouth open. Liquid seeps between Robick's legs; he's wetting himself. "Pathetic," Cayden spits, forcing the knife into Robick's mouth and cutting out his tongue. He screeches as blood pours out of him like a fountain.

Cayden uses Robick's hair to keep his head straight. The blood has nowhere else to go other than remain in his mouth or flow up his nostrils. He's drowning Robick in his own blood. Cayden pins him there until Robick no longer fights his hold and yanks him forward at the last possible second. Robick spits and coughs out his blood, spraying Cayden in the process. Blood drips from Cayden's face and coats his hair. If wrath was personified, it would look like this version of Cayden.

He drags Robick's body back to where he was originally standing and lets his body crumple on the floor. He pulls on the chains and raises Robick into a kneeling position.

Robick kneels on the floor, bloody and broken, on the brink of death. Blood sloshes under my boots as I walk forward and drop to one knee in front of his cowering frame. I take a moment to look at his face. Even if he can't see me analyzing him, he can feel it. I'm committing this version of him to memory. This is the new face I'll see. This is the face that will replace the original face in some of my darkest memories and nightmares.

When I think of him rubbing his hands against my underdeveloped breasts, thighs, and back, threatening to betray Garrick's orders, I'll think of the hand I cut every finger from. When I think of the face that used to stare down at me, smiling, before I passed out from blood loss or force, I'll remember the eyes that now leak blood. When I think of the words he used

to say to me, how I would be nothing, how I would die in a cell, how I would never know freedom, happiness, or love, I'll remember that Cayden cut out his tongue, and he can't say those words anymore.

"I would have loved to drag your death out for days, but I'll be a bit busy the next few weeks," I begin in a low, menacing tone, "because, you see...I'm going to bring Garrick to his knees, and you can leave this world knowing that you failed him *because I win*."

He moans in pain before I slice my blade clean across his neck. His blood sprays out and shoots me in the face, but I don't move to wipe it clean or drop my blade. I just stay kneeling, staring at his crumpled frame. He used to be the most daunting and terrifying figure in my life, and now he's weak, powerless, and dead.

He's dead.

He's dead.

He's dead.

I say it over and over in my head like a chant. But what if he's not? What if he somehow manages to wake up? I can't be a prisoner. I won't be a prisoner again. I raise my knife in the air and sink it deep into his chest. Blood trickles out of the wound when I pull my knife free and raise it for a second time, ready to strike again.

A blood-covered hand reaches out to clasp my wrist before I stab him again. Another hand gently brushes against my cheek and turns my head away from Robick. I stare into the eyes of the one person who I think understands me in this moment—Cayden.

Maybe that's what sparked the kiss and the change between us. There's nothing sexual or wanting in the look we share. It's just a deep understanding. It's an understanding that we can show each other the ugliest and most evil parts of ourselves, and we won't judge each other. We just witnessed each other do something vile and gruesome, but he's still here, touching my face, and I'm not recoiling from his touch. I think being understood and accepted is one of the greatest forms of intimacy there is.

"He's dead," Cayden says, mirroring my own thoughts. I can't manage to form words, so I just hold onto Cayden's reassuring expression. "You can sink into a frenzy to prove it to yourself, and I'll dig you out of whatever blood-filled hole you dig yourself into. I'm here for whatever you need." His thumb brushes against my cheek. The gentle gesture smears the blood that coats us both. "He's dead, Elowen."

It's the hand that held me in a passionate embrace.

It's the hand that spilled the blood of my enemy, with my knives that he wears.

It's the hand that keeps me from disappearing into my mind right now.

"He's dead," I echo his words and let the knife drop out of my hand. It clatters to the ground, splattering blood onto our knees.

"Your brain caught him, and your hand killed him," he speaks to me softly, but there is nothing weak in his tone.

I stare into his blood-splattered face as we kneel in the puddle of my abuser's blood. We did this. We killed him. He's a threat I'll never have to worry about looming over my shoulder again. When I'm walking in a market, I'll never have to worry that I saw him in the crowd and sink into a dark corner to have a panic attack. He may have started this war between us, but I ended it. He can't hurt me ever again.

Cayden reaches down to pick my knife up from the floor and holds it out to me, hilt first. He's giving me the choice of how I end this night. He won't judge me. I reach my hand toward the hilt without breaking eye contact and sheath it on my thigh. Robick doesn't get any more breakdowns from me.

"I want to leave," I say firmly. Cayden nods his head and helps me to my feet. "I'm sorry you had to see this," I look toward Ryder. Cayden stiffens but doesn't cut into our conversation.

"Never apologize for a kill you deserved to take." Ryder shakes his head, a dark grimace contorting his face. "I would have done the same thing." His deep brown eyes meet mine in earnest, and I know he's not lying to me. I nod my head as my throat tightens. Cayden's hand threads through my hair and he presses his lips into the side of my head.

"The two of you can wash your hands and faces there. I'm going to find Finnian so we can leave here as soon as possible." Ryder points to the rusty sink, taking one last look at me before turning away and heading up the stairs.

Cayden presses a hand into the small of my back and ushers me over to the sink. Blood coats the squeaky dial after he turns it, and cool water rushes through the spout. He gently tries to pry my bloody hands off the edge of the sink that I hold in an iron grip as I stare at my face in the broken mirror. His hands wrap around mine, and his thumbs rub circles on my palms. The blood that coats both of us mingles together, but I keep our

joined hands away from the water. I see him turn his head toward me in the mirror, waiting for my next move or to tell him where my head is at. My eyes dance between us, both covered in the blood of my enemy. Proof of the cruelty we are capable of is written in crimson against our skin. Even after it's washed off, it will forever linger.

We look like the Lady and Lord of Revenge, Retribution, and Vengeance.

I take one hand away from our sticky embrace and turn the faucet off. Turning my body to face Cayden, but my eyes brush past him to where Robick kneels, crumpled in my own red river of revenge.

He's dead, I echo in my mind once again, this time letting it truly sink in.

Cayden reaches out his hand and gently turns my face toward him. "Talk to me, angel," he quietly urges. His thumb continues to smear blood across the back of our joined hands.

"I want to ride to the border like this." I peer into his eyes, awaiting some level of repulsion or rejection, but he relays none. He just quietly waits for me to continue as he lightly caresses my blood-caked face, giving me enough touch to keep me present in this moment. His eyes give me a silent promise that he's not going to let me sink into my mind without my consent. I wonder how many times he's disappeared into a frenzy with nobody to pull him out.

"Word of you and I riding through Vareveth covered in blood will travel fast, and we can make a statement." I swallow my nerves. "I want my enemies to know what fate awaits them if they make an attempt on my life. I want those who have won against me in the past to know that I don't plan on losing again."

Pride shines in Cayden's eyes, and my chest feels full again. The look he's giving me gives me hope. It makes me feel like I don't have to face every threat alone because he'll be right here—unjudging, understanding, and just as bloody as me.

"Your enemies are my enemies," he restates his original vow to me. Something flutters in my chest again.

"And yours are mine." I will get just as bloody for him as he has for me. He drops his hand from my cheek and squeezes the hand he holds.

"Nobody wins harder than someone who once lost everything," he says. I have the privilege of witnessing a rare glimpse into his vulnerable side

that he normally keeps under lock and key. I can tell from his tight lips that he doesn't wish to indulge me further. I've exposed part of myself tonight, but I won't press him for more, no matter how much I want to. Vulnerability is something that should come naturally to a person, but when you've lived your entire life filled with agony and pain, it's hard to associate vulnerability with something other than weakness. I'll take his few words and appreciate them as if he wrote me a novel. "Let's get to the border and begin the heist, Queen Elowen."

PART THREE

THE HEIST



CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



“You won’t be able to bring a tent,” Saskia mutters, chewing on her bottom lip and staring down at several maps laid out in front of us. She’s been working on plotting a safe route to the castle for Cayden and me based on the intelligence she has gathered through her spies. Her spies know nothing of the mission, but she saved every report they have ever given her since she became the head of intelligence. “What route did you take when you left Imirath?”

My mind conjures the icy and treacherous path we took, “We went through the mountains.”

“The mountains?” Saskia’s eyes widen in shock. “Hardly anyone survives a trek through the Etril.”

“It’s the shortest route we could take.” I shrug a shoulder. “The risk was worth it.”

The Seren Mountains stretch all the way down the continent, but the Etril Forest resides between Imirath and Vareveth. It’s another section of unclaimed god land. Not only are the mountains freezing, but beasts also lurk within their icy peaks. It’s a risk for anyone to seek shelter there, let alone a defenseless child that was never allowed outside before that night. My guards opened their arms to me to offer me a shred of warmth, but I told them I would rather freeze than be close to an Imirath soldier. The whole thing felt like a sick joke, just another way to torture my mind. I left Imirath in the warmer months of the year. I can’t imagine the temperatures of the mountains now.

“There are caves somewhere near the border,” I offer. “It’s where Ailliard wanted to take me, but Garrick would have sent soldiers to scour

them. It was too obvious of a hiding place.”

Saskia snaps her fingers in recognition, “Yes! I forgot about the caves.” She glances toward the coordinates on the side of the map and drags her slender fingers toward a point close to the border but far enough for Cayden and me to be able to rest. “The most difficult part of this is going to be getting behind the lines.”

I laugh under my breath and pinch my tired eyes. “Yes, infiltrating the castle will be nothing.”

I had close to no sleep last night, but I still got more than nothing, which is more than I expected. I rode here on the same horse as Cayden. Neither of us said anything while he lifted me and swung himself up behind me. He just pressed my back into his chest and kept me secure between his arms. Citizens of Verendus looked at us in a mixture of horror, confusion, and shock. But I noticed a definitive shift in reactions when we rode through headquarters and to the border. His soldiers looked at him with pride; some even cheered as we rode past. He’s a leader they’re happy to follow, and I don’t think Cayden even realizes it.

After we got back here, he said he had some things to take care of before his soldiers charge the border today, so I bathed first. Eagor’s mother wasn’t against using magic to make lives easier, so the tent has a bathroom, as do many of the other tents. Eagor doesn’t spend time at the border, but I’m sure magic has aided his life in other ways. Ryder gathered the intelligence of their soldier rotations, and we need to find a weak spot in their defenses for Cayden and me to enter Imirath.

“If anyone can do it, it’s the two of you,” she says, flashing her eyes up to mine.

“Why do you say that?”

“I don’t think anyone hates Garrick more.” Her eyes darken, and a frown pulls at her lips before she clears her throat and wipes away her brief show of displeasure. She forces a smile in its place. “Plus, you have my brain on your side.”

Nobody wins harder than someone who once lost everything, my brain replays Cayden’s words for the millionth time. While it’s definitely a comfort to have someone as intelligent as Saskia working with me, my mind snags on her first statement.

“Why does Cayden hate Garrick so much?” I whisper. I can’t bear to say the words louder. It’s a question I should ask Cayden directly, but can’t

stop the persistence of my curiosity.

Saskia's shoulders stiffen, and she halts the fingers she was gliding over the map. "It's not my story to tell."

"You're right. I'm sorry I asked." Guilt ripples through me and weighs heavily on my chest. I don't want to put her in an uncomfortable position.

"If I were you, I'd be asking the same question, and I honestly give you credit for not coming to me sooner. I don't even know the whole story, and neither does Ryder." She shakes her head, her long midnight braids slipping in front of her shoulders. "He's the most guarded person I know."

"Did Ryder or Cayden fill you in on everything we found out last night?" I ask, desperate to change the subject. She opens her mouth to answer my question but cuts herself off when the tent flaps swing open, and three tall figures stroll in.

My eyes zone in on Cayden. I rake my gaze over his body, clad in his black and silver armor and several weapons. He looks every inch the feared commander the continent knows him to be. His knuckles are still red and raw from last night. I offered to bandage them, but he said he wanted to remember every blow he made. When my eyes make their way to his face again, he's staring at me with such intensity that my knees feel weak.

Ripping my eyes away, I steady myself before my mind starts replaying the memory of last night. Inhaling calming breaths and smiling at Finnian. His curls bounce against his forehead as he walks further into the tent and tosses the leather satchel that was slung over his shoulder on a chair in Cayden's seating area.

"Did we miss anything good?" Ryder asks, walking to the other side of the desk to stand next to his sister.

"Elowen was just about to go over the details from last night." My body stiffens at her choice of words; she doesn't realize how suggestive they sound. I look anywhere other than Cayden, who now stands at the edge of the desk. My cheeks heat under his gaze and only worsen when Ryder's mouth turns upward briefly before he covers it up. "Where were you?" Saskia inquires, looking over at me with a confused expression.

I lick my dry lips, "The brothel. Anyway—"

"The brothel?" Saskia cuts me off, not letting me skid past. My cool hand caresses my burning neck, and I let out an awkward laugh. I would love to bring both of my arms forward and bury my face in them.

“Elowen thought of a plan to catch the final assassin. Ryder, Finnian, and I showed up to help her follow it through,” Cayden informs her in an easy tone. At least he doesn’t look like a tomato.

“You could’ve sent word. I would’ve helped,” Saskia mutters. She came here before us last night, which is why she couldn’t come to the brothel. I guess neither Cayden nor Ryder caught her up on anything this morning. They were probably busy with army preparations.

“Honestly, Sas, I think Cayden and Elowen pulled it off perfectly. I’ve never seen Cayden quite so....” Ryder waves his hands in front of his face as if he could pluck the perfect word from thin air. “Dedicated to his mission.”

“Yes, I take some missions very seriously.” Cayden shoots daggers at Ryder with his eyes, imploring him to stop talking.

“You can be weird later.” Saskia raises her finger and pokes Ryder in the chest to amplify her point. She turns her gaze back to me, “What did you find out?” Bless her thirst for knowledge.

“The Head Guard of Imirath carries a key to the dragon chamber. If we can get the key, then it will overpower the runes. It has a red ruby on it to differentiate it from the others. He also confirmed the dragon chamber is in the East Tower of the castle.” Saskia’s smile grows the more I speak. I think knowledge and intelligence sustain her more than food and water.

“Brilliant!” she exclaims, drumming her fingers on the table. “The guard is easy to spot; they wear a black band on their right arm to differentiate them from the rest.” I feel my shoulders loosen slightly. I’m relieved she knows how to differentiate the head guard because I was never exposed to the hierarchy of the court. “Did you get the name of the assassin?”

This is the part I was dreading telling Finnian the most. He didn’t push me to talk last night after we got back; I was too drained. Robick kept all information about himself close, never letting any of his partners question his identity. I can deal with teasing when it comes to the beginning part of last night, but this is something that latches onto all the years I woke up screaming from nightmares.

“Robick, one of Garrick’s guards,” I state. Finnian’s hands shoot forward to grip the edge of the desk. I sneak a glance over at him; his skin has turned a sickly shade of green. Ryder and Saskia’s eyes shoot toward

him, but I can feel Cayden's eyes on me like a second skin. It feels like he's tracking every emotion that flows through me.

"I would've stayed in the basement if I knew it was one of *those* guards. Tell me you made him suffer," Finnian grounds out. His eyes dart toward me, waiting anxiously for my response.

"Yes," I answer firmly. I recall the sight and scent of Robick's blood as it pooled on the floor, my skin, on the hand that Cayden stroked my face with, and how it danced along Cayden's soft lips. I recall how Robick slumped on the floor after I slit his throat. The sounds he made as Cayden slit his eyes, rendering him blind.

"Whatever you did, he still deserved worse," Finnian adds darkly.

"I agree," Cayden states, and Ryder solemnly nods his head, all traces of mischief gone.

My chest tightens at their show of support. For the longest time, Ailliard would shoot me down whenever I brought up revenge. He would tell me it's a miserable way to waste my life or that I'll never step foot in Imirath again, so there was no point in dreaming. He told me that revenge fills no one, and he was correct. I haven't had my fill of revenge yet. I've only received my first taste of it, and I want more.

"Do you have an archers line prepared for the charge?" Finnian asks Cayden. He nods in response. "I'll shoot with them with your permission."

"Permission granted," Cayden says. The archer's line is behind the charge, so my chest doesn't fill with the worry it would if he asked to be in the charge itself. Finnian has always favored his arrows in the same way I prefer my daggers.

"You're sure?" I ask. Neither of us has seen a battle, and I want to make sure he's ready for this.

"Killing more of them gives you a better chance when you cross the border." He pulls his hands from the table and raises himself to his full height. He turns to face me, his eyes pleading, "Let me help you in any way I can." I know I have no right to persuade him away from the charge other than selfish reasons. He reaches out to affectionately squeeze my arm, "Are you okay?" His eyes have gone a shade softer to match his softer tone.

"I'm okay," I answer honestly. I'm a little unsettled after seeing Robick's face again, but I'm okay. "Shoot straight, bloodthirsty archer," I let amusement trickle into my tone and lightly shove his chest.

“I’ll find you as soon as it’s over.” He leans down to kiss the top of my head before heading out of the tent.

“Some of our archers are stationed where I’ll be. I observe Imirath’s numbers and any changes they make in weapons, rank, charge patterns, the whole lot,” Saskia directs her words to me. “I’ll ride down to the first line with Finnian now.” She shoves a few pens and a small notebook into the back pocket of her pants. “Both of you, be careful,” she looks between Cayden and Ryder.

“We always are,” Cayden says with a slight tilt to his lips.

“That’s not comforting,” she groans, leaving through the same exit Finnian had moments ago.

“The lack of faith is refreshing,” Ryder huffs a laugh. “You ready?”

“Yes,” Cayden confirms, turning toward the front of the tent. He never told me about his role in all of this, and I think he’s avoiding it. Before he can take two steps away from the desk, I hurry toward him and seize his hand in mine. He halts his steps and angles his body to face me. He doesn’t hold my hand back, but I don’t let him go.

“Why did Saskia tell you to be safe?” I ask, though it comes out as a command.

“Because she doesn’t want me to get hurt,” he sarcastically replies.

“Cayden,” I warn, not in the mood for his jokes. He deeply sighs and grinds his jaw.

“Wait outside,” he tells Ryder without removing his gaze from mine. Neither of us speak before Ryder leaves the tent. “I’m leading one of the charges.” His monotone voice does nothing to ease my spike of emotions.

“You can’t!” I nearly shout. “We leave tomorrow. We’re so close, and you’re just going to lead a charge?”

“I have to find a way for us to get through their line.” He licks his lips and runs his free hand through his hair. “The border is long; I’ll be riding to a part where the fighting isn’t as thick, and Ryder will be riding in the other direction. But we can’t get to the dragons if we can’t get through their line.” Cayden squeezes my hand lightly and rubs his thumb over my knuckles.

“Then I’m coming with you.” I try to pull my hand from his while I step toward the exit, but he keeps our hands joined and yanks me backward, pressing my back into his chest. He wraps one of his strong arms around me; his scent overwhelms me, as do the memories of last night.

“No, angel. You know you can’t.”

“If you wanted a docile queen, then you should have made a deal with someone else,” I argue. His proximity is taking the bite out of my tone.

His chuckle vibrates against my back. “Why would I waste my time on someone lesser than you?”

His praise makes a fluttery feeling rise in my chest. I crane my neck to glance up at him. “They wouldn’t be giving you a headache right now.”

“I’ll take a tonic then.” His statement is humorous, but his near whispering tone feels more like a caress than a joke. “I won’t be able to focus if I don’t know for certain that you’re safe.” His admission causes the fluttering sensation in my chest to heighten. I shove his arm away from my waist and spin to face him. It’s easier to do this when he’s not pressed up against me.

“That sounds like a problem for you, not me.” Although my words hold harshness, my resolve is weakening. I know I can’t go near the Imirath line, and I have no urge to be captured.

“Yes, it is my problem.” He leans forward, and my body urges me to arch into him, keep him distracted, keep him here. “Stay here.” He scans my face once more like he’s committing it to memory before brushing past me and slipping out of the tent.

“Is she alright?” Ryder asks.

“She’s fine,” Cayden answers.

My feet move after five seconds at most, and I hurry after him. I push the flaps open just as he’s about to climb onto his horse. His boot lowers from the stirrup when he looks in my direction. He stalks over to me like he commands the earth itself. When he’s close enough, his hands don’t hesitate to reach out to me like they normally do. Instead, he places them on the sides of my face and threads his fingers through my hair. “Elowen, I will never make you a promise that I can’t keep. I promise I’m coming back.” He gazes at me with absolute certainty. He shouldn’t be able to make promises like that in these circumstances, but I find myself believing him the more I look into his eyes. “I need you to extend me the same trust and promise me that you’ll stay out of the charge.” I try to drop my eyes, but he forces my gaze to him. I don’t want him in the battle, and I realize those reasons go beyond the heist.

“I promise,” I mutter, hating the way it tastes. Everything in me rebels at staying here, away from the four people I want to protect from the kingdom that tortured me. His harsh eyes soften at my words, and he lets

out a sigh of relief. He strokes his thumbs against my cheekbones and opens his mouth to say something, but is cut off by a deep battle horn cutting through the air.

It's starting.

His eyes dance over my face again as he slowly detangles his fingers from my hair. Our gazes stay locked on each other as he walks backward, and only part when he must turn away to get on his horse. He swings himself up but cranes his neck in my direction.

"If you feel left out, I'll find someone for you to stab later," he calls out over his shoulder.

"I'd like to stab you." I cross my arms over my chest, not hiding the annoyance in my tone.

His grin widens. "I love it when you sweet-talk me."

"The both of you better stay alive," I call out.

"I have to; I still owe you that drink," Ryder responds, recalling the night he brought me to their house. The pair turn away and ride toward the first line. Cayden didn't tell me which direction he's going in, only that they will split at some point, but I think it's best I don't know where he is. I don't trust myself, just as much as he doesn't trust me at the moment.

I turn away from the path that Cayden and Ryder race down and walk back into the warmth of the tent. My hands wrap around the strap of Finnian's satchel and carry it into my room. He has his own tent, but he'll be staying here for the days that Cayden and I are in Imirath. He told Ailliard he'll be guarding me. My body sinks into one of my chairs, but my limbs are restless. My hands tap against my thighs, my feet start to tap against the carpet, and then I start alternating patterns of feet and hand tapping.

"I hate this," I groan, looking for something to do. I'll go mad if I just sit here, staring at the tent walls. My hand closes around the romance book I was reading a few days ago before Finnian and Cayden interrupted me. The couple was on the cusp of kissing, so at least it's an exciting part of the story. I kick my feet onto the coffee table and rest the book on my lap, attempting to read the first sentence, but fail. I try again, but my eyes dance across the page. I shake my head and squeeze my eyes shut before opening them again, but my ability to focus doesn't improve. My frustration results in me tossing the book across the room, and I shove my face into my hands.

My head snaps up when I hear the book land with a loud flop against the floor. Anxiety wraps around my heart, and I hurry over to where it landed.

“I’m sorry,” I say to the book as I dust off the cover and scan it for damage. “Gods!” I shriek when I realize I’m talking to a book. I’m losing my mind. My hand places the book gently on the table and gives the cover a little pat before I straighten up. Obviously, I won’t be reading while I wait for everyone to get back.

My fingers fiddle with the ends of my hair but cringe when some of the pieces break off and wrap around my fingers. I shake out my hands and walk over to my mirror to braid my hair. My fingers twist my strands extremely slowly, but I manage to finish the braid before one of them magically appears to tell me the charge is over and they’re all safe.

Surprisingly, I’m not wearing armor. I wouldn’t be dumb enough to rush into battle without leathers and armor, so my outfit today is to protect me from making a rash decision. I’m wearing my brown fleece-lined leggings paired with a black cotton shirt. My leather waist corset hugs me, and several knives are strapped along my thighs. I may not be running into battle, but I’m never without a weapon.

I toss my braid over my shoulder and head back into Cayden’s room. I’ll continue analyzing the maps for the journey. We still have to figure out a way to get back to Vareveth. Nobody has brought it up. We’ve just been focusing on getting to and into the castle. I think the journey home, if it happens, is going to be unpredictable.

My hand stills as thousands of war cries filter through the air, penetrating the tent. A leftover cup of tea clinks against the saucer it sits upon while the ground vibrates beneath my feet.

The air in my lungs feels tight.

The fighting has begun.

I glance toward the front of the tent. I could ride down to the first line to overlook the battle. I’ve never seen a battle before, so maybe it’ll be good for me to observe.

No.

I’ll be productive in a different way. My shaking hand reaches toward the list Saskia was writing and compare it to the largest map on the table. My fingers dance along each point we planned out, committing it to memory. Once we get to the caves and past the army, we can do our best to avoid patrols and kill when necessary.

A large crash shakes the ground, and the teacup falls to the floor, landing with a dull thump against the rug.

The crash sounded like it happened on this section of the front lines.

That's where Finnian is.

That's where Saskia is.

Fuck this.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-SEVEN



I rush around the table and through the front of the tent, forgoing a cloak and running headfirst into the cold. The air burns my throat, but I force myself to increase my pace. I can't stop the images of a mangled Finnian and a bloody Saskia flashing in my mind.

There are more people in the camp than I anticipated there would be. I weave between everyone and break the third line, pushing onward to the second line. It's far, but it's within my sight. My legs cry out for a break, but their pleas are silenced by my need to get to Finnian and Saskia. The best-case scenario is that they're unharmed and that whatever caused that large crash missed them. But if it's anything less than the best case, I need to get them out of there.

Black spots dot my vision by the time I breach the second line, the medical line. Canvas tents line the edge of this camp, the same as the third. I slow my run into a jog, unsure of how to navigate this line. My breathing is heavy, and my head swings in all directions, trying to figure out where to go. The lines are thick. I keep pushing in the direction I know for sure is toward the border, but there aren't any straight paths or clear lines that lead there. The tents aren't evenly spaced apart or even the same size. It's most likely a precaution they take to slow any possible invasions.

The noise gets louder, and the atmosphere becomes grimmer as I walk down the makeshift path I've chosen. In a terribly selfish and backward way, I suppose that's a good sign. The grimmer the path, the sooner I'll be able to get to Finnian or Saskia. Rows of soldiers stand in front of the second line, most likely waiting to be called in for reinforcements, should they need any. Some soldiers with minor injuries line the sides of the paths

I've crossed, wrapping their wounds in bandages. I assume that only grave injuries or those that need stitches go to the medic tents.

"Queen Elowen," a confused voice says. I turn to my right and find Braxton approaching me. He bows his head slightly when he's close enough. "Does Commander Veles know you're here?"

I stop myself from blurting out that he does not, and force as much confidence I can muster into my tone. "We agreed I wouldn't take part in the battle." The air continues to burn my throat like I swallowed ten ice cubes. "I heard the crash."

He still looks apprehensive but proceeds, "It appears Imirath tested a new weapon, but something must have gone wrong because they haven't fired it again." A small feeling of relief shudders through me, but it's fleeting. The weapon was fired as Cayden and Ryder charge the army.

"How many were injured?" I ask. The confidence I had previously mustered now melts into urgency.

"We won't know exact numbers yet, but the medic tent is swarmed." He points over his shoulder. "We're waiting for the healers to make the call to move some of the injured to other tents along the border if it gets too crowded." I'll have my best chance at finding Finnian or Saskia in the medic tent if they're injured. I can't exactly rush into battle and begin ripping helmets off soldiers. The noise of battle is so loud that my voice will be drowned out even if I scream their names.

"Thank you," I say to Braxton.

My feet take off toward the tent without giving him a chance to stop me or ask more questions. I slip through the opening and am immediately met with the cries of the wounded and the smell of sweat and blood. If I didn't have my training, I would be overwhelmed by sight. At least two hundred tables are lined up throughout the tent, all equally distanced from each other. Each table has a shelf underneath where medical and sanitization supplies are kept, ready to be used for each individual soldier. The pathways to the tables are not as clear as I wish for them to be. Some soldiers linger by injured soldiers' bedsides, holding their hands or just holding a conversation. Healers are dressed in black and try to keep their work quick and precise. My eyes dance from table to table, but just when I think they're in the clear, my chest tightens at the sight of a familiar set of black braids tumbling over the side of a table in the back left corner.

“Saskia,” I mumble and rush toward her. I keep glancing for any signs of Finnian as I approach but find none.

Please, be okay.

I breathe through my rising anxiety and reach Saskia’s table. Her face is scrunched up in pain, and blood leaks from a nasty gash on her left arm. Her dark eyes snap open when she notices the presence of someone by her side.

“Please tell me you don’t plan on rushing into battle.” She tries to sound humorous, but her tone is drenched in pain.

“I’m here to help you.” I crouch down to analyze her wound, making sure nothing is stuck in it. There’s nothing, thankfully. My attention turns to filtering through medical supplies. I grab the antiseptic first and splash it onto some cotton. “This is going to sting a bit,” I warn and dab her gash as lightly as I can. Her body jolts against the table, and I offer her my free hand to grip through the pain. I can manage the antiseptic with one.

“Fucking gods,” she seethes through her teeth, squeezing my hand so hard I feel like it might break. Her body stops shaking after a few moments pass and her grip on me loosens. She sucks in a breath and slowly blows it out through her lips. “Finnian wasn’t in the hit. I was at the tail end of it.”

Thank the gods. I swallow through my tight throat and stay focused on my task. I sanitize the needle and loop thread through the top, grabbing a clean rag from under the table to dab the blood away from her gash. The wet rag thumps against the table when I toss it next to her and begin sewing her wound shut. My fingers make it through the first set of stitches down her arm, dabbing the blood away as needed, and turn the needle to sew up her wound.

“Does Cayden know you’re here?” her voice quivers. “Never mind, I think the blood loss is making me stupid.”

“Why are you so sure?”

“If he knew you were here, he’d be standing at your side.” She looks at me as if it’s the most obvious thing. I’m just glad the color has stopped draining from her lips.

“There’s an entire army between Imirath and me. *His* army,” I amplify, never taking my eyes away from her stitches.

“He’s become quite the territorial bastard.” Her smile seems genuine, but I can see how the pain still creases her forehead.

“That I will agree with.” I huff out a laugh as I begin to sew down her arm again. I don’t want her stitches to open. “Is he not always this territorial?”

She shakes her head while looking over at me, “He never lets anyone close enough to touch him, and you can bet your ass he doesn’t communicate with anyone as he does with you.” I don’t show a reaction on my face; I keep it hidden. All the things I shouldn’t feel are concealed beneath a mask.

“He communicates with me because there will be consequences if he doesn’t.” I recall my threat to balcony-hop again.

Saskia huffs a pained laugh, “That’s not the only reason.”

The noise rises in the tent as I’m finishing the last knot on her stitches. I wipe my hands off on a new rag and grab a roll of cotton bandages from under the table to wrap her arm. Whimpers rise from the table behind me, and I notice a male soldier with a gash on his thigh. I glance back at Saskia, “How are you feeling?”

“Better.” I wish I had a tonic to ease her pain, but I’m sure she has one back in her tent.

“I’m just going to be at this next table. I’ll check in as soon as I’m done stitching up the next person.” Then I do something I don’t normally do; I reach down and give her my best version of a hug, just like she gave me when I woke up in Cayden’s bed. She raises her good arm to embrace me. “I’m glad you’re alright.”

“Thank you,” she murmurs as I lift myself off her.

“I got wind of the queen being here,” Finnian’s voice streams from behind me. I gasp and turn toward him, throwing my arms around him in the process. Who knew Vareveth would make me into such a hugger? His chuckle vibrates my cheek as he wraps his arms around my waist. “Before you start poking around, I’m not injured.” I release my hold and step back to scan him, wanting to make sure for myself, but he truly is unscathed. A fraction of my nerves are eased by his presence, but not all. My eyes flash to the tent opening, but a familiar set of hazel eyes are nowhere in sight, nor are Ryder’s brown ones.

“Forgive me for worrying about you.” I reach up to ruffle his hair that’s been flattened by a helmet. “Would you mind getting Saskia some water?”

His eyes flash with worry when they land on Saskia. He glances back at me and nods his head before brushing past me in search of water. I turn

toward the soldier with the gash on his leg. Offering him a smile and a greeting before dropping to my knees to find the same supplies I used on Saskia. After I finish stitching him, I make my way to the next table to stitch the next person, repeating the pattern until I've lost count of how many people I've stitched and bandaged. My fingers have gone numb, and blood is caked under my nails and splattered across my arms. The injuries I'm working on aren't too serious, but they need attention.

I finish stitching a female soldier and glance toward the entrance again. It's the ritual I do whenever I finish taking care of a soldier. I'll have whiplash if Cayden doesn't stroll through soon. Even the slightest bit of movement by the entrance makes me pause and look up mid-stitch.

"Thank you, Queen Elowen," the woman says as I wipe her blood from my hands.

"Of course." I smile at her as she swings her legs off the table and leans against another soldier to help her hobble away.

My eyes stay glued to the opening, but Cayden never appears. Countless soldiers enter and exit, but they're never him. I toss the bloody rag onto the table once my hands are clean. "Where are you?" I mumble in frustration.

Maybe he's hurt in a different medic tent and can't get back here.

Maybe he died on the battlefield.

Maybe he got captured.

I should go look for him.

"Looking for someone, angel?" I spin toward his voice. Relief slams into me, and my legs turn to jelly at the sight of him. His hair is flattened, and a mixture of dirt and blood is smeared against his face and armor, but he doesn't appear to be injured. My eyes dance over him, soaking in every inch, but come back with no ailments. He leans against the table across from me with his hands in his pockets. Even post-battle, he's still handsome enough to steal my breath away. My fingers grip the edge of the table behind my back to keep myself from rushing toward him. All I can think about is closing the distance between us and burying my face in his neck.

"Mhmm...." I nod my head.

"Oh yeah?" He pushes off the table and slowly walks in my direction. He's so close that my back presses into the table. "Who might that be?"

"I've only seen him around a few times...blonde hair, blue eyes," I shrug my shoulders.

He narrows his eyes and places his hands on either side of my body, caging me in. If he realizes or cares that people are staring, he doesn't show it. "I wonder how my army will react when I discharge all the blonde and blue-eyed soldiers."

Territorial bastard, Saskia's voice echoes in my head, and I laugh, both at his joke and Saskia's words. "Did you find an opening?" I whisper.

"Ryder did," he matches my tone. It's happening; we'll be in Imirath tomorrow. My head swings around until I spot Ryder's familiar frame by Saskia's table. The last knot of anxiety loosens in my chest. They're all safe. "The fighting was too thick on my side."

My anxiety shoots right back up, "Were you hurt?"

"I'm fine." His eyes shift away from mine briefly. He's lying.

"Don't lie to me, Cayden." I cross my arms over my chest and glare at him. Now isn't the time for him to be stubborn. If he's hurt, even with a minor injury, then I'd rather fix it now instead of waiting for it to get worse or hinder something while we're on the heist.

"As I recall, you promised me to stay in the tent," he deflects my statement.

"I promised you that I would stay out of the charge. I'm capable of compromise." He grinds his teeth, knowing I have the upper hand on him. I keep my eyes narrowed and wait for him to answer me.

"My shoulder," he grumbles, clearly hating being defeated. "It's not cut, just sore."

"Shirt off, sit on the table," I instruct. "I'll wrap it to help lower the swelling."

"I'd prefer it if you kissed it better," he smirks down at me.

"Shirt off and on the table, soldier," I command again, pointing a finger in his direction.

"So bossy," he mutters, unlocking his armor and lifting his shirt over his head. I roll my eyes even though he can't see it. My annoyance cools at the sight of his lean and defined torso. Damn him for being so attractive. This would be so much easier if he wasn't. My eyes track the love bites that dance across his skin from last night, trailing from his neck to his waist. I still have a few marks on myself as well, not that I mind. I like the reminder, and it seems he does too considering he lets the light dance along his torso for everyone to see as he takes a seat.

My fingers push the strands that have fallen from my braid back behind my ears while I grab a roll of bandages from under the table. I could stand on the side of his legs to avoid staring into his face, but he widens them, which would make it harder for me to reach across. Instead of telling him to move, I stand between his thighs.

“How did you hurt your shoulder?” I ask while unwrapping the bandages.

“Someone rammed into me; I killed them.” He brushes it off like it’s an everyday occurrence to be rammed into.

“Cayden!”

“What? They’re dead now, and I’m still breathing and getting bossed around by you. Life is good.” I roll my eyes and flick him in the forehead, which makes him chuckle. “Thank you for helping here,” he says quietly. I meet his gaze as I lean forward to wrap the bandages around his back. I have to wrap a portion of them around his chest to support his shoulder. His eyes darken while he looks down at me.

“It’s no problem,” I murmur. “I couldn’t focus on reading, and I thought I would go insane just waiting around.”

“Romance couldn’t keep your attention?” he mockingly gasps. I level him with a glare, but it doesn’t hold nearly as much venom as my earlier glare when I told him to get on the table. “I’m going to see your smut-reading face one day.” My traitorous cheeks redden at his words. It’s one thing to enjoy romance in private, but I feel like someone is reading my personal diary when it’s brought up. I never kept a diary, but my book collection is the closest thing I have to one.

“I don’t have a smut-reading face.” I focus on the bandages rather than his eyes.

“Finnian said you do.”

“Finnian is a liar.”

“I don’t know. Your face is getting red,” he jests, pinching my heated cheeks.

“That’s because it’s warm in here.” I swat his hands away.

“Yeah, you like to read about people getting sweaty, don’t you?” I don’t have to look at his face to see the cocky grin that spreads across his features. I pull his bandages tighter, and he sucks in a sharp breath.

“You deserved that,” I mutter through a smile, sneaking a glance at him while I loosen them again.

“Maybe,” he says with an easy smile on his face. “We should leave after you finish wrapping me.” As much as I’d like to stay and help, I know he’s right. We both need to rest before tomorrow, finalize plans, and pack. I also want to spend some time with Finnian before we leave. I nod my head, not bothering to argue with him.

“How did you know I was here?” I ask.

“Braxton,” he responds. “He found me while I was riding back. Speaking of which, how did you get here? Did you steal another horse?”

“I never stole a horse.” He’s referring to the horse I borrowed the night I first rode to the border. “They’re there to use in a pinch.”

“They are,” he agrees. “For missions.”

“Yes, well, it just so happens that my mission was to find an uncommunicative oaf,” I say while tying off the bandages and tossing his shirt onto his lap. “I ran here.”

He pauses briefly before resuming his movements and looping his shirt over his head. “Impressive,” he states, getting to his feet.

We walk side by side to the back opening I originally slipped through. Streaks of pink mingle in the sky as the sun sets on my last day here. “I’m beginning to think you steal horses or run everywhere just so we can share one.”

“Don’t flatter yourself.” I roll my eyes. “If there was a horse outside of our tent, then I would’ve ridden that one. I’m perfectly capable of walking or running back to our tent. Maybe I’ll *steal* another horse.”

“Stealing is a capital offense. You forget who you’re speaking your devious plans to, you wicked woman.” We near his sleek, black horse tied to a post a few feet in front of us.

“I’m sure you’d love to punish me.” I grasp the saddle horn and slide my foot into the stirrup to swing myself up. He looks up at me with a devilish smile and swings himself up behind me.

He wraps an arm around my waist, pulling me tightly into his chest. He tilts his head and his lips near the shell of my ear. “Comfortable?”

I grip the saddle horn and focus on suppressing a shiver that rattles through me. “Terribly,” I breathe. He keeps me snug against him and leads his horse back to the third line.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



My sleepy eyes slowly open, and the sound of Finnian murmuring incoherent words in his sleep drifts across my pillow. He has a tent of his own, but he fell asleep while I was in the bath, and I didn't have the heart to wake him up. He'll be staying here while I'm gone anyway; he said it'll make him feel closer to me. I had to bite my tongue to stop myself from crying when he said that. All five of us agreed to wake up late so that Cayden and I will be as well-rested as possible when we cross into Imirath. I doubt I'll be able to sleep once I cross the border into the land that's haunted me ever since I left.

It's for the dragons, I remind myself.

I'm careful not to wake Finnian while slipping out from under the covers and padding over to where I packed my satchel last night. The air hits my bare legs, making me squirm. It's not cold in here, but I instantly miss the warmth of my blankets, internally groaning at the thought of sleeping in a damp cave or a frosty forest floor again. I've gotten used to the comfort of being here.

I grasp the soft leather and run my hand over the front. It feels like so much time has passed since I last saw Nyrinn. Last night, I took out the healing supplies she gave me to replace them with food, extra undergarments, the amulet, some extra knives, and pads incase the gods decide to curse me with my period while in Imirath. I kept a few needles, thread, and bandages for the journey. Once I filterer through everything a second time, making sure I haven't forgotten anything, I zip it up and place it back on the table.

Cayden shuffles toward the space that connects our rooms and opens the curtain. He leans against one of the poles that supports the tent. Black cotton pants hang low on his hips. My eyes trace his defined v-line, which ignites a flame inside of me that I quickly snuff out. The sight of his sleep-ruffled hair makes me want to walk over to him and run my fingers through it.

“Ryder and Saskia will be here in an hour,” he says in a low tone, tracing my legs with his eyes. That means it’s already two in the afternoon. To be fair, we didn’t fall asleep until four in the morning, and the goal was to sleep in.

“How’s your shoulder?” I rewrapped it as we went over a secondary route with everyone, just in case something goes wrong on our first. It was, thankfully, far less intimate than when I wrapped him in the medical tent.

“It feels fine.” He shrugs his shoulders, showing me that he can move without pain. “How are you feeling?” He casts his calculating gaze my way. I know he’s asking about more than any kind of physical pain; he’s asking about my return to Imirath.

“I’m fine,” I mutter, getting to my feet. Truthfully, my stomach is unsettled, and the air feels thin, no matter how deeply I breathe. A lump permanently rests at the base of my throat, and I continue to wipe my moist palms on my sweater. But talking about it will only make it worse. I don’t want comfort, or pity, or words. I want actions. I want to feel as powerful and in control as I did the night I tortured Robick. The same girl that left Imirath is not the same woman that is returning. I was their princess; now I’m their ruin. I’ll take my dragons and burn Garrick’s reign to the ground.

Finnian stirs on the bed and lets out a groan. Cayden’s hard eyes still rest on me, even when I turn toward Finnian, but he doesn’t press me to talk. “Did I fall asleep without bathing?” Finnian asks.

“Yes,” I confirm.

“Gods, I must smell terrible.”

“You do,” I answer.

Finnian raises his middle finger to me while sitting up in my bed, letting out a sigh and running his fingers through his tousled curls that stick out like a unruly bush. He clumsily slips out of bed and pouts as he sifts through the bag he brought. Finnian in the morning is something most people wish to avoid; I just find it amusing. No matter how old he gets, he still acts like a child.

“I’m using your soap,” Finnian states, narrowing his eyes at Cayden while brushing past him and stomping over to the bathroom. Cayden scrunches his brows together and turns to watch Finnian walk away before turning back to me.

“Was that supposed to be a threat?” he asks, pointing in the direction Finnian walked in.

“Everything is a threat when he first wakes up.”

“Right,” Cayden says, turning back to his room and closing the curtains behind him.

I quickly dress in my leathers, hooking my corset and strapping as many knives as I can fit along my legs. Any kind of armor will draw too much attention. We may have to hide in a pinch, and the last thing we need is something reflecting off our chests, shoulders, or legs. The tough, black leather can protect us fine enough on its own. Weapons are a necessary risk. I don’t tie my cloak or strap my swords around me yet. I’ll do that later.

This will probably be the only time I’ll have away from Finnian before I leave. I walk over to my vanity and sit down on the soft chair, reaching a shaking hand toward the top drawer to pull out the stationary supplies. My fingers anxiously fiddle with the quill, running the smooth feather through my fingers. I can’t put this off any longer.

The quill lingers in the air while I try to find the right words to write to him, should he need to open this. I rest my head in my hands and sigh.

FINNY,

I KNOW YOU’RE PROBABLY WISHING YOU HAD STOPPED ME BEFORE LEAVING, BUT PLEASE KNOW THAT NOTHING COULD HAVE STOPPED ME. YOU’VE ALWAYS HATED MY STUBBORNNESS. YOU WERE THE FIRST PERSON TO MAKE ME FEEL HAPPY. I NEVER LAUGHED BEFORE I MET YOU; I DIDN’T EVEN KNOW HOW. YOU’VE BEEN MY FAMILY FROM THE MOMENT YOU STEPPED INTO AESTILIAN, WHICH IS WHY I LEAVE IT TO YOU. I DON’T HAVE AN HEIR, BUT YOU’RE MY NEXT OF KIN. I CAN FEEL IT IN MY SOUL. WE DON’T NEED BLOOD TO MAKE US SIBLINGS; YOU’RE MY BROTHER THROUGH AND THROUGH. I’LL NEVER BE ABLE TO PUT INTO WORDS HOW MUCH YOUR FRIENDSHIP MEANS TO ME, BUT I’LL CARRY OUR BOND INTO THE AFTERLIFE AND INTO MY NEXT LIFE BECAUSE IT’S A BOND THAT EVEN DEATH CAN’T BREAK.

MAKE YOURSELF A CROWN AS BEAUTIFUL AS THE ONE YOU MADE FOR ME. I BELIEVE IN YOU. LEAVE VAREVETH AND GO HOME, GO ANYWHERE, CONQUER THE DAMN WORLD IF YOU WANT. LIVE THE LIFE YOU'VE ALWAYS DESERVED TO LIVE—A LIFE FILLED WITH LAUGHTER, PINTS OF ALE, CHICKEN POT PIES, AND LATE MORNINGS.

I LOVE YOU ALWAYS.

YOUR SISTER.

YOUR ELLIE.

My heart clenches as I sign the letter with his childhood nickname for me. The first time he ever told me he loved me he finished it with Ellie. It was the first time anyone told me they loved me. I wipe the stray tears that fall down my cheeks and dot the paper, placing the letter further up the desk and leaning back in my seat. He's the only letter. I can't bear writing a letter to Ailliard, not when he's the one that took me out of Imirath. If I wrote one to him, I'd have to write one to every guard, and I can't stomach it. I can barely stomach the letter I wrote to Finnian, but he deserves it. We've always only had each other unconditionally.

I take in several steadying breaths and fold the letter in half to slip it into an envelope. I put it in the drawer and firmly shut it. There's no point in him seeing it before I leave; he'll probably react horribly. I'll tell him about it when we say goodbye. My hands pinch my cheeks to bring some color back into them, and I fake a few smiles in the mirror before walking into Cayden's room. He's sitting on his couch, clad in leather and black armored accessories, sharpening his swords. The corset I'm wearing serves the same purpose as his chest guard. My boots tap against the rug as I walk over to his desk and pick up the paper Saskia made us recite at least one hundred times last night. We won't be able to bring it with us, so memorizing landmarks is the only option.

Finnian exits the bathroom just as a cart of coffee and breakfast foods are wheeled in by a servant. I know there are servants here; I just don't see much of them. My days here are much more unpredictable than they are at the castle, which is why I think I like it more. The servant curtsies before turning to exit the tent. I dodge the coffee cart for now and slip into the bathroom to wash my sticky face and do my morning routine.

Two more voices are added to our gathering when I rejoin the group. Saskia sips on a mug, and Ryder licks the leftover jam off his fingers from

whatever pastry he consumed.

“Are the stitches okay?” I ask Saskia while pouring myself a cup of coffee. My nerves don’t need the extra jolt, but I’m greedy when it comes to caffeine. I dip a spoon into the array of sweet syrups and stir some vanilla into my coffee.

“Yes, no bleeding!” she says in a much happier tone than when I last saw her. “I changed the bandage this morning.”

I walk over to one of the chairs in the seating area and cross my legs in front of me, resting my mug against them. Cayden is still sharpening his swords while the other three sit around the desk, enjoying the food.

“You should eat something,” Cayden says to me without taking his eyes off his blade. It’s not that I don’t want to eat. I just don’t think I’ll be able to keep it down.

“Maybe later,” I mutter into my mug while taking a long sip. The whetstone pauses on his blade, but he resumes the movements after a few seconds. When I sneak a glance in his direction, I can tell his jaw is clenched.

“I finished translating part of the dragon text,” Saskia declares, drumming her fingers against the desk. “It’s about the bond.”

My posture stiffens, and the room falls eerily silent. I’m thankful I haven’t eaten yet because my already on-edge nerves make my stomach churn. “What did it say?”

“It’s not bad. It’s just not exactly good.” I feel like I’m holding my breath as I wait for her to continue. “The bond isn’t broken; nobody can break it. But it can be...weakened.” I clutch my mug tighter.

“Weakened in what sense?” Cayden inquires. His tone is just as edged as my nerves.

“The dragons will know who you are, but they may not answer to you. You’ve been separated for most of your lives. But when you get back here, there’s a bond ceremony to strengthen it again.”

“I can’t do the ceremony when I walk into their chamber?” If I can’t do the ceremony there, then the dragons will have free rein, unleashed upon the world.

“No, it’s impossible. We need a fire priestess, and it’s a lengthy ceremony. The dragons also have to be willing participants. You can’t just force it onto them.”

“Will they even come here if we set them free?” I ask the question I’m sure everyone is wondering.

“They’ll find you. Their senses will lead them to you, even if they don’t follow you at first. The bond is part of an ancient prophecy, and the dragons always find their way back to the bond in every version of it.”

“It’s probably best if they don’t follow us at first,” I mumble, suddenly finding the rim of my coffee cup an interesting thing to set my gaze on. I know it shouldn’t feel embarrassing, but it does. It feels like my title is a mockery...that I’m a mockery. What if we’ve been separated for so long that I can’t revive the bond? What if they never choose me because I left them in Imirath at the mercy of my father? I wish there was a way I could have told them I didn’t want to leave them. My fingers trace the column of my throat, remembering the way it burned as I screamed and thrashed against Ailliard to get back to them.

“Shall we plan the return journey?” Saskia’s voice pulls me from my thoughts. I glance at Cayden, wanting him to answer this one. I don’t see the point in planning the return journey when so much unpredictability surrounds the heist. He meets my gaze, understanding my meaning behind it, and turns back to Saskia.

“I think the return journey will be up to Elowen and me.” He pauses, then says, “Depending on how everything goes.” He looks at me to approve his answer and turns back to sharpening his swords when I nod. The return journey depends on if we make it to the castle, if we get out of the castle, and what we’ll do if we get separated. There’s no point in planning something when we’re grasping at hundreds of possibilities.

The journey to the castle and heist were finalized last night. We plan on entering through the dungeon and killing any guards with as much stealth as possible. After that, we’ll have to find the Head Guard of Imirath, get the key, and get to the dragon chamber. We’ll have to wait for the first hours of morning before slipping in. There’s no sense trying to stay hidden in the middle of the day—it’s a death wish.

“Right,” Saskia mutters, looking down at her lap.

The rest of the evening is filled with finishing the coffee and pastries while avoiding any kind of heist talk. The lower the sun gets, the more anxious we all grow. None of us speak of our nerves, but it becomes apparent when there’s a lull in conversation or one of us spaces out. At some point, Cayden hands me a plain pastry and urges me to take at least a

few bites. I'm normally a fast eater, a habit I developed after years of not having food regularly at my disposal. Whenever food is in front of me, I feel like I must eat it before it disappears. But it takes me at least an hour to finish the soft buttery bread.

Eventually, the sun leaves the sky, and some soldiers make their way to their tents. The soldiers that patrol the lines at night will be unavoidable, but it's a risk we'll have to take. If Cayden ordered everyone to stay inside, not only would it be suspicious, but it would leave Vareveth vulnerable. We'll cut into the forest located to the right of us and ride to the cross point through there.

When the conversation lulls once again, nobody begins a new one. The tension is so thick in the tent it's almost suffocating. It's well past midnight judging by how quiet it is outside. I strapped my swords on a few hours ago, and my satchel sits at my feet. My shaking hand grasps the leather strap and lift it while we all stand.

"I'll ride with you to the border so I can take the horses back," Ryder declares. We won't be able to travel on horseback; they would make too much noise when we first cross the border. In order to stay hidden, we'll have to stick to the shadows the trees provide, and we won't be able to do that while riding.

"I'm coming too," Finnian says, staring directly at me.

"As am I," Saskia finishes.

I take them all in; their determined expressions mingle with helplessness. I would feel the same if I was in their position. Together, we walk out of the tent and to the five horses tied to the post in front. I swing myself onto the same tan horse I rode here a few weeks ago. I've been riding her to and from the Inner Kingdom. She's very well-tempered, unlike some of the other horses I've ridden that have tried to buck me into thorn bushes.

Cayden leads the ride and is flanked by Ryder, Finnian stays next to me, and Saskia brings up the rear. We all stay silent as we ride. We break the tree line and are surrounded by nearly complete darkness. I can see why Ryder chose to fight here when they charged yesterday. The density of the trees lets close to no moonlight shine through. Cayden and I are also wearing all black, which can only help our coverage.

Cayden holds his hand up, signaling us to stop our horses. Finnian lets out a shuddering breath beside me before dismounting. It's so quiet in the

forest. It's almost eerie. It's the same feeling you get while watching a storm roll in. Finnian steps in front of our horses and pulls me into his chest. I wrap my arms around his waist and breathe in his familiar citrus scent. We stay like this, locked together, holding onto the one person that became family when we were both alone in the world.

"You didn't forget to take your tonic this month, right? You tend to forget to take care of yourself when you're overwhelmed. You won't be able to have the tea that sometimes helps your cramps while you're in Imirath, and sometimes your hands shake from the pain so your aim will be off."

"I took my tonic," I gently quiet Finnian's anxious rambling. "It's already a few days into the month so I should be okay." He snuffles and mutters a curse above me. "I'll be back before you know it."

"Tomorrow?" he asks in mock hope.

"Hmm..." I pull away from him and reach up to wipe the tears off his freckle-filled cheeks. "Maybe the next day." He looks down at me with ocean eyes and smiles through his emotions. He must notice the change in my features because his smile leaves as quickly as it formed.

"What?" he demands.

I lick my lips, hating that I must do this. "There's a letter."

"No," he shakes his head.

"It's in the top drawer of my vanity."

"Elowen, no." His arms fall from me, and he rakes his hands through his curls, looking like he wants to scream. "I can't think about that possibility."

"It's just a precaution," I try to reason with him. The other three look in our direction but don't interfere. Saskia looks close to tears herself. Ryder is thin-lipped, but Cayden is oozing unyielding sturdiness. Whether he's doing it for my sake, or he truly feels it, I appreciate it. I do the same for him and fight back the tears that threaten to spill from my eyes as I watch Finnian.

"I won't need your precaution," he growls while stepping closer to me and placing both hands on my shoulders, giving me a squeeze. "After everything you've survived, I refuse to believe you could be in a situation don't come out of it. You're not dying, especially not in Imirath. You're my queen, my sister, and you're coming back." His voice quivers at the end, and he leans forward to press his lips into my forehead.

“I’m coming back, I promise,” I echo the words Cayden told me yesterday with the same amount of certainty he delivered it with. This is what Finnian needs. He needs my confidence, not my tears. I can be his rock. His shoulders ease at my proclamation. I’ll crawl my way out of Imirath if I must. But, as a queen, I can’t view my capabilities with tunnel vision. I’d rather prepare for any possible outcome, even if I don’t think that outcome will come to pass. Nobody wins wars or stays on a throne without maneuvering every possible scenario to their benefit, because if you don’t, someone else will maneuver it for your downfall.

Finnian releases my shoulders, and we walk side by side to where Saskia clings to Cayden, and Ryder grasps his shoulder. Cayden seems to be trying his hardest to comfort her, but he looks like he needs a manual on how to hold someone. It breaks some of the tension in the air, considering Ryder can’t stop silently laughing while looking at Cayden’s rigid stance. She pulls herself away from him when she hears our approaching footsteps and turns toward me. She rushes forward, midnight braids flowing behind her back, and wraps her arms around my neck to hold me tight.

“You’re coming home too,” she whispers into my hair.

“I am,” I say while wrapping my arms around her, giving her a tight squeeze. “Who else will you shop for spring dresses with?” I wink as she releases me from her embrace.

“Don’t let him die,” Ryder says as I approach him and Cayden.

“No promises,” I shrug. “He might piss me off on the road.”

Cayden looks down at me, matching my smirk. I think he likes it when I threaten to kill him. He turns serious when he looks back at Ryder, “You should head back now before the guards change over.”

“You better come home to me, love.” Ryder channels his uneasiness into humor.

“Always, darling. You know I can’t stay away from you,” Cayden replies with the same easy humor.

“Boys,” Saskia mutters while shaking her head, but her teary eyes are filled with anything but annoyance.

“I’ll see you soon, brother,” Ryder states in a much more serious tone, holding his hand out to Cayden.

“You will.” Cayden clasps Ryder’s hand and shoulder.

The three of them slowly make their way to the horses. Finnian holds the reins to my horse, and Ryder takes Cayden’s. They don’t say anything

else before they leave. They just look at us until they can't look any longer and disappear from sight.

CHAPTER
THIRTY-NINE



Cayden and I are left in ghostly silence that was momentarily filled with life. Tree branches creak in the wind, causing my cloak to flutter around my ankles. We still have several hours before the sun rises, but we need to make it to the caves as fast as possible. We'll be too close to the border to travel in daylight. We can travel during the day once we get farther into the kingdom.

"It's just you and me, angel." Cayden is the first to break the silence.

"I'm still trying to figure out if it's for better or for worse," I say, turning toward the direction we must travel.

"Do let me know once you've figured it out." He mirrors my stance and turns his back on Vareveth. "You ready?" he asks, tone turning serious.

Any sadness I felt in saying goodbye is replaced by the thirst for vengeance traveling through my veins. Anxiety mingles there, but that's always there. This is what I've waited for since the moment I left Imirath. I thought about this moment long before Cayden came into my life; he's just the person that set everything in motion.

"I have been for years," I answer. Let the Lady and Lord of Revenge, Retribution, and Vengeance be unleashed upon their enemies once again.

We step forward, careful to keep our steps light, aiming for rocks and piles of wet leaves rather than the forest floor, which is most likely littered with branches we can't see. There's no path, so we navigate on whim and memory.

We're fairly deep into enemy territory when we spot soldiers coming our way. We press our backs into the rough bark of trees and wait for them

to pass. They walk right by us, swords clinking as they proceed, unsuspecting of the foxes slithering into their coup.

Light bleeds through the trees as Imirath's camp looms closer. No matter how dark the night is, it can't bleed out all the torches that line their camp. We silently creep past, sinking deeper into the forest for more coverage when needed. I peer down into their camp from the hill we're on; it looks sort of similar to Vareveth but much less organized. Their camp isn't separated into lines like Vareveth's is. It just looks like a sea of tents evenly spread apart and stretches as far back as I can see.

A twig snaps ahead of us, and my eyes shoot forward. Cayden slips his arm around my waist and pulls me down behind a large moss-covered rock a few feet to our right. My back is pressed into the ground as he tucks me under him and keeps us as close to the rock.

The footsteps get closer.

They're walking directly toward us.

My anxiety is so high that every breath I take makes me cringe. I strain my ears to decipher how many soldiers are walking toward us. It's somewhere between eight and ten.

I grab Cayden's leathers, urging him to get closer. He reaches down to my thigh and slowly pulls out a knife, careful not to make the steel sing against the holster, and presses it into my palm. I wrap my fingers around the hilt, and he repeats his actions to pull a knife out of his thigh for himself.

I force myself to keep my breathing even and quiet. Cayden's eyes blaze above me; he turns his head to his right and scrunches his brows in contemplation. The hill that we're on drops off sharply, and I can hear a small creek running below. We won't be able to jump without mud splattering and alerting the soldiers near us.

"These leaves have been stomped on," a nasally voice declares. I close my eyes and release a string of profanities in my head. Cayden creeps his foot up, getting ready to throw the knife if it comes to it. I can't move from under him, but I'll spring up after him.

"It was probably one of our earlier patrols," a different voice filters through the air.

"I don't know," the nasally voice says while rising to their feet. Their footsteps come closer to the rock until they stop directly in front of it. One

of my hands tightens on the hilt of my knife, and the other releases Cayden's strap from my grip.

His eyes flash to mine again, coated in a silent message. He brings a hand forward and presses it into my chest, and then points to the right of him where the cliff drops off. I hate that I can understand him without words; he doesn't need to use his hands to articulate his thoughts. I hate that we share something so intimate. He's looking down at me, and I know he's telling me that I can run if I need to; he wants me to run. I shake my head to tell him I understand his message, but I don't agree with him. A confused expression crosses his face. I lay my dagger in the dirt and squeeze his fist that closes around his dagger.

I'll fight with him, and I'm not leaving him.

Not when I know we're outnumbered.

Not when we're inches away from Imirath's camp. I wouldn't be able to live with myself knowing what they would do to him. I left my dragons; I'm not leaving him.

We're in this together, until the end.

We're both protectors, two people that consistently throw ourselves into strife, but I'd rather stare down danger with him than be safe without him. His throat works through a swallow, and his eyes fill with something I can't quite place, but it's close to tenderness and teeters on helpless.

The soldier is so close that Cayden could spring up and stab them in the gut. I could take another one down with my knife before they become aware of what's happening. I reach up to grab his strap again. We need to avoid conflict at all costs when we're this close to their army. I don't want Garrick to strengthen the castle if he thinks someone slipped through the border. Another set of footsteps dance along the forest floor, only these footsteps are followed by a low, beastly growl.

"Netherwraith!" a soldier shouts.

The soldier standing above us sprints away from the rock and toward the netherwraith. Cayden quickly pokes his head up from the rock before looking down at me with an upturned corner of his lips, not quite a smirk or smile, just the face of someone that got lucky for once. It's like he's bragging to fate.

He climbs off me, and we scramble to the edge of the hill, jumping down. I resist the urge to shriek as my stomach fills with butterflies, and we land in the mud with a splash. The soldiers are still shouting above, and I

know we only have a few more moments to get to solid ground. We can't stealthily slosh through mud, so we break into a sprint. My leg muscles burn as we push through the thick riverbank. It's up to my shins and wet enough that our footsteps cave in on themselves as soon as we lift our boots.

We eventually make it back to the solid forest floor, and we don't waste time resting before taking off into the night. It's only the beginning, but I still let the satisfaction of making it past our first obstacle mingle through me. I hope my dragons can sense me getting closer.

We make it to the caves a few hours after the sun has fully risen, and they're a welcome sight. In the ancient texts, it's rumored that these caves were made by the gods. I don't necessarily believe in the gods, but I can see why someone would believe these caves were made by them. Several circular caves are perfectly shaped along the mountainside. Cliffs jut out, making it easy to travel up the mountain and choose the cave you'd like to find refuge in. I don't care which we stay in, so long as it's not open in the back. We briefly exchange words about wanting a cave about halfway up the mountain. Going all the way to the top seems like a foolish waste of time but staying at the bottom is too risky; beasts lurk in the forest, as do soldiers.

We climb the cliffs with ease. They resemble an oversized staircase made of stone. I'm careful to keep my footing on the moss-covered rocks as we rise; the last thing I need to do is misstep or lose my balance. The wind whips at my face the higher we climb; loose strands tickle my cheeks as they slip from my braid. I raise my chapped hands to my head to tuck the strands behind my ears. I wish we could light a fire, but it's a luxury we won't have until we get back to Vareveth.

When we're high enough that a fall would result in death, I grab Cayden's hand to stop him from climbing any higher. I walk into a dark cave that looms in front of us to make sure the back is closed off. The cave is tall enough that Cayden doesn't have to hunch over to walk inside. I drop my satchel to the floor and plop down next to it, resting my head against the cave wall. It feels wonderful to be off my feet. We've been running and walking on and off, and the hills have killed my thighs.

"Cozy," he says while mirroring my sitting position on the other side of the cave. We haven't spoken much since we left Vareveth, too worried

about our voices carrying while we're this close to the army. It's comforting to have put some distance between them and us.

"How many hours do you think we have before the sun goes down?" We can't travel in daylight yet. We're far enough from the camp that I don't feel uncomfortable speaking, but they will definitely patrol this far back on occasion. We'll be safe, or as safe as we can be after we cross the Emer River tomorrow.

"I'd say we have around nine hours," he answers. "Are you hungry?"

I shrug my shoulders, "A little." I feel like I can't keep anything down when I'm this nervous, which is why, even after a day of traveling, I'm not as hungry as I should be.

"You hardly ate anything before we left," he points out. Sometimes I forget how much he pays attention to me. Finnian has always looked out for me, but there's something different in the way Cayden does it—something more intense. It's like I deprive him when I deprive myself.

"I ate enough," I argue. He levels me with a glare, and I know he won't drop this until I eat something. I roll my eyes and grab an apple from my bag, sinking my teeth into it and letting the sweetness coat my mouth. My nerves are still on edge, but starving myself the entire time I'm here will do more damage to us than anyone we encounter. "Are you going to eat?" I prod.

"I'll eat while you rest. I'm taking the first watch."

"No, you're not."

"Why is that?" he drawls. He's impossible.

"I don't trust you to wake me up for the second watch," I say while tossing my apple core to the back of the cave. He's more likely to let me sleep through our entire time here and ignore his own need for rest.

"Are you calling me a liar?" he gasps, bringing a hand to his chest. I cross my arms over my body to conserve heat and to show him I'm not feeding into his humor. "I'll wake you up," he presses his hand to his chest, "soldier's honor."

"I don't think you have honor."

"That's why we get along so well," he smirks.

"We don't get along *that* well," I say while moving my satchel to use it as a pillow. We understand each other, but we can be at each other's throats in a minute.

“Whatever you say, angel.” He gets to his feet and walks over to my side of the cave as he unties his cloak.

“What are you doing?” I quirk a brow.

He lays his cloak on the cold floor and looks at me expectantly. “You’re freezing, and we can’t build a fire.”

“I’m used to it.” His eyes flash with displeasure before he blinks it away while sitting on top of the makeshift blanket. I spent more nights of my life cold than I have warm. I got spoiled in Vareveth. I had fires in Aestilian, but not always in the beginning when the wood surrounding us was wet and covered in snow.

“Then think of this as you keeping me warm.” He sits on top of his cloak and pats the spot next to him. I suppose laying on him would also help him, and the thought of warmth is tempting. We’ve been closer. It shouldn’t be this hard to lay on him, and it’s for warmth.

Frustrated with myself, I untie the cloak from my neck and crawl over to him without meeting his eyes. He grabs my satchel from where I set it and puts it under his head. I lower my body onto him, molding my limbs with his. Even after a night of traveling, he still smells like the intoxicating pine and spice scent he usually does. I rest my head on his chest and wrap a leg over his. He takes my cloak from the hand I rested on his chest and wraps it around us, cocooning us in warmth. I let out a shuddering breath and bury my cold face in his neck. His hands creep along my back until one of them undoes my messy braid. One hand stays on my back, rubbing soothing circles. The other gently grabs the hand I have on his chest, brings it to his mouth, and begins blowing on my hand to warm it. My heart flutters at his kind gesture, and my body inches closer to him. He momentarily stops rubbing circles on my back, and his breath hitches.

I internally freeze.

Did I make him uncomfortable by getting closer?

I try to inch away from him, but his arm tightens his hold around me, keeping me close. My body slowly starts to relax again as he holds me securely against him. When he’s sure I won’t move away, he continues rubbing my lower back. When my hand has thawed, and I feel like I can move my fingers again, he rests it on his chest and moves his hand to my hair. He traces long strokes from my head down my spine. I can’t help but remember our first interaction near a cave and how drastically different they are. A small laugh escapes my lips before I can stop it.

“What’s so funny, angel?” he quietly asks.

“I’m just thinking of the night we made the deal when we were near the cave. You tied me to a tree, and now we’re in a cave and you’re keeping me warm.”

His chuckle vibrates against my cheek. “I can tie you up again if you’d like that. Actually, I think you’ll enjoy what I’m thinking of right now far better than our earlier interaction.”

“Scoundrel.” I lightly smack my hand against his chest but let my laughter freely drift up to him. Even in the bitter cold, he still makes my cheeks flush with heat and my body beat in want. He brings the hand I used to smack his chest to his mouth, placing gentle kisses on my knuckles before placing it back where it was. His charm is going to be my undoing.

My eyes shut while his scent, warmth, and touches soothe me. I never thought I’d be able to sleep in Imirath, considering it’s the place where my darkest nightmares were born. But here, in Cayden’s arms, I can imagine I’m somewhere far from here. He transports me like no amulet ever could, with every gentle stroke on my spine. I can sleep here because it doesn’t feel like I’m in Imirath; all I’m surrounded by is Cayden.

CHAPTER
FORTY



The darkness consumes me until I feel a squeeze on my arm, dragging me from sleep. I swat the hand. I don't want to wake up, but the hold only grows tighter. I try to snuggle into the intoxicating warmth and dive headfirst into the darkness again, but the warmth is gone.

My eyes snap open to a much darker cave, the sun is still up, but it's too low to fully light the space around us. The spot next to me is vacant; rather than being in the position I fell asleep in, Cayden is above me with a finger pressed to his lips, which is lifted in a smirk as he looks down at me.

Oh good gods.

He just watched me try to snuggle into him.

Wait, I need to sort my priorities out. He's obviously listening for something, which means someone is probably outside of the caves. I don't move, straining my ears to hear the forest floor below us.

Crack.

Crack, crack, crack.

Someone is here, and by the sound of it, it seems to be a patrol. The footsteps are coming closer. Cayden climbs off me and draws his sword. I mimic his movements, opting for my sword rather than my knives. Swords are best in close combat. We scoop up our satchels and cloaks while rushing into the darkness the back of the cave offers. We can't leave without directly meeting them on their ascent up the mountain. The darkness may keep us hidden if they don't have torches.

They climb up the mountain but are taking their time. We never left a trail, I made sure of it. Perhaps they're just doing routine patrols. If it's just

routine, then hopefully, they won't be as thorough as they would be if they were searching for someone.

Cayden slides his eyes away from the mouth of the cave. "I'll go first and kick the first one off the side of the mountain. It'll be a more even fight if we take one out before they suspect anything."

"Wait until you're sure they've seen us. It's dark, so we may be able to stay hidden," I add.

A bird whistle sounds through the air; it starts out at a lower pitch but gets higher toward the end. Cayden's eyes turn wild, and he whips his head forward. The bird whistle sounds for a second time, the exact same as the first.

"No," Cayden whispers. "It can't be."

The bird whistle sounds for a third time, but this time Cayden answers it with the same bird whistle. I slap my hand over his mouth. "Are you insane? Now isn't the—" He cuts me off by slapping his hand over my mouth. I glare at him, but his eyes are still glued to the mouth of the cave. Whoever it is, answers Cayden's bird call with a new one, higher in the beginning and lower toward the end. Cayden drops his hand from my mouth.

"Ryder," he growls, stalking toward the opening of the cave before I can stop him.

"Ryder?" *Shit.*

Cayden stops at the edge of the cliff, staring down as he clenches his fists at his sides. "Oh, angel," he raises his tone loud enough for Ryder to hear, "we have guests."

Guests.

Multiple people.

I rush toward the front of the cave to stand beside Cayden, peering down the cliffside. Three hooded figures make their way up. Their faces are shrouded by the shadows of the setting sun, but I don't need to see their faces to know which one is which.

They followed us against orders.

I should have known Finnian would follow me. I should have left him at the castle instead of taking him to the border with me. Cayden is probably thinking the same things about Saskia and Ryder. We should have given them a timeframe of when we would leave but never let them watch us leave. I would have followed Finnian. Cayden would have followed Saskia

and Ryder. Even I would have followed Saskia and Ryder. We're both fools for expecting them to stay put.

I walk back into the cave, followed by Cayden, waiting for them to make their way to us. "Did you plan this?" I ask him in a rough tone.

"You can't be serious." He looks at me like I'm insane to accuse him. I mean, he did seem genuinely shocked. Cayden doesn't seem like the kind of person to fake emotions easily, considering his range of emotions consists of angry, horny, flirty, and sarcastic.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize you and Ryder have been practicing bird calls for years," I dryly reply. He rolls his eyes before facing the mouth of the cave as the three of them enter.

They look between each other while fumbling their words, trying to find the right ones. I can't even make out what they're saying—it just sounds like anxiety-induced gibberish. Finnian looks as red as a strawberry, Saskia's dark eyes are darting around the cave like she wants to look anywhere other than us, and Ryder is flailing his arms so much that he looks like a rogue vextree.

"I wish you would have told us you were coming to our new home," Cayden speaks above the gibberish, his tone dripping in sarcasm. "It may make Elowen insecure for you to see our new place like this."

"Yes, it does," I add to his sarcastic bit. "I would have really loved a warning. We could have swept the floor for you or gotten the guest rooms ready."

"Oh, angel, don't you worry," Cayden turns to me and wraps his arm around my shoulders, "your very presence cancels out all the cobwebs and dirt."

"Please, forgive our manners." The mock smile melts off my face, and a glare grows in its place. "Can one of you tell us what the fuck is going on?" I hiss. Cayden removes his arm and turns toward them. He tucks his hands into his pockets, looking incredibly rigid and irritated.

"We went back to the tent, and had every intention of following the original plan, but the more I looked at the map we made of the castle, the more I started to doubt it," Saskia begins.

"Then when Saskia started to doubt, I did," Ryder adds.

"Where do you fit in all of this?" Cayden directs his question to Finnian, but Finnian's eyes remain fixated on me.

“I was reading your letter,” he says in a quiet, even tone. My throat bobs, but my hard eyes still blaze with frustration.

“Yes, the one where I named you my heir should I die in the very place you’re standing in,” I argue.

“That’s not an option,” Cayden states as he whips his head in my direction, unphased by my heir comment, but Saskia and Ryder both exchange a glance at the piece of information. I can feel the intensity laced within Cayden’s stare against the side of my face, but I can’t bring myself to meet his eyes. I need to focus on Finnian.

“He’s right,” Finnian says as his features take on a dark twist. “I failed to protect you once, and I’m not making that mistake again.”

His eyes display no trace of regret for crossing the border, only fierce determination. If I were in his position, I don’t even think I’d be able to hold off as long as he did. This heist isn’t just about me, or Cayden, or dragons. It’s about him too, and how it will affect him if something goes wrong. I’m still frustrated he’s here, but I can’t be angry with him. I’d be a hypocrite because it’s exactly what I would have done. I look down at the cave floor and take a deep breath, letting go of the sharpest parts of my anger. He has just as much of a choice to be here as I do.

“Good,” I slowly look up from the cave floor and meet his determined stare, letting the fire that blazes in me shine through my eyes, “because I’m awful with a bow, and I don’t plan on dying before I ride a dragon.” A broad smile stretches over Finnian’s face, and he nods his head, determination bleeding into satisfaction. We’ll get what we deserve and deal out our vengeance to those that deserve it.

“I do not doubt either of you. As I said to Elowen, if any two people could pull this off, it’s the both of you. But we couldn’t just stand by and worry every day,” Saskia says.

“That’s not how we work. When we were younger, yes. You’re the one that put a sword in my hand, so I understood why you didn’t want me on your,” Ryder pauses and Cayden cringes in the silence, “missions.”

I exchange a quick look with Finnian; both of us are thinking the same thing. What happened in Cayden’s past that they can’t talk about here? Cayden hardly ever cracks his exterior. “I’ve fought by your side countless times since then, and I’m not sitting on the sidelines for the fight we’ve worked at for years,” Ryder adds.

“We understand that neither of you need our protection, but we’re still going to do this together, as a team. Because we’re better off with each other than separated,” Saskia finishes, and the cave is cloaked in silence again.

A strange feeling settles in my chest; it’s not a bad feeling, just a new one. I’ve never been part of a team before. I went from being a prisoner, to a ghost, to this. I was never able to exist. But strangely enough, here, in a damp cave nestled inside of the one kingdom where everyone wants me dead, I’ve never felt safer or steadier. For the first time in my life, I feel like I belong. Existing with these four people makes me feel alive. I reclaimed my life after leaving Imirath. I learned that my body, my choices, and my freedom all belong to me. But this...it’s not something I learned. It just happened. I don’t know when, and I don’t know how, but what I do know is that I would be honored to fight side by side with anyone in this cave.

I nudge a broody Cayden in the side, wiggling my elbow a little. “Come on,” I mutter. Saskia beams at me, and I return her smile. I look up at him. He’s still scowling but struggling to hold it firm. He faces the ceiling of the cave and lets out a groan.

“You’re so annoying,” Cayden mutters to me. “Ryder, I hope you brought extra food because you ate all of mine on the last mission.”

“Hold on...this isn’t just an ordinary mission; this is a heist,” Finnian declares.

“The greatest heist in all of history,” Saskia adds.

“We’ll solidify your entrances into the castle when we get closer and can see their—”

“Wait,” Cayden cuts me off as I was talking about the guard rotations. “Where does everyone think you are? You were our cover.”

“I told Braxton that Saskia got sick with fever, and since we don’t want illness spreading through the camp, you and I are taking care of her with no intrusions. All correspondence is rerouted to him until she has a miraculous recovery,” Ryder says. Cayden releases a breath, most likely erasing all the images of Imirath conquering Vareveth in our absence. It’s a good cover story; it’s something so simple that nobody will look too deeply into it.

“What about you and me? What does Ailliard think?” I ask Finnian.

“He still thinks I’m guarding you, which I am. I didn’t even have to lie to be here.” He looks utterly smug, which causes Ryder to roll his eyes.

“Since your rooms are conjoined, everyone can assume that you’ve been exposed as well, and myself by extension.”

Impressive, and it’s believable. As long as nothing drastic happens within the days we’re gone, we should be able to get back into Vareveth without Imirath ever knowing we left...unless we get caught, and they figure out we’re the ones freeing the dragons.

“You should all rest; I’ll keep watch,” I offer, walking closer to the mouth of the cave, but it’s much darker than I expected. The sun’s pastel pink rays have turned magenta. Realization washes over me. I whip around from the mouth of the cave and immediately zone in on Cayden. He smirks when he takes in my angry expression. I stalk over to him and hit him in the chest, “You didn’t wake me up!” He doesn’t even budge; the only thing that budes is his smirk—it gets wider.

“You never specified how long the watch shifts had to be. We never agreed on half and half, so I took it upon myself to allow one hour for me and give you the rest. I didn’t lie; you didn’t nail down specifics.”

“I’ll drink myself to death if I ever encounter someone more vexing than you.” I stalk back to the front of the cave and sit down on the cold stone. It’s a stark contrast to the warmth Cayden provided me. I fasten my cloak around my neck to block out some of the chill. “You’re going to be sleeping for more than an hour because everyone else needs their rest,” I remark.

“Finally, someone to rival your stubbornness,” Finnian mutters, stretching out his long limbs as he reclines on the cave floor. I roll my eyes as sleep quickly overtakes him. I’ve always envied his sleeping abilities. He can sleep anywhere, at any time of the day.

Cayden walks over to where I sit. “I miss blankets.” His eyes trail over my body, most likely recalling the way I draped myself over him. Thankfully, the cave is so dark that nobody can see my face redden as I glare at Cayden to keep his mouth shut.

“Just use your cloak. I miss my mattress,” Ryder mutters, half asleep already.

“There’s just something about blankets,” he sighs while sitting down. “The cloak isn’t as warm, doesn’t smell as nice.” My expression only adds to his smirk.

“I’ll bet you had a really nice blanket before you got stubborn,” I mutter, and a chuckle vibrates through his chest.

CHAPTER
FORTY-ONE



Darkness greets the forest like a lover returning home after a long day. Its embrace is gentle yet consuming. The past few hours have been filled with nothing but silence, aside from forest creatures scurrying around. We're far from the main path Imirath's soldiers take, so thankfully, there haven't been any sightings of them.

It's so dark that I can't even make out Finnian's body at the back of the cave. The only one I can sort of see is Cayden, who sleeps the closest to me. I haven't allowed myself to turn my head toward him. I've seen many faces of his, but there's just something so intimate about watching someone sleep. I don't want to know that face. Or rather, I hate that I want to, so I won't let myself.

The first one to stir from sleep is Saskia. She sits up while groaning, and I imagine she's rubbing the back of her neck to ease the inevitable ache that settled there. Her silhouette approaches the mouth of the cave with clumsy steps.

"Morning," she grumbles, taking a seat across from me. "My mistake," she shakes her head slightly, "night."

"You can sleep more if you're tired," I offer.

"No," she sighs while tying her braids together with a leather strap and leaning back against the cave wall, "I've exceeded my limit of cave floor for tonight." She reaches into her satchel and pulls out a piece of bread. She tears the top of it off and pops it into her mouth.

"Have you ever been to Imirath?" I ask.

"I grew up in Feynadra," she replies, tearing another piece of bread. Her hand pauses halfway to her mouth, "How does it feel...to be back here?"

“I’m fine.” I’m anxious, but I’ve never had an easy time talking about my feelings. I don’t always know how to receive comfort, and I don’t look for it anymore. Comfort can’t erase years of torture; I don’t think anything can. But achieving this mission might help.

No, it will.

It must.

Come what may, and may the gods have mercy on anyone or anything that dares, because I won’t.

I don’t know how to communicate that I’m anything other than fine. Whenever I try, it always feels like I’m burdening someone else with my emotions, so I just keep them to myself and keep pushing forward like I always do. Admitting I’m anything less than fine feels like defeat.

“Morning, ladies.” Cayden’s voice has an addictive rasp to it.

“How long have you been awake?” Saskia narrows her eyes at him.

He stretches his arms wide, biceps flexing under the thick leather material that covers them, and mirrors my sitting position beside me. “I slept like a baby.”

“Translation—you hardly slept.” She rolls her eyes. “You don’t sleep enough.” I remember forcing him to sleep a few weeks ago. He looked like he hadn’t slept in days.

He waves a hand through the air while reaching forward to grab his satchel. He unscrews the lid from his canteen and takes a gulp of water. “It’s river crossing day; I could hardly contain my excitement,” he says in a monotone voice.

Finnian lets out an animalistic groan from the back of the cave, and I laugh at Saskia’s startled face. “He’s the worst in the morning,” I inform her.

“Is that a bear?” Ryder shoots forward and sleepily scrambles for a weapon.

“It’s a Finnian,” I answer. Saskia’s shoulders shake with laughter as she watches her brother untangle the cloak he twisted around his legs when he thought he was seconds away from being breakfast.

Finnian is the last of us to get his bearings, but we leave the cave soon after everyone wakes. I take careful steps down the side of the moss-covered cliffs. They’re much damper than they were when we ascended the mountain, and I keep my ears strained to listen for any signs of movement in the forest. Leaves crumple beneath my feet when I hop off the last cliff.

We surge forward into the night. Moonlight cascades through the breaks between branches; it's just enough for us to use while navigating.

Eventually, the forest blends together. No trees stand out from those around it, and I can't focus on anything other than keeping my footing. The air gets cooler as we near the Emer River. We're still a few hours away, but I can already feel the misty chill in my bones. The Emer is the longest river on the continent—stretching from the top of the Seren Mountains, bordering the Etril Forest, and all the way to the Dolent Sea. Legend says that the Goddess of Souls lives in the Etril Forest and that she sends mortals to the Emer to cry their tears of sorrow into.

Every human is broken in some way, whether for love or life, because we feel everything. We're not like the gods. No matter how much we try to detach ourselves from emotions, they still grip us in their clutches. No matter how much I've forced myself to bury my own emotions, they still threaten to pull me under. It's why the Emer is so vast; every soul has something to mourn.

The moon glides away from us, and the stars disappear. Morning light slithers into the sky, chiseling cracks in the darkness. The roar of water meets my ears, and I try to increase my pace but instead crash into Ryder's back. A firm hand reaches out to grasp my arm. I'm yanked back, and something cool presses into my neck.

Cayden locks an arrow in his bow and points it at whoever my back is pressed up against. The stench of stale ale and sweat lingers in a cloud around me. Finnian also locks an arrow but points it at someone approaching Cayden with a sword, halting them in place. Saskia points a sword toward someone approaching Finnian. Ryder draws two short swords and faces three soldiers in the back while angling himself to protect Saskia. We're outnumbered by two; they must have been sleeping here, which is why we didn't hear them. We walked right into their camp.

"The more you press that knife into her, the more you suffer," Cayden speaks in a deadly tone, though he never takes his lethal gaze off me. I drop my eyes to his elbow and then flash back up to his stare, hoping he'll get my message. Finnian's arms shake as he fights to keep his emotions at bay. If he freaks out, he can escalate this fight before the right moment. Over time, I've learned that fighting isn't only about physical strength—it's about timing and wit. Yes, strength helps, but it's worthless if you don't know how to use it.

“You’re trespassing in the Kingdom of Imirath,” the soldier’s voice vibrates against my back.

“I thought we were just taking a stroll through the forest,” I sigh. He presses the knife further into me, and blood trickles down the front of my neck in small beady drops. I don’t flinch when I feel it, but Cayden’s nostrils flare, and his teeth are going to break if he clenches his jaw any tighter.

“You have no proof of us trespassing, you brute,” Saskia shoots out.

“You’re not soldiers of Imirath, and you’re off the main road that citizens are taking. Call it an inkling,” says the soldier Finnian has an arrow pointed toward. I file the information about the road in the back of my mind.

“Well, aren’t you a *finicky* bunch?” I use Finnian’s code name. I know he’s listening because his shoulders lift slightly, only enough for me to see. We’ve gotten into a lot of predicaments where we couldn’t outright communicate, so we figured out a solution—insult our attackers in code and hope they don’t kill us before we can decipher each other’s messages. “You should really *go back* home and sleep off your moods.” His hands tighten around his bow, and I know he understands. Saskia is going to go for the person that has a sword pointed at Finnian, Cayden is going to go for the soldier behind me, which means I’ll go for the soldier behind him, and Ryder needs help taking on three soldiers. Luckily, Ryder didn’t let the soldiers breach the entanglement we’ve gotten ourselves into, so nobody has anything pointed at Saskia.

“Leave no survivors,” sneers the soldier behind me, tired of my sarcasm.

I wrap my hand around the soldier’s wrist and jam my elbow into his stomach before he can slit my throat. I push his hand away as I crouch down and throw a knife in the direction of Cayden’s assailant. It sinks deep into his chest with a deadly crunch. Cayden releases the arrow, which pierces the soldier’s neck exactly where he held a knife to mine. Blood gurgles up the soldier’s throat while he sinks to the ground. Finnian shoots his arrow, taking down one of the soldiers for Ryder, and Saskia slits the neck of the soldier that has a sword pointed at Finnian. Which only leaves two soldiers to take down.

“Well played,” Cayden praises me, turning toward the remainder of the battle. Finnian shoots another arrow, taking down another soldier. Ryder

pulls his sword from the last soldier's chest. He leans down to wipe the blood that coats his blade on the slain soldier's cloak and returns his blade to its sheath.

"Likewise, soldier." I turn toward Cayden when I'm sure nobody needs help, and all the soldiers are dead. His cold eyes drop to my neck. "It doesn't hurt."

He takes a step forward, gently swiping his finger across the cut. Displeasure coats his features. My throat feels tight, which is my usual reaction to his proximity. He's looking at me like the only thing he cares about is making sure I'm okay. It's so easy to get lost in him, his touches, his glances, his words. But I always have to find myself. The whole reason I'm standing in Imirath right now is because of my dragon link; it's not because of who I am as a person. He's with me because of my dragons, and I'm with him because of his army, but it's getting harder to remember by the minute. He reaches into my bag and pulls a roll of bandages free as a set of footsteps approach us. I pluck the roll from his hand, ignoring the jolt that shoots through me as our fingertips brush.

"I'll retrieve your knife, you blood-thirsty, beautiful, angel." Cayden smirks down at me, and I snicker. "We'll clean the cut later," he says, walking in the direction of Ryder and Saskia.

Finnian stops a few feet in front of me and grimaces when he sees my neck. "I've had worse," I shrug, unwrapping the bandages and doing two quick loops around my neck.

"That doesn't mean I'm numb to seeing you hurt," he replies, stepping forward to help me tie the bandage off. "Good?"

I nod my head in response. "I'm glad you remembered our code."

"Smart thinking." He taps his index finger on my head.

"I found something!" Saskia exclaims. Finnian and I crane our heads in her direction and see her holding a piece of paper. We walk over while she skims over whatever it says. "Thank the gods, two good things!"

"Damn, usually we don't even get one," Ryder mumbles.

"First," Saskia says, ignoring Ryder, "we can use this to get across the river in daylight, which will cut our travel time."

"How so?" Finnian asks, uneasy on his feet. "We just dealt with one skirmish; we don't need another one in broad daylight with no coverage."

"It's an order to get back to the castle. All we have to do is show the seal. The letter isn't addressed to anyone specific, so I doubt who we are

will be of importance.” She closes the letter to reform the broken seal.

“We can take the cloaks from the soldiers. It’ll help us blend in since our cloaks don’t have the silver trim,” I offer.

“We’re going to steal from dead men?” Finnian asks.

“It’s not like they’re going to tell anyone,” Cayden responds.

“They also won’t protest if we take their horses too,” I add.

“Absolutely pitiless.” Cayden looks at me with a dark gleam in his eyes.

“What’s the second good thing?” he asks, looking back at Saskia.

She smirks, “There’s a masquerade ball tomorrow night.”

I gasp and let the shock that grips me to melt into hopefulness. Hope is a dangerous thing, something I don’t often let myself feel, but I can’t stop myself. Judging by the looks on everyone’s faces, we all have the same thought—it will be so much easier to infiltrate the castle during a masquerade ball. We’ll be wearing masks, so there’s less of a chance for anyone to recognize us.

There’s a small crack in the woods behind us. We all fall silent for a few moments, but nothing comes from it. It’s most likely a small creature, but we should still get out of here now. Cayden appears next to me as I walk over to the saddled horses. We only need five out of the seven, but we aren’t far from the bridge, so a patrol will find them soon.

“What about the bodies?” I ask Cayden.

“We’ll be across the river by the time someone spots them. Garrick won’t strengthen the castle because of a few dead soldiers on the other side of the Emer.” I hope he’s right. I knew it was a low possibility to get to the castle without encountering any soldiers, but it still feels wrong to just leave evidence behind. He must notice the uneasiness on my face because he adds, “We’re going to need to acquire proper disguises if we’re going to infiltrate a masquerade ball.”

A smile lifts the corner of my lips. “Will the robbery ever end?” We have some money with us, but nowhere near enough for ball gowns and suits.

“Ask me again when you’re not stealing another horse.”

“You can’t steal from a dead man!” I poke him in the side. “And this is mutual *stealing* between all of us, so my debauchery cancels out.”

“The morals on the two of you are admirable,” Ryder jests.

“Don’t act like you don’t share them,” Cayden says.

“I do,” Ryder smirks, “I just prefer the more subtle approach to duplicity.”

CHAPTER
FORTY-TWO



We nestle into a narrow alleyway in the capital of Imirath, the city of Zinambra. None of us have ventured into the heart of the city yet. We all agreed the less exposure, the better, and plan on hiding out here and taking our chances later. Saskia assured me that Ryder, Cayden, and she are all too new in their positions to be recognized on the streets. They've never been to a war council—tension has been too high to even attempt to convene one. But just to be safe, Finnian is currently inside the inn we stand beside to book us a room. I volunteered to book the room but was met with a unanimous protest.

I've never been to a place like this before. Well, I suppose I have been here but not truly. The Emer breaks off into several canals, which is what the city is built on, with several bridges stretching across the canals to connect everything. We're on the edge of the center isle, the most populated one that leads directly to the castle.

Water trickles under the wooden boards we stand on, pushing and pulling the tide under us depending on the boats that slowly float by. The inn is on the edge of the isle, so building a dock was necessary. A light dusting of snow coats the roofs of the surrounding buildings, and boats dodge small pieces of ice in the water. The smoke that lingers around chimneys is a mocking contrast to the breath that clouds in front of my face.

My knuckles and cheeks are red and raw from the piercing wind. I sneak a glance up at Cayden and take in his reddened cheeks. I imagine it would make him look boyish if his glare alone couldn't cut a man down without a fight. The reflection of the sun off the water makes his hazel eyes

look more green than brown. They flash down to me before I have the chance to pull my gaze away. A sliver of warmth penetrates his eyes, and his lips lift in a smirk, betraying the usual scowl he gives the world.

I jerk my eyes away, focusing on the cracks in the wood below me. If my cheeks were not already red from the cold, they would have heated under his gaze. The dock creaks below us as he shifts beside me, leaning closer to my ear. "Careful, angel, your glare doesn't have as much sting as it normally does," he says in a teasing tone.

"My glares sting you?" I tease back and force my eyes to meet his again. They shimmer in amusement, but it's better than him glaring at every single boat that passes by. I don't think he realizes he's glaring; I think his face is just naturally angry.

"Deeply." He presses a hand to his chest. "Your hatred captivates me."

"You make it very easy," I retort.

"Perhaps," his eyes flare in challenge, "but that doesn't change the fact that you are the sweetest curse bestowed upon me."

My breath hitches in my throat, and his eyes fall to my lips before slowly climbing their way up my face, meeting my eyes again. His gaze has darkened, and his smirk isn't as prominent. He opens his mouth to say something but cuts himself off when he hears a set of footsteps coming our way. He whips his head forward and angles his body slightly in front of mine. Finnian rounds the corner, fiery curls swaying in the icy wind that flies off the water.

"Almost everywhere is full because of the ball, but they offered us the attic room if we want it," Finnian says, licking his chapped lips.

It doesn't surprise me that all the inns are full. Citizens probably made their reservations weeks in advance. I don't care if we have to stay in the attic; I just want to get out of the cold for a few moments. It feels like it's seeping into my bones and boots. All four of us nod in unison and push off the walls we're leaning against. Cayden stretches his arm to the side and gently presses his hand into my lower back, urging me to walk in front of him.

We file out of the alleyway and round a corner that leads to the entrance of the weather-worn inn. I climb the few creaky steps, sandwiched between Finnian and Cayden, and walk into the warmth of the crowded building. Finnian reaches a hand up to the owner, who stands behind a busy counter to signal that we're taking the room. The inn doubles as a tavern, as most

inns do, and the smell of a hearty winter stew hangs heavily in the air. I keep my head down, not wanting to risk making eye contact with the wrong person, and follow Finnian's footsteps to the narrow staircase.

The ceiling of the stairway is warped and slanted, which causes Finnian, Cayden, and Ryder to hunch over as we round the third level. Rather than another hallway lined with rooms, the stairway to the final level only leads to a single door. Finnian bounds up the stairs and stretches his arm to the top of the door frame to retrieve the key, puffing dust into the air in the process. The door creaks against the rusty hinges as he pushes it open. Light streams through the double windows directly in front of me. We have a view of the canal and several rickety buildings, resembling the same shade of wood as the inn. There's no fireplace in the room, but it's still decently warm in here—much better than sleeping outside. The room is equipped with two beds side by side and a couch.

I take a seat on the bed closest to the window. Finnian sinks down beside me, claiming his spot. A notch loosens in my chest when I see Cayden walk to the couch out of the corner of my eye. This is how the arrangements should be. My mind repeats that it's good to put distance between us. However, I've said the words so many times that they've stopped holding as much weight as they should.

My eyes betray me and glance in his direction, only to find him already gazing at me. I don't jerk my eyes away. Neither does he. His legs spread and he leans into the soft cushions. One of his toned arms stretches along the top of the couch while the other rests at his side. His long fingers drum against his thigh; it's as if he's silently challenging me to climb onto him. His eyes are laced with dare and decadence, and I can practically hear his sensual whisper in my mind, reminding me of how much I enjoyed myself when I last sat on his lap.

"I'll toss your body into the canal if you kick me in your sleep, got it?" Saskia growls.

"Relax," Ryder drawls. "We can make a pillow line. I don't want to see your face while I'm trying to sleep. It might give me nightmares." He sticks his tongue out at his sister. She hits him with a pillow before packing it into their pillow line while mimicking him in a mocking tone.

"I've been scheming," Saskia declares, taking a seat on the edge of her bed, unaware of the silent battle between Cayden and me. I look away from

him to focus on Saskia and the mission, but I can still see his gaze linger on me from the corner of my eye.

Cayden clears his throat and looks away after an extended moment. “You’re always scheming,” he responds.

“As are you,” she retorts before getting back on track. “We’re obviously going to have to split up to infiltrate the castle because all five of us together will draw too many eyes. Three of us should enter through the dungeon door Elowen mentioned, and two of us should enter through the main entrance in proper masquerade attire.”

“Elowen and I will enter through the main entrance,” Cayden states. Finnian whips his head in my direction, wanting my approval. I know he doesn’t want to separate from me, but he’ll be safer if he’s farther away. This was mine and Cayden’s mission from the beginning, and it still is. It’s what forged our alliance and partnership.

“I agree with him,” I say. Finnian doesn’t challenge it. Neither does Saskia or Ryder.

Saskia continues, “Elowen and Cayden will enter through the main entrance and take part in the ball. It’ll be easier to get to the dragon chamber from there, considering that’s where the amulet took her through. Finnian, Ryder, and I will steal guard uniforms, get the key, and get it to you in the ballroom.”

Ryder runs a hand along his jaw, “There’s a lot that could go wrong.”

“Those usually make for the best plans,” Finnian muses. Ryder’s calculating eyes flash to Finnian, but he doesn’t deny him.

“I have a condition,” I state. “We must travel back to Vareveth separately. We don’t know what chaos will come after Cayden and I release the dragons; it’s too unpredictable. They might follow me right away, or they might not. You three need to be out of the castle and riding away by the time we get to the chamber. We’ll wait in the ballroom to give you a head start.”

“You can steal a boat and travel down the Emer. It’ll get you to Vareveth faster than the route we took to get here. The river will be crowded due to the ball; it’s the perfect coverage,” Cayden adds. I glance over at him and offer a small smile of appreciation for supporting my condition before anyone else speaks. He nods in acknowledgment before fixing his hard eyes back on the group, daring anyone to challenge him. We could’ve taken that route if we knew about the number of people traveling through Imirath.

Finnian's jaw is locked, and Ryder looks to Saskia, who twiddles with her tied back braids. "It makes sense," she whispers, not wanting to bring the truth to the light.

Finnian pinches the bridge of his nose while getting to his feet. He glances out the window toward the canal. "We should head out soon to scout out where we'll rob later."

"It sounds so gross when you say it like that." Saskia rolls her eyes.

"How else would you like me to say it?" Finnian turns away from the window to face us.

"Redefining ownership," I chime in, smiling at Finnian, who meets my grin with one of his own.

"Sometimes, I truly love your mind," he sings, swinging the key ring on his finger.

After resting for a few hours, we file out of our room to head into town. Since we're on the most populated isle, we shouldn't have to go far before reaching the boutiques. The cold air is like a slap in the face after our brief reprieve from it. I pull the hood of my cloak forward to cover my ears. The dock is so narrow that only two lines of people can fit. We walk in single file toward the town while others walk in single file from it. I resist the urge to hold my arms out to balance myself as we cross parts without any railings, at risk of looking like an off-balanced baby deer taking their first steps.

The dock ends and opens to a wider walkway now that we've made it onto the solid ground of the isle. I walk silently beside Cayden as shops loom into view. Fire pits appear every few feet, giving the townspeople a warm place to regroup on their shopping or eating endeavors. The scent of smoked fish and meats, mixed with something sweet, lingers in the air. A strange feeling settles in my chest as I take in the life around me.

In all my nightmares of Imirath, I never imagined there to be so much... *life.*

Every image conjured in my mind has been a dark, sinister place where only pain could blossom. I imagined faceless citizens suffering under the reign of my father. I didn't imagine children laughing in the streets, bustling shops, or couples sharing food in restaurants. This isn't the Imirath I know, but it's here, and it exists. It feels like I've been lying to myself or that I've been lied to...I don't know. Even if this is how people view Imirath, it'll never be how I view it. My memory will forever be stained with evil,

torture, a dark dungeon, and blood. It's strange how two people can look at the same thing and perceive it entirely different.

My steps begin to slow, and Cayden looks back at me, eyes narrowing in assessment. He halts his steps, but the other three in our group stop a few steps ahead. They're taking in the town before we enter the chaos. I'm sure it'll be filled with elbow bumping and muttered apologies.

"What's wrong?" Cayden asks, stepping closer and lowering his tone so only I can hear him.

I shake my head and plaster a smile on my face, "I'm just hungry. It's been a while since I had a proper meal."

"If I put a plate of food in front of you, you'd nibble on it like you've been nibbling on everything for days." His narrowed eyes dance over my face and rigid posture. "Tell me."

I clench my jaw, hating how he can read me. Nobody else questions or pushes me to the level he does. My eyes are drawn to the town again, and I breathe through the pressure in my chest. "I just—" I cut myself off, feeling stupid saying the words out loud. I turn back toward Cayden, meeting his gaze. It's easier saying this while looking at him. "I didn't expect there to be so much life here. I always imagined a place filled with suffering—not this," I wave my hand toward the town before toying with the end of my braid. "I was ignorant to think everyone suffered here."

"Don't belittle yourself." His hands twitch at his sides, but he restrains himself from reaching out to me. "The rich suffer last. They take the food from poor farmers suffering from famine. It's the poor that Garrick uses as collateral damage in his army. The rich go to bed with full stomachs in warm houses, but the poor starve in the cold. This place is a facade. Rulers have the option of ignoring suffering in favor of comfort, and Garrick takes advantage of that. There is life here because the pain is kept tucked away, far from the eyes of the privileged. I will not listen to you question your intelligence, or believe you fall short in comparison to Garrick, or anyone else, in any way. You transcend him and any other ruler I've had the displeasure of encountering."

The harsh look in his eyes contrasts his words. Cayden isn't soft, he's not the person someone would seek out for comfort or kindness, and yet he's the person that knows exactly what to say to me. He's the person who lulled me to sleep in the place that chases me from it, and now he's the person reassuring me in the middle of enemy territory. The dragons were

never mentioned in his statement; he only spoke of me. He believes *I'm* worthy.

He just said that I transcend his own king and queen, and he doesn't show any signs of regretting his treasonous statement.

"Cayden," I begin, but emotions constrict my throat. He balls his fists at his sides but stays rigid in place. The burn of his gaze is so fierce that I can feel it weighing me down. He has the power to transfix me. I've never given anyone power over me, least of all him, but I think he just took it without my knowledge and keeps some part of me under lock and key. I don't know how he did it, but I can't bring myself to care, not when he's looking at me like I'm the only person that exists within a hundred-mile radius. There's a chip carved in the shape of his name within the walls I've built around myself. My realization only makes it harder to think, harder to speak. I can see the group turning back toward us, and I know I need to pull myself together. "Thank you," I whisper.

It's a simple phrase, but I can't find anything else to convey my feelings. I wrack my brain for every word I've ever read, heard, or spoke, but they all fall short in comparison to what I'm desperately trying to communicate. His eyes soften a fraction, and I pray to the gods I haven't prayed to since I nearly bled out in the same kingdom we're standing in that he understands me. I haven't received much kindness in my life, and I don't always know how to react when I receive it. I wish I was more eloquent in moments like these. Kindness is a language I can speak, but don't know how to listen to it.

He nods his head in understanding, inching closer to me. His eyes trace the way my shoulders have loosened, the way my brows have relaxed, the way my braid rests against my chest now that I'm not anxiously twiddling the strands. I inhale a steadying breath, and his eyes fall to my parted lips. The sun beats down on us, its rays doing nothing to breach the icy chill in the air that makes me want to pull him against me, but the air between us is thick with unspoken words and restraint. The white scar that drags along his right cheek is illuminated by the light that reflects off the ice in the canal. Without thinking, I step forward and grab the hood of his cloak that rests against his shoulders. His breathing hitches, but he makes no move to touch me—the only thing that caresses me is his gaze.

"What are you doing?"

“It’ll help hide your scar when we head into town,” I answer in a soft voice, matching his tone.

“Right.” His eyes dart away from mine, and he presses his lips together.

“We’ll have to find a mask that covers it,” I add, pulling the hood over his head.

“I know,” he snaps, his intense eyes slamming into me. I drop my hands from the fabric and visibly flinch back; the harshness in his tone surprises me. It’s an old habit of mine to flinch when I’m vulnerable.

“I’m sorry,” I rush out, hating that I breached upon something that made him uncomfortable. Remorse fills his eyes, and the space between his brows creases in worry. His frown deepens when I take another step back.

“Elowen.” He reaches a hand out to me but drops it when I shake my head.

“It’s fine, don’t worry. I should have assumed you thought about it already.” I offer a tight-lipped smile that I know he can see through. Sometimes, I think he can see all the parts of myself I try to hide. He opens his mouth but snaps it shut when the group breaches our space. My heart twists when he pulls his hood farther up, sinking into the darkness. I clasp my hands behind my back, so nobody notices the slight tremor that travels through them.

Perhaps I was wrong when I thought he looks at his scar and sees a proud survivor.

CHAPTER
FORTY-THREE



“There’s three tasks we need to accomplish, so we’ll have to split up,” Saskia begins. “Elowen’s attire, Cayden’s attire, and forged invitations.”

“I can handle my attire,” I offer.

“I’ll come with you; you’ll need more things than Cayden.” Saskia smiles at me. “Plus, I just want to shop, and need a break from men.”

“I’ll handle my attire,” Cayden says. “I don’t need help.” That just leaves Finnian and Ryder to handle the invitations.

“We overheard someone talking about a few gambling dens along the west side of the isle. We can start there,” Finnian states.

“Remember,” Ryder declares as he scans his eyes over all of us, “no fighting,” he finishes while looking at Cayden.

“Me? Never.” Cayden raises his hands in surrender, breaking away from the group and disappearing into the crowd.

Saskia and I enter the throngs of people. We link our arms together to keep from being separated in the sea of chaos. Someone bumps into my shoulder rather harshly. I spin on my heels and raise my hand to flip them off, but Saskia pokes me in the side.

“No fighting,” she imitates Ryder’s voice. I let out a soft laugh at her goofy, far-off impression. “I saw a dress shop not too far up the road. We’ll have to wait for the cover of darkness, but it won’t be long before the sun sets.”

“I’ll have to size up so I can fit my leathers underneath. I just won’t thread my arms through my sleeves, and the corset will hide the extra fabric beneath the dress.” She nods her head in agreement. I’m happy Saskia is the

one with me right now. Her presence is like a calming force. She also has a keen eye for fashion. I remember the ballgown she helped me design a few weeks ago. “I never thanked you for adding the gold vines onto my dress.”

A smirk tugs her plump lips upward. “That wasn’t me.”

“What?” I blink in confusion. “But you placed the order for our gowns and the boys’ attire.”

“Indeed, I did.” She guides us past the dress shop she mentioned. So many people litter the sidewalk in front of the shop that I’m unable to get a good look at it before we turn the corner. However, I managed to get a glimpse of several beautiful gowns in varying shades of popular colors hanging on mannequins—red, blue, and purple, among others. Those are usually the colors people favor in the colder months.

Saskia sits us at a small table outside of a bakery. The scent of sugar and sweetness filters through the air. If we’re going to blend in, then we may as well enjoy it. She picks up the light pink menu from the table and scans her eyes over it. I do the same, letting my questions simmer quietly. It still amazes me how many food options are available to me now. A woman with short black hair pops out of the bakery and struts over to us. She places a bag of logs in the fire pit to my left and sets it ablaze. The fire roars to life, breaching the icy chill around us.

“What can I get you two lovely ladies?” the woman asks.

“We’ll take a pot of decaf rose tea and two raspberry and cheese danishes,” Saskia smiles.

“That will be right out,” the woman says before turning back toward the door and disappearing inside. It’s not a bad place to hang out for a while, and Saskia is always good company. The weird feeling that settled in my chest while first viewing the town isn’t as prominent as it was. My mind is preoccupied with monitoring everyone that passes, making sure their eyes don’t linger on Saskia or me for too long.

“I did place the order for the dresses,” Saskia picks up on our earlier conversation, “but I left the designs for the dresses on Cayden’s coffee table that night. I took them to the shop the morning after we designed them... with alterations made to your dress and the instructions of payment written in a familiar hand.”

My hands grip the cold, metal armrests of my chair, trying to steady myself even though I’m sitting. Cayden helped design my dress, and it was a beautiful addition. It must have been expensive to add all that detailing. I

remember seeing his face as he drank me in from the bottom of the stairs. His features were laced with wonderstruck awe and appreciation. *Wait.* His suit was embellished with the same green and gold detailing as my dress. I hadn't thought deeply into his suit when I saw it because I figured Saskia orchestrated the whole thing, but it was him. He wanted to stand beside me that night *and match me.*

Emotions swarm inside me—confusion and happiness being the most prominent. But then I remember the expression on his face only mere moments ago when I mentioned his scar. My happiness deflates, and the memory of the ball is whisked away and replaced by Cayden's eyes simmering in anger and regret. My brain urges me to go find him, to apologize, but I know I can't.

The waitress places a teal teapot and two matching teacups on the table. A sweet aroma of baked berries and cheese drifts up to my nose. The sight of the danishes makes my mouth water. "Do you need anything else?" she asks while pouring the tea.

"No, that's all. Thank you," I smile.

"I'll leave the bill. Take your time and stay as long as you'd like," the waitress says, placing a small piece of paper with prices scribbled in smudged ink onto the table. She turns away from us and slips into the bakery once more.

I may not be able to find Cayden right now, but I know he would care more about me finishing this pastry than anything else. My hands lift the danish to my mouth, and I sink my teeth into the soft, flaky bread. The tartness of the raspberries mingles with the savory cheese on my tastebuds. Gods, this is amazing. I add it to my mental lists of pastries to make Cayden try, and pastries I want to learn how to bake.

"What color do you think I should wear tomorrow?" I ask, wanting to take a break from the Cayden talk for now.

She purses her lips in assessment after swallowing, "I really like that deep purple color in the window, or maybe maroon. Those look good with your dark hair." She sits back in her chair and sighs toward the sky. "Gods, it's nice having a girl in the group."

I laugh into my teacup while taking a sip. The warmth of the cup feels delightful against my cold fingers. "Has it always been just the three of you?"

“Yes,” she nods. “I met Cayden when we were sixteen, and Ryder was seventeen. It’s been around ten years together, maybe more—I don’t remember exactly how long.”

I figured they met when they were young. I hesitate before asking my next question, “How did you all meet?”

She takes a deep breath, sitting forward to place her teacup back on the saucer. My hands tighten around mine, preparing myself for the story she’s about to begin. “Ryder and I met Cayden soon after we ran away from our home in Feynadra. Both of my parents were cruel, not in the way your father was, but in the way they viewed us as assets.” She pauses briefly, recalling the memory. “Ever since I was young, I always craved knowledge. I would sneak into the library and read any books on strategy I could find, but my parents didn’t like that. Ryder was always interested in swords and painting, but my parents forced him into politics, and he hated it. They viewed my interests as an act of rebellion, to be focused on nourishing my mind and not doing my part in securing a match that would advance us.”

“My parents never hit me, but they would punish me for reading. They would withhold food, they hired a whipping boy, and eventually, they locked the library and arranged a match for me. My height and curves developed at a young age, and since I appeared older, my parents treated me like I was older. That’s when Ryder and I decided to run away. The idea was always in our minds, though we never thought it would come to pass. When I was informed of the match, Ryder packed bags for both of us, and we left that night.”

I have to put the teacup on the table to stop myself from breaking it. The thought of a young Saskia being forced into marriage as a child, all because she wanted to nourish her mind, sets my teeth on edge. Now I understand why she gets so excited whenever new reports come in; it’s because she’s living the life she never thought she would have. She’s in a position where her mind is valued by her allies and envied by her enemies. She hasn’t gone into detail about what Ryder went through in the household, but I can’t imagine it was pleasant.

“We couldn’t take any money with us because my father would have been able to take legal action. We had no place to stay. I fell ill with fever once our food ran out and wasn’t getting better. Ryder’s first instinct has always been to protect me, despite logic, so he carried me over the border of Feynadra and into one of the slums of Vareveth with only a blunt blade to

protect us. He walked us right into a tavern filled with criminals. It was the kind of place where desperate people make deals with anyone that could help them, no matter the cost.”

“Ryder was prepared to sign himself into a gang just to get someone to help me. We had no money, all he could offer was himself. But Ryder didn’t have much skill with a blade at that point because our parents always discouraged it. That’s when we met Cayden. Ryder waltzed right up to the table he was eating at. He was alone, and from the way he looked at us, he hated being approached. He was so young, but he was easily the most menacing one there. If you think his glare is bad now, then you should’ve seen it back then. I don’t think even you could’ve softened it.” I look down at my lap when she finishes her last sentence. I’m not sure I have that much power over him, but I care more about listening to Saskia share her story than debating over Cayden’s feelings toward me.

“Nobody knows Cayden’s full backstory, but he had his scar when we met, so I know he was just a boy when he got it. Sometimes he lets bits and pieces of his past drop, but the way he looked...” She shivers and takes a sip of tea before continuing. “He denied us at first. He knew we had nothing to offer him and didn’t want to be bothered. When Ryder told him he was there because he needed a way to save me, his sister, Cayden agreed. Not graciously, but he agreed. After that, we slowly became a team, and then we became a family. Cayden may have protected us that night, but we’ve protected each other countless times throughout our lives. I love Cayden like a brother, and I always tell people I have two.”

My mind is reeling from all the information she just laid on me. I sip my tea, giving myself a few seconds to prepare a proper sentence in response. “Your father was a believer in the old ways, I presume?”

The old ways of the continent dictate women belong in the home—not on the battlefield, in politics, in forges, in businesses, or anywhere else. I’ve always believed that weak men fear powerful women. There’s absolutely nothing wrong with keeping a home, but everyone deserves an equal opportunity to pursue whatever they wish. Most people have moved on from the old ways, but there’s always those few idiots that can’t take their heads out of their dead ancestors’ asses long enough to look at the world in front of them.

“Big time,” Saskia scoffs. Her eyes drop to her hands, and I can tell she hates talking about her past. My heart drops in tandem with her lips turning

down.

“Saskia, your mind is unlike any other I’ve ever encountered. None of us would have made it this far into the heist without you.” Her troubled eyes flash toward me. The mindset is disgusting, deplorable, and disgraceful. I’d like to challenge each and every man that deems me lesser than them and prove just how well I can best them. I’d also like to watch Saskia go head-to-head in a battle of intellect because I firmly believe nobody can beat her. “Every corner of the world will know your name when we pull this heist off. Your father won’t be able to escape how powerful your mind is because everyone will know how you used it to best King Garrick Atarah and his impenetrable castle. People might even write songs about you and your boundless brain.”

A corner of her lips twists upward. “Your father won’t be able to escape you either.”

“What a pity for him.” A sinister smile spreads across my face. “Let’s show them what kind of claws we grow when they pinch our wings.”

She brings her teacup forward, hovering it in the space between us, “To getting what we deserve and retaliating against those that have wronged us.”

Our teacups clink together, and we drain them before placing them back on the table. She shoots me an infectious smile and reaches over to squeeze my hand. It feels good to talk like this with someone else, to know that more than one person wants to know me, and I want to know someone. Throughout this entire endeavor, I’ve come to the unquestionable conclusion that I’m very grateful I met Saskia Neredras.

“Speaking of my mind and my scheming, the owner left through the back door about five minutes ago.” She drops some money on the table while getting to her feet. The street is close to deserted, save for a few workers cleaning outdoor tables and putting out fires. The sky is a deep orange color, which means it’ll be dark soon.

“Cover me,” I mutter.

We round the corner and enter the alleyway that leads to the back entrance. My two smallest knives find their way into my hands and make quick work picking the lock. I have far too much practice doing this. I slip them back into my holsters and whistle to Saskia while slowly pushing the door open. My gaze peers inside to make sure all the lanterns are out, and

detect no signs of movement. When I know we're safe, we slip into the shop and lock the door behind us.

"Let's make this as quick as possible," Saskia says while heading over to a rack in the back. "These sizes should fit you with your leathers underneath."

"I'll be fine over here. Try to find a mask, makeup, and something to do with my hair."

She nods and leaves me by the dress rack. "What color?" she calls over her shoulder, filtering through a display of masks.

I run my fingers along a maroon velvet corset with a gem between the breasts. It has a sweetheart neckline with two off-the-shoulder satin straps. The bottom is a sea of deep maroon tulle; it'll be perfect for hiding my boots beneath. "I'll pack this one into a box. It's maroon."

"Perfect!" Saskia exclaims while grabbing a mask from the table and tossing it over to me. I don't waste time looking at it since I trust Saskia's judgment and place it in the box while folding the dress on top of it. The sun has fully disappeared from the sky, and I want to get out of here before guards go on night patrol. Saskia shoves some red jeweled hairpins into her pockets, and I rush over toward the makeup section. I'll be wearing a mask, so I don't bother grabbing too much, just the basics, mascara, lipstick, and tinted powder. I shove them in my pockets while walking over to the large dress box and hoist it in my arms.

"We'll stick to the alleyways for as long as we can. We should be clear by the time we get back to the dock," Saskia whispers as presses her ear against the door and listens for any signs of someone in the alleyway.

We slip into the night and take off at a quick pace. Our steps are feather light against the stone streets. We pause before crossing intersections, making sure no sounds are coming our way. A few people loiter along the sides of the roads, but none of them are wearing guard uniforms nor pay us any mind.

We slow our pace once we're far enough from the dress shop and the line of boutiques. Taking on a leisurely stroll while catching our breath. The dock that leads to the inn we're staying at looms in front of us.

"I haven't stolen anything in years," she says as we step onto the creaking dock. "You're a bad influence."

"You say bad influence, I say adventurous influence," I muse. She glances over at me, and the pair of us break out into a fit of laughter that

floats up to the moon.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR



A dark figure with their hood pulled up is sitting on the steps of the inn when we make it back. They're twirling a silver knife that catches moonlight along the edge. I know it's Cayden, and my suspicions are confirmed when he looks up to meet my gaze over the dress box. I would know his eyes in my sleep, even in darkness. He stands from the steps but stays at the base of them, not coming any closer. I don't realize I've stopped on the small bridge until Saskia reaches around to take the dress box from my arms.

"He's not here for me," she whispers before walking toward the inn. Cayden reaches behind him and opens the door for her, never taking his eyes off me.

It's not long before he closes the distance between us and stands in front of me. I hold the wooden railing in an iron grip. The harshness I had seen in his eyes a few hours ago is gone, but the remorse remains.

"Did you find everything you need?" he asks in a low voice while pulling his hood down.

I nod my head, swallowing through the tight feeling in my throat. "Did you?"

"Yes," he confirms, darting his eyes away from me quickly.

"I'm sorry," I blurt out, looking at his boots. His gaze focuses on me, and I force myself to look up again. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. It wasn't my intention."

"No, Elowen," he shakes his head, "you don't have anything to be sorry for." If he's not looking for an apology, then why was he waiting outside? It's freezing out here, and the cold is only amplified by the wind that drifts

off the icy canal. He turns away from me and grips the railing with both hands, bowing his head. "I didn't mean to snap at you. I just—" Cayden struggles to find the words he wants to say; it's a feeling I know all too well. His unspoken words are suffocating him. "Fuck," he mutters under his breath.

My heart clenches as I watch him struggle, "Cayden, it's okay. We can go inside."

"No. You said you want communication," he declares, snapping his eyes open and turning back toward me. "Let me do this for you. I know I'm terrible at it, but I'm trying."

Thankfulness falls over me like a blanket, wrapping me up, keeping me safe and warm. He's trying for me. My emotions are bare on my face. I don't hide how much I appreciate his effort because he's showing himself to me, and it's more intimate than when I felt his lips on mine.

The crease between his brows eases a bit when he looks into my eyes, seeing my decision to stay reflected within them. "I don't talk about feelings; I never have or wanted to. They've never been important to me or something I focused on. I also never had anyone to talk about them with—you're the only one. I know you can see my scar; I just don't like knowing you can see it. It caught me off guard when you mentioned it earlier because you never spoke of it before. You mentioned it when we were sparring, but I expected that after I started making jabs at you. When I was younger, most people brought it up as soon as they saw me. I can still tell they want to ask about it, but my reputation ties their tongues. It's never been like that with you. When you look at me, I feel like you see *me*, not a scar or a story."

"You're more than a scar or a story...so much more," I whisper, but he hears every word. "Nobody should ask you about it, it's not fair to you. You don't owe anyone an explanation, not even me. You don't have to be ashamed of your scar, Cayden. Why do you care so much that I see it?"

"I don't want you seeing the ugly parts of me because I care about your opinion, I value it. The scar is from a time that I failed, and I don't want you to think I'll fail you," the words run from him as if he's trying to force his syllables to cross the finish line before his mind can rein them back in.

The brunt of his honesty slams into me harder than a punch to the gut. Suddenly, I'm not only looking at this Cayden, my version. I'm also looking at the burdened boy that sat alone in a tavern when Saskia met him.

The boy that hated the world and everything in it. I hope that boy would be proud of the man standing in front of me, trying for someone.

“Don’t you dare think that, not for one damn minute.” I force my walls to stay down. I owe him the same honesty he’s giving me. “The only reason I was able to fall asleep in the cave was because I felt safe with you. The thought of you failing me or letting harm come to me never crossed my mind.”

“You flinched, Elowen,” he stares at me with anguished filled eyes. “You must know I would never hurt you, nor let harm come to you. You flinched away from me and part of me died inside.”

“I know, Cayden. I didn’t flinch because of *you*.” I take a step closer to him but drop my eyes to the icy water we stand above. “Both of us are burdened by our pasts, my scars just aren’t as visible,” I whisper.

“Every part of you, every scar both visible and invisible, are utterly beautiful to me,” he murmurs.

“As are yours to me.” My eyes briefly drift to his scar before meeting his eyes again, “I don’t know how you got the scar, and you don’t have to tell me, but just know that even if I knew the reason behind it, I wouldn’t turn away from you. I think it makes you brave to face your past every day when you look in the mirror.”

He looks down at me with the same wide-eyed expression he did when I descended the stairs at the ball, but it feels more intimate this time. This look isn’t because of beauty; this look is because of something far deeper than that. I don’t know who wronged him in the past or who abandoned him, but I’m not going to be one of those people. Without letting myself think better of it, I brace my hands on his broad shoulders, stand on the tips of my toes, tilt my head forward, and press my lips into his scarred cheek. I feel a shiver travel up his spine, and he lets out a shuddering breath.

When I pull my head back, he’s looking at me with an emotion I can’t recognize, but it makes my insides melt. I leave my hands on his shoulders. He stares at me for a few more moments before reaching a hand up to take mine in his. He brings it over to his lips and places a tender kiss on my knuckles. He leaves our hands interlocked between us and slowly traces his thumb along my skin.

My palms tingle with anxiety, this may be the only time I have alone with him before we infiltrate the castle, and I don’t want to bring this up

with anyone else present. “There’s something I need to talk about with you,” I whisper.

He nods, brows crinkling slightly, “Do you want to sit down?”

My instincts tell me to run away, sprint up the stairs and climb into bed and forgo this entire conversation. This must have been what he felt like when he gave me a glimpse into himself. Gods, it makes me want to dig deep and just hand him one of the shards of my broken self that I’ve patched together, but I’m afraid of piercing my own skin in the process. My eyes drop from his again as shame wraps around me. I shake my head, sinking into myself, “It’s fine. Maybe we should just go—”

“Don’t do that, Elowen.” He uses his free hand to tilt my chin back toward him. His eyes are still filled with openness and patience, but have steel and reassurance embedded into them. “Don’t retreat into your mind unless you’re taking me there with you.”

A broken laugh crackles in my chest; it’s a hollow sound filled with anything but humor. It’s forged in the realization that Cayden Veles is under my skin and in my mind, and I don’t want to get him out. “It’s about the bond.”

He moves his hand from my chin and rests it on the back of my neck. His fingers stroke the stress from my posture and help me get the words out. A shaky exhale drifts out of me, and my breath clouds in front of my face. I like to consider myself a fairly confident person, but that doesn’t mean I’m immune to self-doubt. I squeeze my eyes shut...*try for him like he tried for you.*

“I tried to go back for my dragons when Ailliard took me away from Imirath.” His fingers still on the back of my neck, and my eyes slip open to take in his shocked expression. He quickly blinks it away when he notices my eyes are open again and resumes his motions, waiting for me to continue. “My body was weak and frail and couldn’t overpower Ailliard no matter how much I tried. It pained me to leave them, and I could feel the pain right here,” I point to a section of my chest close to my heart, which starts to beat out of control. My breathing is coming out in short, shallow breaths. My corset is working against me in the worst ways. “What if the bond broke that night? What if they hate me and don’t want me anymore? They might not even remember me. I can’t lead you into a trap. I *won’t* lead you into a trap.”

“Listen to me, Elowen,” he cuts off my rambling by grabbing my face in his rough, calloused hands, forcing me to stare into his reassuring eyes. “I know exactly what I’m getting myself into. I’ve known we would end up here from the moment we struck the deal because you have a fierceness like no other. You’re a wildfire I have no intention of smothering. There’s no trap, the five of us are the trap. Saskia said the bond can’t be broken, just dulled over time, and I trust her brain more than I trust my own sometimes. She doesn’t state a fact without doing the proper research. The dragons will remember you. I can’t imagine a reality where you could be unwanted. Believe in yourself the way I believe in you.”

His words squeeze my heart, and I push away from him. It’s too painful to look at him when I know we’re walking into certain danger tomorrow, and I’ve started to view him as a constant in my life. Everything is unpredictable the second we step through the threshold. So many things can go wrong, and I don’t know what my future looks like without him. His absence is something I don’t want to learn to live with.

“I won’t let them take me alive if something goes wrong tomorrow,” I confess.

One of his hands flashes to grip the wooden railing. “I will kill anyone that comes near you,” he says through gritted teeth.

“No, you do not understand me.” I lick my dry lips and brace myself for his reaction. “If something goes wrong tomorrow and you have the chance to run—do it. Run and don’t look back. If they realize who we are, you’ll have a better chance of getting away than I will. I won’t let them take me *alive*,” I emphasize my point by meeting his stare.

His shoulders stiffen to the point you could sharpen a blade on them. With lightning speed, he reaches to the side and pulls me in front of him, pinning me between his body and the railing, locking me in place with his arms. He presses himself into me and shakes in quiet rage.

“I’ll die with a knife in my hand if it comes down to it. Don’t die trying to be a hero,” I bite out.

“You forget me,” he huffs a bitter laugh. “I have no intention of dying or being a hero.”

“Leave me if we can’t get back to each other.” My fists wrap around the leather straps that cross his chest. I want to shake him and scream at him to listen to me. Garrick will target both of us, but I’ll bear the brunt of it.

“I don’t take orders from you, angel. Don’t attempt to lock me in an empty promise,” the bitterness that infiltrated his chuckle stays laced through his tone. “I won’t lie to comfort you; I’ll never leave you behind. It’s you and me until the end—whatever end that may be. If you’re to die with a blade in your hand, then I’m to die by your side with a sword in mine.”

My teeth might crack from how hard I’m clenching them. It’s similar to what went through my mind when he implored me to leave him when we crossed the border. He wanted me to leave him, and I couldn’t fathom it. Honestly, even in the beginning, I would’ve stayed with him out of principle. But not anymore. I’m frustrated with myself because we promised each other no feelings would get involved, and I failed. I’m frustrated with him because...the realization rains over me like a hailstorm; each word is another ball of ice leaving a welt on my skin.

His safety means more to me than my own.

I lean forward and rest my head against his chest, not caring if it’s too forward; I just need this. His arms wrap around me instantly, and his chin rests on top of my head. My ear presses into his chest, listening to his heartbeat, it’s pounding, but it’s steady. We hold onto each other in silence for a few moments, where nothing other than the icy wind and the moon bear witness to two guarded people navigating their way through vulnerability. It’s a treacherous, reckless path. Filled with beasts, thorns, and uncertainty. There are no maps, compasses, or stars to guide me. But despite all of that, I keep walking forward, blindly, into the darkness that smells so much like pine trees and cinnamon.

“Do you remember what I told you about when I make a promise to you?” His voice is calmer than before, and his heartbeat is slower. I begrudgingly lift my head from his chest. His arms loosen around me, but I’m still wrapped in them.

“That you always keep it,” I murmur. Moonlight trickles down from the sky and dances across his scarred cheek, his *beautiful* scarred cheek.

“My promises to you are vows branded in my soul. I will never make you a promise I can’t keep, and I swear to you I’m getting you out of that castle. You are not dying here.” He removes one of his hands from my waist to gently grasp my chin, “You do not relent. Do you understand me? Do not even entertain the possibility of fighting to your death tomorrow.” He rests

his forehead against mine, and my eyes slip shut, shielding him from the emotion that's flooded them.

"How can you be so sure?" I whisper.

"You're too stubborn to die," his soft chuckle fans against my lips, "and because I would find a way to defy death itself to keep you here." My eyes flash open, and an unrestrained smile slides across my face. "Who else would challenge me and stuff me with pastries?"

"I found a new one for you to try!" I exclaim.

"Was it good enough that you would've written to me about it?"

"Mhmm," I nod my head excitedly. "I added it to my Cayden pastry list."

He softly chuckles, "You have a Cayden pastry list?"

"Yup. I keep it stored right up here," I say while tapping my head.

"You ate while you were with Saskia? The whole pastry?"

"Not a crumb was left," I confirm.

A broad smile coats his features, and he leans forward, pressing his lips into my forehead. I find myself wanting another as he slowly pulls away. I look into his eyes...and it terrifies me. The promise, the strength, the sheer magnitude of all the emotions he can force me to feel just through those two eyes. I step back, even though it feels like my body is going against the tide. Though, I feel that if I remain here, the current will overtake me. I'm already treading water as is. Chills wrack my body, and his eyes fill with concern. He doesn't realize that I'm not shivering because of the cold.

He takes my hand in his before I can do something rash and walks us back to the inn. I force my legs to carry me forward and not stand rooted on the bridge all night. He guides me to walk in front of him before dropping my hand. We bound up the stairs silently, but I stop before opening the door to our room. I turn around to face him, having the height advantage on him for once.

"What color did you get for the ball?" I ask.

"I got a black suit and black mask because I wasn't sure what you'd pick." He scrunches his brows together in confusion. Probably wondering why I'm asking about this now.

"Do I have to worry about any gold embellishments being sewn onto my dress while I sleep?"

"Saskia," he sighs, though he doesn't look annoyed. A lazy smile spreads across his face. "I knew she'd stir up trouble once she got you

alone.”

“Why did you do it?” I press.

His fingers brush down the top of my arms, “I do not believe your beauty needs any embellishment, nor do I believe anything can compare to it, but that dress would have paled in comparison to you.”

“The dress was beautiful before the embellishments,” I murmur, biting my lip to stop myself from smiling. The flush that creeps along my skin is illuminated by the sconces on the walls. His smile deepens as he takes in my disposition.

“I agree.” No matter how hard I bite my lip, I can’t fight the smile that now sits on my face in plain sight for him. His eyes dance along my features as they often do, taking in every detail. “But it never would have measured up to you.”

“You embellished your suit to match me,” my voice is as thin as a sheet of ice in direct sunlight.

“I’m a greedy man, Elowen. I make no apologies for wanting the entire ballroom to know that the most beautiful woman in the room was mine for the night.” He brings his face inches from mine to reach around me, twist the doorknob, and push it open. “Goodnight, angel,” he whispers, leaning in to kiss my cheek.

CHAPTER
FORTY-FIVE



The bones of my corset stab into my ribs, making it hard to breathe. Technically I'm wearing two corsets. My leathers are hidden beneath my maroon ball gown, along with all my knives. Finnian has my swords. Cayden's knives are hidden beneath his suit pants. One of his swords is sheathed at his waist since most men wear swords with their suits. Ryder has his extra weapons considering Cayden can't show up to festivities looking ready to murder someone. The scowl he wears on his face always draws enough attention.

"Would you stop staring at everyone like you want to kill them?" I poke him with my elbow, hard enough so he can feel it through the armor he wears under his suit. It's easy since my arm is laced through his, as it has been since we made it into the general square where pre-ball festivities are being held. Finnian, Saskia, and Ryder are watching our backs from the shadows. We avoided goodbyes, opting for a simple *don't die* exchanged between us all before leaving the inn.

"What if I *do* want to kill everyone here?" Cayden asks.

"Then I'd tell you to wait for nightfall, and I'll help." A demur smile spreads across my lips as I tilt my head toward him. His icy glare is replaced with heat in his eyes as he rakes them up and down my body. Half of his face is covered in a simple black mask that tilts up like horns at the top two corners. Saskia couldn't hide her smirk when I spotted the mask she had chosen for me. The glittery red mask sits across the bridge of my nose and rests upon the tops of my cheeks. The ends flare away from my face, resembling angel wings. My body pulses in tune with my heart as his eyes continue to latch onto me.

“You are the most exquisite creature I’ve ever met.” His words ignite something low in my belly, and my hand subconsciously tightens on his arm—which doesn’t go unnoticed by him. His tongue glides across his lips, knowing he ruffled me. It’s the second time he has done it today.

The first was when he pressed a black velvet choker into the palm of my hand after Saskia finished pinning the front pieces of my hair away from my face with the jeweled pins we stole. The material is wide enough to cover the cut the Imirath soldier gave me. He instructed me to hold my hair as he fastened it around my neck, brushing his fingers over my exposed shoulder blades and down my spine. I nearly lost it and had to grip the counter in front of me when his lips brushed against my neck, and he whispered how beautiful I look in red. He withdrew himself, leaving me a shaking mess in his wake. My only satisfaction came from him needing to adjust his pants before rejoining the group.

We walk through an open tent flap that leads to another place filled with things to marvel at. The tents line the square, and once you make it through all of them, you make it to the castle. I would have preferred to just walk right up to the castle, but we need to blend in. This is our last tent, and the sign for Finnian, Saskia, and Ryder to make their way into the castle through the dungeon. They’ll need a head start to take the key undetected before the ball ends. Our goal is to slip from the ballroom at the peak of the evening. We have already made our way through tents filled with intricate tapestries and paintings, cakes that looked too pretty to eat, spiced meats, bubbling bright drinks, and shimmering jewels the size of my face. Cayden and I never touched any food or drink offered.

The air in this tent is warm and damp, a welcomed respite from the winter night. A wave of color washes over my vision and steals the breath from my lungs. Swarms of deep strawberry red, sunset orange, ocean blue, and forest green petals mingle together in front of us. The colors don’t just stop there; purple, white, black, and colors I didn’t even know existed join the swarm.

I’ve always wanted to see a greenhouse. My small garden in Aestilian could never measure up to the beauty before me. I’m sure the garden that Eagor took me to is beautiful, but I wasn’t able to see it in full bloom. Vines twist together and drape from the ceiling. Lanterns hang down, far enough from the vines so they won’t catch fire. Rows upon rows of flowers create a maze-like structure for us to walk through. I crane my neck upward to

watch the lantern light dance along the greenery. I reach my free hand to the side and gently brush my fingers against the silky surface of the flowers. I love the way petals feel between my fingertips.

“Beautiful,” I whisper.

“Incredibly,” Cayden’s low, husky voice drifts down to my ears.

I turn my face, intrigued by his tone, and find him gazing at me. Everything around me fades; the beauty of the flowers and their colorful hues become an afterthought because the only color I’m enamored by is the way hazel looks under dim lantern light. At first, there is only darkness, but the longer you look, the more beauty is revealed—which perfectly describes Cayden. The angel wings brush the tops of my cheeks as a smile blossoms across my face, as pure as the first bloom of spring.

“What?” he whispers. I recall the feeling of his eyes on me last night, keeping me warmer than any blanket could. I tighten my hand on his arm and inch closer to the sound of his voice. We’ve spent almost every day together since I came to Vareveth, and there’s something so intoxicating about knowing I’ve only ever seen him show this rare gentleness to me.

“Nothing,” I murmur. The trance he has on me breaks when a blast of cool air washes over us, and I turn forward. It feels like a dagger stabs me in the chest as anxiety forms a fist around my heart.

The castle stands tall in front of us. It’s beautiful, of course. When something is beautiful, nobody looks to pick it apart. Beauty can be blinding if you only look for it on the surface. The castle stands along the side of a snowy mountain that belongs to the end of the Seren Mountains. Obsidian spires stretch so high into the sky that it’s hard to make out their pointed peaks against the darkness. The castle is made of white bricks with a long cobblestone pathway stretching down from the main entrance. I didn’t imagine returning here, especially not surrounded by a swarm of people eager to enter the doors. The most my imagination ever conjured up was beheading my father in his throne room. I never imagined what it would feel like to look at the castle itself.

I square my shoulders and just focus on getting past the guards without shaking like a leaf. Despite the chill of the winter air, sweat gathers in my palms. Cayden, sensing my nerves, crosses a hand over his body and wraps it around my hand that rests on his arm. I’ve been on plenty of missions before, but there’s something different about facing the place that inspired your bloodthirst—the place that broke a girl begging for mercy and forged a

woman that creates her own fate in this world with a blade. The world is a cruel place, but I don't intend on being at its mercy ever again.

We begin our ascent up the path. My emotions feel like they're overpowering me, flooding through me like I'm drowning from the inside out; anger, anxiety, bloodlust, doubt. It twines together, shooting up from the shadowy depths below me, wrapping around my limbs and throat. They're pulling me under, choking me, and the blue water around me turns red.

We drift away from the guards, walking under the first drawbridge along the walkway. "Are you okay?" Cayden asks, low enough so only I can hear.

"I'm fine," my voice shakes, but not with tears nor any emotion bordering on sadness.

"Don't lie to me, Elowen."

"The castle looks lovely from the outside." My hand flexes at my side; I want to hold a damn knife. He glances at me, taking in my current state, and leads us toward the side of the path. Half of my face is covered, so all people can really see is my scowl, not that they pay any mind to it. The crowd is fixated on getting into the castle and handing their invitations off to the guards at the door. My jaw clenches so hard that my teeth throb. Cayden can feel the way my body is vibrating against his. Gods, I wish I could turn this off. I don't want to have a reaction to my past. I want to be able to face it with squared shoulders and a raised chin. Not like this—burning with anger.

Instead of forcing me to look at him and speak, he circles behind me and wraps his arms around my waist. Holding me securely against him as I continue to face the castle. I rest my hands on top of his.

"Close your eyes," Cayden commands.

"Why?" I ask, not in the mood for games.

"My statement didn't require a response." I try to pry his arms off when his comment drifts down to me, but they stay firm around me. Not even budging. Not wanting to draw attention to us, I slip my eyes shut and give in.

"They're closed," I sigh.

"When you look at the castle, what do you see?"

A prison.

A cage.

The root of my nightmares.

“A place I want to destroy,” I settle on.

“Good. Now, imagine your dragons flying overhead like they will be tonight. Imagine them burning this place to the ground,” he begins. My heart still pounds in anger, but it’s a different kind. The chaotic rage has been tamed into something akin to determination. He threads his fingers through mine, keeping his arms securely around me. “Imagine all the ways you could make the people in there suffer with just one throw of your knife in the right place. Power is just chaos if you don’t control it and wield it to your benefit.”

“Is that what you do?” my tone is breathless, and fierce flames dance behind my eyelids. In my mind, the spires fall to the ground and shatter against the mountain; their sound is drowned out by mighty dragon cries of war.

“Power kneels at my feet, begging for me to give it a shred of attention,” his dark chuckle dances along the side of my neck. “I’ll make sure you get whatever you want. You want to burn this place? Done. You want to never return here? Done. You want to tear it apart stone by stone? Done.” I want all those things, and I don’t know how that’s possible, but I do. “What do you see now?” he gently inquires.

I swallow, “I see myself standing in the throne room with a bloodied sword in one hand and Garrick’s head in the other while his body lays at my feet.”

“Done,” he whispers into my ear and places a quick kiss on my neck. He loosens his arms around my waist to circle in front of me. My eyes slowly peel open, tamed rage burns inside me and doesn’t threaten to spill out. A savage smirk slides onto my face. “There she is,” Cayden mutters.

Garrick sealed his own fate the day he chose to lock me up. I slide my arm through Cayden’s and walk toward the entrance how I want to enter, shoulders squared and chin raised. Standing in front of my past and facing down all I’ve endured is daunting, but I’m still here, still standing, and still moving forward. Cayden reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out two perfectly forged invitations with silver edges. Finnian and Ryder hung out in a gambling den and spotted the invitation forger rather quickly. All they had to do was bide their time before picking them off someone else that had paid a large sum of money for their authenticity.

Some people make it too easy.

The guard accepts our invitations and waves us forward.

With one simple mistake, Imirath has sparked the beginning of their downfall.

CHAPTER
FORTY-SIX



A servant takes our cloaks as soon as we cross the threshold. Everyone slowly filters into the open doors at the end of the hall, the ballroom.

“It’s the same,” I whisper. It’s vague enough that only Cayden will understand. There are too many people for me to offer anything other than loose statements. This is exactly what I saw when the snakes led me through the castle. He doesn’t respond, but I know he heard me.

My wavy hair tickles my arms as I glance up at the intricate ceiling. Every detail, from the chandeliers to the staircase, is all the same from the time I wore the amulet. Cayden and I accept two flutes of champagne from an overly eager server and make our way over to stand by one of the pillars that line the ballroom. It gives us a modicum of privacy, but not enough to potentially rouse suspicion. It’s tempting to bring the champagne to my lips, but I just twirl the glass in my hand.

“They should be inside by now,” I say. Cayden surveys the ballroom, his eyes jumping to the guards that are littered throughout. Unlike Vareveth, Imirath’s guards wear white armor with silver accents. Not that I mind considering it makes them easier to spot, which makes them to kill.

“The guards wouldn’t be as relaxed if they were spotted. They would be walking through the crowd or asking people to take off their masks,” Cayden observes.

A woman in a deep purple gown trimmed with white lace glides down the left side of the staircase with a rolled-up scroll in hand. I suppress a groan and lean into the pillar, thinking about how many announcements we’ll have to get through. I’ve never actually had to sit through this part of

a ball. The only ball I've been to was the alliance ball in Vareveth, and I was the last to enter.

"Is the champagne not to your liking, miss?" a servant inquires, and my spine stiffens. Cayden inches closer to me and opens his mouth to speak, but I place a hand on his chest and force a broad smile onto my lips. It's the same smile that I've used countless times to charm or persuade anyone I needed to.

"It's too much to my liking, unfortunately. I dearly miss it," I sigh, removing my hand from Cayden's chest to place it on my belly. "I won't be able to have it for quite some time. I just didn't want to be rude to the servers at the door and decline their generous offer." The thought of being pregnant terrifies me, but the lie has saved me on numerous occasions.

"Of course, miss. Congratulations!" the servant exclaims, taking the glass from my hand and adding it to her tray. "And you, sir? Would you like a different drink?" Her eyes glance toward Cayden's untouched champagne glass.

"No, thank you," he says in a courteous tone while placing his glass on her extended tray. He doesn't smile at her in the same way I do, but his glare has lessened to a tolerable level. "I've decided to refrain from drinking for as long as my wife can't take part in it." Cayden emphasizes his point by placing a hand on my back.

My wife.

I fight the chill that threatens to shake my body like wind through an abandoned temple. It's just a word. It's just a meaningless word. I keep the smile plastered on my face while the servant looks between us, a smile of her own spreading on her full cheeks.

"That's lovely," she beams, "we need more men like you."

His fingers trace one of the bones of my corset, "There are no men like me." He directs his statement to the servant, but it feels like he's speaking to me. I don't look at him, but can practically feel the inevitable smirk crawling across his lips right now.

"You make a beautiful pair. I hope you enjoy your evening." The servant curtsies before turning away and carrying our champagne out of view.

"Tell me, how is your evening, *wife*?" Cayden mumbles in my ear as his hands snake around my waist, not letting the lie drop between us just yet.

“I don’t know, *husband*,” I play along, leaning into his tall frame and resting the back of my head against his shoulder. I’m not wearing heels, so he’s still several inches taller than me. “It’s wonderful to know we make a lovely couple, but I’ll enjoy some dancing before the night is over.”

“Well, I do love dancing with you. Though I prefer it when you’re the one dancing...on my lap and with far less clothing. No audience this time.” I jab my elbow into his stomach with little force, just enough to make him chuckle. Images of our night at the brothel flash in my mind. “Don’t be bashful, it’s how we made Elowen II,” he jests while tightening his arms around me and rubbing his hands on my stomach, which I attempt to swat away.

“That’s enough from you,” I say through my fit of giggles. His laughter vibrates against my back as he pulls me closer to him. I stop fighting off his pursuit. Instead, I stay locked in his arms, even after the laughter dies down. We stand in comfortable silence as the woman begins announcing the guests.

I’ve never been like this with anyone. I don’t normally like being touched; I don’t even feel comfortable giving hugs to many people. My body has been beaten too many times for me to associate touch with something good. My first reflex is to shy away from it, to draw my knife up to it and stab it until I’m safe again. But when I’m with Cayden, I feel safer than I ever have. Not because I need him to save me, but because I know he will fight by my side until the very end. He will never relent. He will never give up until the fight is over and we stand as victors.

I’m standing with him, a few floors above the cell I was tortured in, and don’t feel a single ounce of fear. Yes, I still feel angry, but that won’t ever go away. It’s controlled for now. I feel strong and steady. I know I would feel those things without Cayden here because I trained and fought for the life I have, but it feels good to not do this alone. I’ve always known I would have a better chance at taking down Garrick with a team, but I never imagined finding people I would be willing to fight with. I’ve never been happier to have proven myself wrong.

“Esteemed guests of King Garrick Atarah, we wish to welcome you to our masquerade ball!” the woman’s clear voice rises above the chatter of the guests. “King Garrick is honored to be entertaining you all this evening and thanks those who have traveled from great distances to be here. Tonight is a celebration like no other. Tonight marks the first night of a new

friendship that will bring us heaps of prosperity.” The crowd begins to cheer, and Cayden tightens his arms around me. I stick to the coverage the pillar next to us offers. I’m about to see my father. “Welcome our fierce leader, head of our armies, defender of the people, the true and only claim to the Imirath throne—King Garrick Atarah!”

The room erupts in cheers when my father appears. His red cloak with white fur trim floats dramatically down the stairs behind him, and my brain conjures up an image of it getting twisted around his legs, causing him to faceplant. My hands slowly clap with my new scenario at the forefront of my mind.

“I think her statement needs a little mending,” I muse above the cheers.

Cayden scoffs in my ear and adjusts his arms around me now that we’ve clapped for a socially acceptable amount of time. He pulls me in tight again, and the hilt of his sword presses into my back. “I’d be happy to correct their views on your behalf, *princess*. Though, I do think the title of queen fits you better.”

I hum in agreement as I watch my father make his way to stand next to the woman in the purple gown, pausing at the top of the center staircase. He’s not wearing a mask, so it’s easy for me to take in his features. I always thought seeing him would be worse than seeing the castle. Imagined the immediate panic and the faint sound of chains being dragged across the floor. But he just looks like a man. I’ve killed men twice his size and will be happy to add him to my roster when the time is right. Any man can be killed, even a king. Some people view monarchs as invincible, but all humans bleed the same.

His black hair has streaks of gray, and his forehead and eyes wrinkle when he smiles. He has aged, but he looks similar to the last time I saw him, the day my dragons burned my mother. He was always a tall and muscular man, hyper-aware of his appearance so that he wouldn’t incite weakness. He never married after my mother died, but it wasn’t because of love. I can see the way his eyes dart around the room, the way his hands twitch at his sides. He’s always looking for the next threat, and he hates being in a ballroom full of masked people. His eyes dance clear over Cayden and me. I lurk in the shadows, as I always have, waiting for my time to strike. When I do, I’ll sink my fangs so deep into his veins that no healer will be able to stop the poison of my wrath.

On the rare occasions Ailliard would talk to me about Garrick; he used to tell me he believed my father would come to his senses, that Garrick would realize how wrong it was to order his own daughter to live in the dungeon and to be beaten by his guards. He believes that Garrick will want me to come back here one day. Even as a child, I laughed in Ailliard's face. My twelve-year-old self told Ailliard to grow up. There is no love shared between my father and me. The only thing we share is the same blood, and it's blood that I'll spill one day.

The cheers die down when the woman in the purple gown raises her hand. I feel Cayden stiffen behind me, and glance around the ballroom again, taking in the things I previously missed. You can usually tell someone's wealth by how decadent their gowns or suits are, and it seems that the wealthiest people in attendance are already in the ballroom. My mouth feels dry, and I suddenly long for the champagne the servant carried away. I know what's happening before the woman continues—this is a political ball. The occasion is rooted in politics, and I can tell from Cayden's rigid posture that he's figured it out as well. Only an esteemed guest of equal rank is announced after a king. It's why I was announced after Egor and Valia.

"It is with my greatest honor that I announce the pair that will be our kingdom's greatest friends in the upcoming months—King Fallon and Queen Raisel of Thirwen!"

The crowd erupts in another round of applause as the rulers descend the staircase from the opposite end my father came down. A man with long white hair and a decadent silver suit smiles and waves to the crowd below. The woman on his arm has pin-straight black hair and wears a shimmering silver gown to match her husband. The pair of them wear silver masks with stars littered around the edges.

"I suspected as much," Cayden mutters, taking his hands off me to blend in with the applause. I'm about to say we should try to get an audience with the Galakin rulers when we get back to Vareveth, considering they aren't in attendance tonight, but my father raises his hand to quiet the crowd once more.

"Please, enjoy the first dance while the servants prepare the toast for the evening," Garrick declares. Eight guards move forward to flank him as the musicians ready their instruments. The King and Queen of Thirwen descend

the main staircase and walk to the center of the dance floor. A sea of tulle and velvet follows suit, eager to please their king.

Cayden slips his hand into mine and leads us toward a wide circle of dancers. I stop a few feet in front of him and raise my brows, surprised he's following through with dancing. The musicians strike the first chord, and he bows at the waist while I curtsy. We both slowly straighten up, never taking our eyes off each other. The first note of the dance is plucked on the strings, and Cayden cuts forward to sweep me into motion.

He wraps an arm around my waist and spins us together, intertwining us in the swarm of couples. We're in the last circle out of three. Our circle moves in the opposite direction of the middle circle but in the same direction as the first. It makes me feel like I'm floating through the motions. The strings peak abruptly, and Cayden lifts me in a wide arc. We pivot, twist, and glide. The mixture of music and Cayden makes my soul feel like it's on fire. The orchestra strikes its final chord, and Cayden ends the dance in perfect unison with every other couple by dipping me in his arms. Our chests rise and fall rapidly, and he keeps us in this position for an extended beat of time, ignoring everyone else around us. My hand is wrapped around the back of his neck, and I can feel his pulse racing in unison with mine.

"Why did you dance with me the whole ball?" I ask the question that's lingered in the back of my mind since that night.

That was the first Vareveth ball he has ever danced at in all his years of being commander. He didn't even dance at his own ball they threw in his honor when he was named Commander of Vareveth—thank you, Saskia, for letting that slip. His eyes never leave mine as he straightens me up. He takes his hands off my back and brushes the rogue waves from the front of my shoulders.

"I didn't like seeing you in another man's arms," he confesses, stepping back and bowing at the waist to conclude our dance like a gentleman. I lower myself in a shaky curtsy before turning toward the dais where the King and Queen of Thirwen glide. Garrick already stands in front of his throne, still flanked by several guards, with a champagne glass extended.

"Those on the dancefloor, please do not worry about drinking to this toast and simply carry on with another dance after the toast is concluded to share in the excitement. The Kingdom of Imirath is honored to have a newly formed alliance with the Kingdom of Thirwen. Vareveth has breathed down our necks for far too long, and it's time we root them out. As many of

you already know, Elowen Atarah has signed her name to an alliance with them. Rather than returning home after running away all those years ago, she aligned herself with our enemy!”

Cayden fists his hands at his sides at the mention of my name. I step toward him; he looks too mad for my liking. The only times I’ve seen Cayden explode was when we tortured someone together and when he pinned Egor to the wall...he’s only lost himself when encountering someone that hurt me or made me uncomfortable. He can’t lose himself right now.

“She is a traitor to Imirath!” Garrick shouts, and the crowd shouts back in affirmation. “She will die for going against her blood!”

Cayden shakes in silent rage and looks seconds away from charging the dais. “Cayden,” I whisper and grab his wrist, but he doesn’t tear his eyes away from Garrick as he continues his speech.

“With the aid of Thirwen, we will overtake Vareveth, and we will kill that traitor once and for all,” Garrick raises his champagne glass in the air, “to the alliance!”

“To the alliance!” the crowd echoes. People on the dance floor cling to their partners as they share the joy in their kingdom’s new alliance. People that line the floor and sit at tables sip their champagne. My father gestures for the music to start up again as he turns to the King and Queen of Thirwen.

“Cayden, breathe,” I command, grabbing his other hand and forcing him to turn toward me. Everyone here is too invested in their happiness to notice us. “Look at me and block him out. He’s not worth what we will gain tonight.”

“I can’t wait for him to die,” his voice is so rough it sounds like it’s been raked over coals.

“I’ll make him beg,” I promise, “but tonight is not the night.” Cayden closes his eyes while soaking in my words.

“Soon,” he agrees. His eyes flash forward and narrow before understanding washes over his face, “Ryder is here.”

They got the key.

I loop my arm through Cayden’s and spin on my heels to where his eyes point. Ryder plays the part of a perfect Imirath soldier watching over the ball. His white armor is slightly large on him, but not large enough to draw attention. He stands between a cushioned bench and an archway that leads

to a candlelit hallway. Cayden and I offer our spot on the dance floor to a couple waiting their turn. We take our time walking toward him while more dancing begins behind us. Adrenaline rises in my veins in tandem with the rising music. My need for blood plucks me like a musician's skilled fingers pluck their instruments.

I take a seat on the bench, and Cayden kneels in front of me while taking my boot-covered ankle in his hand, low enough that nobody will be able to see I'm not wearing the proper shoes. "So clumsy," he chastises. "Guard, my wife seems to have twisted her ankle while dancing. Would you mind looking at it?"

Ryder moves from his spot by the wall and kneels beside Cayden in front of me. "You're a very lucky man to have a wife as beautiful as her," Ryder smirks while reaching a hand toward my ankle. I suppress the urge to kick him in his smug face. If I blinked, I would have missed Ryder effortlessly slipping the key into Cayden's hand behind my boot.

"There's a staircase to the right of this archway. Saskia and Finnian are waiting for me by the canal. They should have secured a boat by now," Ryder says so quickly it's hard to decipher his words. "Don't be an idiot," he mutters to Cayden.

"Don't die," Cayden mutters to Ryder. A small smile makes its way to my face, despite the morbidity of their statements. It reminds me of Finnian and me.

"Stay safe, Atarah," Ryder looks up at me. "You still owe me a dragon tingle update when all this shit is over, and I still owe you a drink. You can't die with debts, it's a bad look for the soul."

"What the fuck is a dragon tingle?" Cayden inquires.

"You wouldn't get it," Ryder waves Cayden off.

"I'll see you soon, Neredras," I smile down at him.

"She seems fine to me. Just give her a few moments of rest, and she'll be back to the merriment of the evening," Ryder raises his voice while getting to his feet. I stare up at his towering frame from the bench, at one of the faces that have become a welcomed sight these past few months. He takes one last look at the both of us before backing away and slipping through the archway. I strain my ears to listen for any signs of strife while Cayden gets to his feet, but the only sounds I hear are his boots getting farther away.

Cayden extends a hand to me, which I accept, “Are you ready for revenge, angel?”

“Always, soldier.”

CHAPTER
FORTY-SEVEN



We slip from the ballroom and find the staircase Ryder mentioned. It's clearly only used by guards and servants. Cobwebs cling to the corners of the ceiling, and the faint smell of dust lingers in the air around us. The both of us rip off our masks and toss them on the floor.

"I need you to untie my corset," I tell Cayden, turning to face the wall.

"So forward," he jests. "If you wanted to ravish me, I wish you would have spoken earlier."

"Just for once, would you lessen the vexation of your company to a manageable level?" I hiss.

"I recall a few things you like." I can't see his face, but I'm sure it's smug, just as he can't see me roll my eyes, but he knows I did.

He pulls on the bow Saskia tied for me and begins loosening my bodice. I pull on the corset to loosen it further, but my efforts pause when I hear footsteps approaching the door at the top of the staircase. Cayden mutters a curse under his breath as I try to filter through the tulle surrounding my legs to find a knife. Cayden's throwing knives are under his suit pants, he can't get to them, and I can't get to mine. He can't use his sword; the person approaching will come through the door before Cayden can get to the top.

Cayden yanks me upright and presses my back into the wall. "Trust me," he pleads, slamming his lips onto mine. I shriek in surprise, and he presses his body into me. One of his hands grips my hip, keeping my corset from slipping down and exposing my leathers. The door at the top of the stairs opens and falls shut behind someone. I slide my hands into Cayden's hair and hum against his lips. It's my way of telling him I'll play along.

Whatever this madness is. His tongue slides into my mouth, and the familiar pounding sensation arises between my legs. As if he knows, he shoves his knee between my thighs, offering me a little pressure.

“Come on, the two of you, off each other,” the guard sighs.

We ignore him, and I grind down onto Cayden’s leg. He groans in approval while forcing his body even closer to mine. I realize he’s completely blocking me from the guard that now descends the stairs. His hand slowly slides up my leg that’s furthest from the guard, and I feel him slip a knife from my holster. A moan slips from my lips before I can stop it. He strokes a thumb over my thigh, and I can practically taste his praise. I bite his bottom lip to tease him, and he groans another delicious, deep rumble. He presses me so tightly between him and the wall that the dampness of the corridor seeps through both corsets I’m wearing.

“Do I have to pry you two off each other?” the guard asks as he takes his last step off the staircase and strides over to us. I don’t remove my mouth from Cayden’s when the guard touches his shoulder.

With incredible speed, Cayden flips the knife from the hand on my thigh to the hand that’s holding my corset and jams it into the guard’s throat without ever taking his lips from mine. The sound of gurgling blood fills the corridor, but Cayden doesn’t pull his lips away until the guard falls to the floor. He steps back and pulls his knee from between my legs.

“People assume consensual public displays of affection have no ulterior motives,” he pants while bending to retrieve my knife from the guard’s throat. “I knew the guard would lose sense and approach us despite logic. If we weren’t kissing, then he would have thought we were sneaking around, and he could have alerted someone on the opposite side of the door.” His tone is rough and raspy. Cayden wipes the guard’s blood on his suit jacket before straightening up and pressing the hilt into my palm.

“Yes,” I say through my hazy brain, “of course.”

“I apologize if I made you uncomfortable.”

“Well, I’d rather kiss you than die,” I shrug. “Don’t let it inflate your ego too much, soldier.”

“I knew I’d grow on you,” he grins.

I wrap my hand around the hilt of my knife and resume slipping out of my dress. Cayden unwraps his sword from his waist and removes his suit. Honestly, it was good thinking on his part. We wouldn’t have been able to charge the guard from down here. I thread my arms through my leathers and

glide my hands over my knives. My eyes glance at the dead guard and notice how many weapons he has. I unhook one of the swords from his belt. It's larger and heavier than my swords, but it's better than nothing. Cayden squats beside me and takes the other two swords from the guard, strapping another on his waist and settling the broad sword on his back. The leather strap rests diagonally across his chest, but he keeps the sword in his hand. I unsheathe my new sword after getting to my feet and kick my dress over the guard. If we're lucky, nobody will look too closely at our discarded clothes, but we don't have many places to hide a body—and we certainly don't have time.

We take the steps two at a time, and Cayden presses his ear against the door at the top. He holds up a hand, telling me to wait, then slips through the door before me. I glance around to get my bearings, conjuring my memories from when the snakes led me through the castle. The ballroom fizzles with excitement to our right, which means the dragon chamber is to the left. We're not far, and most guards are stationed in front of the castle for security precautions or overwatching the ball.

I take off in a soft, silent sprint. We halt at every corner to make sure nobody is coming but keep our pace swift. I don't want to risk someone finding the guard before we get to the dragons. My skin heats, but not from running; it's from something else. It tickles the back of my mind like a soft brush of a talon. I'm not leading myself; something more powerful is. It's pulling me in, and I'm powerless against it. I don't resist it; I listen to it. It feels natural to accept the guidance. Cayden reaches out a hand to stop me before turning the final corner. He peeks around to gauge our odds.

"Six guards," he says. The odds aren't terrible, they're not great, but the odds are rarely in my favor. "Okay, here's what we're going to do; we'll charge them head-on, but the first chance you get to run inside the chamber, take it. I'll follow you after I've killed them all." He reaches into his pocket to pull out the ruby amulet and the key, pressing them into my palm. I close my fingers around the objects, letting the darkness that lurks within me rise to the surface. The part of me that revels in things like this. I look to Cayden with determination evident on my face. "Bloodthirsty angel," he mutters.

"You adore it," I smirk, tucking the objects into my pocket and pulling a knife free from my holster.

“You take one on the left, I’ll take one on the right,” he says while pulling a knife from his thigh and rounding the corner with a lazy swaggered strut. I follow beside him and throw my knife in tandem with him. They sink into the two outer guards’ throats, killing them instantly. Cayden must have hit a blood vessel because the blood from his downed guard sprays into the eyes of the guard next to them.

“You’re guarding something of mine,” I state as the guards rush forward and Cayden draws a second sword, “I’ve come to claim it.”

The fight erupts in a sea of steel that’s drowned out by the music of the ball. Garrick made the mistake of focusing his guards on himself; he’s not worth the success of the heist. I’ll kill him one day, but first I’m going to become the spitting image of his deepest nightmares that the prophecy implemented in his twisted brain. Fate won’t come true for the sake of fate. I’m making this fate happen on my own accord. I choose my fate, and my fate lives in the realm of flames and revenge.

One guard advances on me while three rush to Cayden, most likely because of how much broader he is than me. People have underestimated me for far too long. Cayden slices through one of the guards like butter; guts fall to the polished floor, and crimson droplets splatter the walls. I drag my sword from belly to chin, slicing my guard down the center. I kick him backward before his blood can spray directly on me; instead, it mists down on me in an arc of my dark deed.

“Go!” Cayden barks, fighting the last two guards.

“You’re sure?”

“You’re forgetting something, angel,” Cayden begins while stabbing one of the guards in the leg, “I enjoy this.” A blood-stained smile spreads across his face. The guard in front of him flinches, and Cayden unleashes himself onto them.

I pull the key and amulet from my pocket and rush toward the door. The blood on the tile has made it slippery, but I manage to keep my balance, holding my breath while slipping the key into the hole and twisting the lock. The door creaks open, but no alarms shatter our semblance of stealth. I shut the door behind me and leave it unlocked for Cayden.

A low, rumbling growl comes from the room that looms in front of me. A confusing mixture of self-doubt and belonging stabs me in the chest. I’ve dreamed of hearing that growl again. Sometimes I would turn around in my house, thinking I heard something. The memory of my dragons has haunted

me for years, but tonight I will perform necromancy and raise my ghosts from the dead.

My eyes slowly adjust to the dimly lit chamber and are immediately met with a pair of orange irises. The only light that streams through the chamber comes from the moonlight that pools through several windows at the front of the room. I know the placement of the windows is not a coincidence. They pan out above the forest that leads to the Seren Mountains. The dragons were forced to look at the skies they could never fly in ever since they were babies. My first instinct should be to grab my knives, but what are knives to a dragon? Who am I to raise a weapon against a creature I abandoned to the cruel fate of this castle?

Silver chains are locked around the necks of all five dragons. I take a step forward, and the rest of the dragons glance my way. I raise my hands, trying to show them I mean no harm, but their eyes don't reveal anything. They just track me, my breath, my steps. Each dragon has different colored eyes that seem to glow in the dark. The first one, the one I had seen in my vision, is sunset orange. Orange is followed by ocean blue, plum purple, coal black, and ruby red. The same ruby red as the amulet.

The amulet.

It's supposed to help me with the chains. The dragons regard me with skepticism. The red-eyed dragon growls at me while I reach for my pocket.

"I'm not going to hurt you." My voice is surprisingly calm. "I'm trying to get you out of here." The red-eyed dragon ceases growling, and I finish reaching for my pocket, pulling out the amulet and holding it up to the moonlight. The dragons shriek in unison, and I drop to my knees from the sheer magnitude of the sound waves assaulting my ears. They fight against their chains and struggle to get toward me. I look at the amulet, still in my hand, and their shrieks only get louder. They continue violently thrashing their mighty bodies against the chains that restrain them. The chains glimmer in an obscure way, and it's not the way steel usually shimmers; this steel sparkles. *It's enchanted.* The amulet begins to burn my palm, and I briefly recall the amulet burning Cayden...because the amulet wasn't meant for him. It was meant for me.

Now, the amulet isn't meant for me; it's meant for the dragons.

I toss the amulet in the space between the five of them, and fire blazes through the chamber. My arms rise to cover my eyes from the heat and brightness that streams from the flames as I flinch back. I can't believe this

is real. My arms slowly lower from my face, and I watch the five dragons illuminate the chamber, mesmerized by the way their fire dances together. Sparks drift from the flames and wisp together through the air. Red sparkling streaks that resemble the gold snakes that once wrapped around my arms now slither to their collars and ankles. The more they blow onto the amulet, the stronger the red streaks wrap around their chains.

My eyes water from the heat, and I choke on the smoke that floods through the room. When I think my ears and eyes can't take any more of this, the red streaks flash to gold, and the chains that held them shatter and fall to the floor. They toss their heads back and let out a mighty roar, fierce enough to make their enemies flee before ever seeing these magnificent creatures. Tears slip from my eyes, they're extraordinary, and they're alive.

I get to my feet, but the unchained dragons whirl on me. I stand my ground, unsure of what's the next correct move. I don't want to hurt them, but by reflex, I pull two knives from my holsters. My knives are pathetic in comparison to the dragons—they're smaller than a single dragon fang. The dragons keep their wings tucked close to their bodies as they circle around me. I spin on my heels as panic rises in me, but there's a new pair of eyes wherever I turn. A hard hit connects with my ribs, and I fall to my knees, doubling over in pain as a tail slithers away from me.

I may be sorry I left them, but I will not submit.

I get to my feet again. If they want to beat me, so be it.

The tail from the dragon behind me slams into the other side of my ribs, but I grit my teeth and stand my ground.

"I'm sorry," I ground out, unsure if they can understand me. "I tried to come back for you." A shriek sounds through the air, and a tail collides with my left thigh. I stumble to the side but regain my balance. "I never wanted to leave you." The smoke from the blazing fire makes my throat feel raw, like it did the night Ailliard took me away from here.

I deserve this.

I deserve the pain, the hits.

For so long, I hated myself for being unable to get back to them. I hated that I was safe in Aestilian while they lived here in chains. Some nights I felt so guilty that I would wake up and run to the bathroom to cough up whatever dinner I ate.

I deserve their anger; I deserve to feel their pain.

I was stupid to think they might be happy to see me.

I was naive to think they might hold the same love for me as I do for them.

Another tail collides with the right side of my ribs, and I crumble again. I stay down for a few moments, and it takes far more effort to stand again.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper, voice breaking on the last word. “But you can’t hate me more than I hate myself.” My body throbs, and every breath I inhale feels like someone’s stabbing me in the ribs. My head is dizzy from the smoke and pain, and I have the overwhelming urge to lay down and rip my corset off me. My hands shake at my sides, and I long to reach out to them, but their hitting has ceased, and I don’t want to spark their anger again.

Their heads inch closer. Serpent-like tails swish behind them as they twist in circles around me, lowly growling. They tower over me by at least six feet, and I feel helpless looking up at them. A sharp bang sounds behind me, and the black-eyed dragon lets out a screech so sharp that I raise my hands over my ears. The dragon notes my sudden movement and swipes its tail across the floor, taking my feet out from under me. The back of my head slams against the hard stone, and I fall flat on my back as the dragons peer down at me. The back of my head throbs painfully, the spots in my vision worsen, and the pain in my torso beats like a war drum. I push myself to my knees and watch flames gather in the back of a dragon’s throat. I pitifully throw one of my knives at the long column of their scaled skin, but it bounces off their natural armor.

“Elowen!” I hear Cayden bellow through my blurred state of mind. He shouts my name as if he’s cursing every inch that separates us. My senses are dulled. I turn my head just in time to see his tall figure clad in black rush into the dragon circle and throw himself on top of my body.

An arrow whizzes over his head, so close to him that it touches a few strands of his hair.

Cayden shielded me.

We land in a heap on the stone floor again, but he manages to soften the fall by placing a hand behind my head so I don’t hit it again. He turns to raise his sword at the dragon, with me underneath him, but a blazing orange fire floods over his head in the direction of where the arrow came from. I try to shove him off when he turns back to me, to force him to get away from the dragons, but he doesn’t budge. He tightens his hold on the back of

my head and shoves my face into his neck, holding me to him as he lays his body fully on top of mine.

“I’ve got you, angel. I promise I’ve got you,” he murmurs.

“No!” I croak. I try to speak through my scratchy throat, to command him to get away from the dragons, but all I can manage to do is cough. He can’t die for me. This is suicide—he must know this! My body is weak from the lack of oxygen, and the more I fight, the tighter he presses me into him.

Cayden turns his head while keeping me pressed against him. “Things didn’t go as discreetly as we would have hoped,” he says. His heart is pounding so rapidly that I can feel it between both sets of our thick fighting gear. He releases his hold on me slightly, just enough for me to look at the door.

That should be my first instinct, but it’s not.

Instead, I look up at him. His angular cheekbones are highlighted by the flames that flow above us. His sharp jaw is clenched, and he looks toward the door with nothing short of a cold, unyielding promise of death. I notice the blood that trickles from a cut under his eye and the slight rip in his armor on his upper right arm, where I’m sure another cut is bleeding. He said he has never claimed to be a hero, but I don’t think he gives himself enough credit. I tear my eyes away from him, even though it’s the last thing I want to do, and look toward the door.

We’ve been discovered.

Thank the gods the other three got out of the castle before this.

The dragons blow their fire at whoever enters. The guards keep pushing forward, running into the room despite logic. They’re acting as my father’s obedient dogs, willingly running to their death. I hear orders being shouted beyond the door, and soon the castle will be surrounded.

We must get out of here now.

I peer around the room to try to find a different exit, but my eyes catch something entirely different. There’s something along the wall catching fire quickly. I squint my eyes, trying to make out what else Garrick kept in this chamber. It’s either something he didn’t want, or something he didn’t want anyone to see. Cayden briefly climbs off me and pulls something from his pocket. My neck further cranes in the direction of the mysterious object. I can make out a small girl with brown hair, five dragons, a crown...it’s the

prophecy. Black smoke whirls in the chamber, but even through the billowing clouds, I notice there's more to it.

I don't know the whole prophecy.

I see an army, I see...I don't know what I see. I try to crawl over to it, but Cayden hooks his finger through my belt loop and pulls me under him again, covering me. A large boom sounds from the wall by the windows and shakes the very floor we lie on.

The wall of windows shatters and crumbles to smithereens. Cayden continues to press me into him until the majority of the rumbling has ceased. Once it's over, he gets to his feet while grabbing my hands and pulling me up after him. Cayden just set off a bomb.

"There's more to the prophecy!" I force the words through my dry throat.

"I don't give a damn about the prophecy!" he shouts back, pulling me toward the gaping hole he created. My gut keeps telling me to turn around; it might hold information that could help us. But I can't use the information if I'm dead.

We're going to have to jump into the Seren Mountains and trek through the Etril Forest. It's the route we'll take back to Vareveth because we can't get back through the door. I can picture Garrick's soldiers lined up, waiting to enter the chamber. The castle is most likely being surrounded, and every inch of the town will be searched. There are no Imirath soldiers stationed in the mountains, considering it's practically a death wish to live there, especially in these months.

One of the dragons exits the hole ahead of us, and I know the others will soon follow suit. My curiosity itches to turn back to the prophecy, even just for an extra peak, but there are too many stones littering the chamber floor. A trip right now could be detrimental to our escape. We don't let go of each other's hands as we jump from the castle, with the dragons flying upward, into one of the most dangerous places on the continent. Stones rain down around us as we fall through the air. I wobble on my bad leg when we land but take off in a sprint as soon as I regain balance. There's nothing but trees and a soft dusting of snow in the forest beyond us. The wind whips down from the peaks that we'll soon be climbing.

"Have you been carrying a bomb this entire time?" I inquire.

"Always the element of surprise, angel," Cayden smiles over at me.

A sharp gust of icy air infiltrates my lungs as I let out a shocked laugh. “You’re insane!” I shriek, facing forward again.

“Admit it, you’re impressed.”

“I never said being insane was a bad thing.”

My steps falter when a booming roar echoes behind us. Cayden and I both stop in our tracks and pivot on our heels to face the castle. A blazing flame shoots toward the tower the dragons escaped from. Another two dragons sink their talons into the already gaping hole and rip it further apart. They’re destroying their cage. A sense of pride shoots through me.

I feel a tug in my chest that travels its way up to my mind. I don’t have time to analyze it before the ground begins to rumble at our feet. I can’t see the soldiers coming, but I know at least a hundred horseback soldiers are riding our way. We whip forward and resume our sprint. The more I run, the stronger the pull in my chest and head grows.

I see a pair of orange eyes when I blink.

I shut them again.

Blue eyes.

Again.

Orange eyes.

Again.

Blue eyes.

Only three dragons are tearing apart the castle; the other two are missing. The rumbling grows stronger, and I know they’re gaining on us. An arrow slices through the air and jams into the tree trunk right next to my head. I don’t stop, I just keep running.

Fire, a smoky whisper forms in my brain while I force my mind to tug on the pulling sensation.

Fire, the thought gets louder.

“That’s the princess! Don’t let her get away!” someone shouts behind us. Cayden and I cut through a narrow set of trees while another set of arrows is shot our way. The arrows bounce off the thick trunks, skimming my bruised leg and the top of Cayden’s shoulder.

“Fire,” I say out loud, ignoring the throbbing sensation in my leg. The pull becomes overwhelming. Cayden’s head jerks toward me before he’s forced to look forward again.

“Elowen, what are you—”

“Fire!” I scream. “Burn them all!” Something snaps into place, and two roars come from above. A forceful warmth blazes at our backs, and the scent of burning flesh and screams of agony penetrate my senses. I don’t turn around to see what I’ve done, not because I can’t handle it, but because I don’t want to waste our lead. We won’t be able to stop running until we cross the Emer. We’ll soon be in unclaimed territory, but I don’t trust the soldiers to relent in their pursuit. Cayden whips his head around to see what I’ve done and almost collides with a tree. I reach over and pull on his hand to keep him from the path of collision. The dragons still roar and shoot fire behind us as we keep pushing forward.

I came for my dragons, just as I said I would. The promise I’ve uttered in the dark corners of my mind is finally fulfilled. Even through the throbbing pain and uncertainty, I smile against the icy wind. It’s a smile soaked in unfulfilled revenge, but it’s a start. The dragons are free, as they always should’ve been. I hope my father knows that no matter how many guards he puts around himself, he’ll never be safe from me. I invaded his home and took back what is mine. There’s no limit to what I can do.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT



My bruised body has been pushed to the point of exhaustion, and the only thing propelling me forward is adrenalin. I've lost feeling in my toes, and I think I'll need at least two entire pots of tea to get the frigid, burning sensation out of my throat. My knuckles split and shred as I battle against the elements. The rushing water of the Emer drifts our way in tandem with a series of howls echoing throughout the forest. Cayden and I cease running and glance at each other.

"They're sending beasts since their soldiers lost us," he pants, breaths clouding in front of his face. I bring my hands up to my lips to try to breathe warmth into them, but it's no use. The cold is bitter and seeps into my very bones.

"I shouldn't call on the dragons again, it'll lead them right to us."

I also don't even know how to call on the dragons. As of right now, the beasts don't know where we are. We've covered more ground than I thought we could in a few hours. The Emer isn't a straight line that cuts through Imirath, and when we cross at this altitude, we'll be in unclaimed god land, the Etril Forest. I look down at my bleeding leg and flash my eyes forward to Cayden's bleeding arm. We have no bandages, and blood is the easiest thing for beasts to track. Neither of us brought our satchels into the castle; we have no supplies with us.

"There are no bridges up here anymore. They were burnt down several years ago," Cayden says while stepping closer and rubbing his hands on my arms to offer me some friction. He's implying we'll have to get in the water...which is more than likely a death sentence.

“I’d rather die fighting on a whim than waiting for the choice to be made for me,” I state while looking into his eyes, knowing he feels the same way by the respect reflected in them. We’re soldiers. We never had the option of being coddled, and making hard decisions becomes easier when you’re forced to make them repeatedly. I move away from him and resume our run. It starts out as a jog, but we increase our pace with every new howl we hear. The water should wash our scents away and throw them off our tracks. We just need to make it to the river.

The rushing water grows, but no relief can be found when the howls are also growing. Each inhale feels like a sharp twist. My bruised ribs and the severe temperatures are a painful mixture. At least I know my ribs aren’t broken. I wouldn’t be able to run at this pace if they were. I suppress the memory of the hits and the hatred in the dragon’s eyes and just focus on getting to the Emer.

The trees begin to clear, and a wide river looms in front of us. My breath flies away from me like a startled bird when the spray of the frigid water dances across my cheeks. It should take us only five minutes to get across, maybe even less, but it’s going to feel so much longer than that. Snow has been melting off the peaks of the mountains since the temperature hasn’t been as cold as it can be up here, so the river is flowing at an aggressive pace. Sharp ice-covered rocks are dotted throughout the river, which will help break the current for us.

Two howls shatter the silence of the forest, and I know we must cross now or never.

“Hold onto my shoulders if we get to a point where you can’t reach the bottom, and do not let go of my hand,” Cayden commands while taking the first step into the water. He hisses through his teeth as his skin makes contact with the icy river. I choke on a whimper; my mind is overtaken by the freezing temperature, and it’s only up to my ankles. There’s a steep drop-off in front of us, and Cayden wastes no time jumping straight in.

“Fucking gods,” he curses, turning his back toward the current. The water is level with his chest, which means it’ll probably be up to my shoulders. He reaches forward and wraps his shaking hands around my waist to help me down.

I press my lips together to suppress a cry and get my footing on the slick bottom of the river. Cayden looks down at me for a quick second, and I catch the guilt in his eyes before he turns away. I want to reach out to him,

to tell him not to blame himself, but my body is fighting to get used to the water. The current blasts me as soon as he steps forward. His grip is like iron laced between my fingers. It's the only thing keeping me anchored to him against the raging river. I use my other hand to grip the sharp rocks to help myself move forward. It feels like a thousand knives are stabbing me all over my body. I've never been this cold in my entire life. It's the kind of cold that makes you wish you were being burned alive. Piercing waters soak further into my clothes with every step I take.

The moon makes me wish for the sun.

The cold makes me wish for heat.

I feel like I've taken every warm day for granted.

A reflection dances in one of the ice-tipped rocks. My head spins as far as it can without pulling my hand from Cayden's, and my panic is amplified along with the tightness in my chest. There's a beast sniffing by the trees we just ran from. We won't be able to leave the river without the beast seeing us, and these beasts hunt in packs. Their white fur-covered bodies are as tall as a horse and far deadlier. Their fangs are so long that they hang out of their closed mouths, and I've heard stories of the milky-white pupils that pollute their eyes.

"C-Cay-" I try to warn him, but I can't get the words out. My body is shivering too hard; my teeth are chattering against each word in a painful rhythm. It's a repulsive feeling to not have control over your own body. He can't hear my stutters over the raging current, which is loud enough to cover any sudden movements. I dance my eyes over my surroundings. There's a big enough rock that we can huddle behind to the right of us. If we stop moving, it could be detrimental, but if we don't take cover, this entire trek through the water would have been for nothing.

I dig my boot into the riverbed below me, shoving it between two sturdy rocks and swinging myself to the right—into the current. The water rushes over my ears, and I break the surface with a loud gasp. Cayden looks over at me with panic-stricken eyes and wraps his arms around my torso. My legs wrap around his waist, and his body heat feels like a safe haven that I'm unable to resist. A shooting pain fires in my ribs as he pulls me closer. My shaking hand slaps over my mouth to muffle a pained cry. He looks at me with wild eyes, but I point toward the tree line before he can ask me what's going on. I see the moment his eyes register the beast—they narrow before he looks down at the water and closes them briefly. He adjusts our

position so his back is facing the current, and he presses my face into his neck. Our bodies violently tremble together.

“Your ribs?” he grits out.

“It’s nothing,” I gasp, “not broken.” He raises an arm to my shoulders to press me further into him, dropping the topic when he sees I’m in no state to carry a conversation. I cling to him, ignoring the pain in my ribs and leg. He’s my warmth in more ways than one in these frigid waters.

“I’ve got you, angel,” he soothes while running a hand down my back, repeating the same words he said in the dragon chamber.

“It’s so fucking cold,” I choke out the obvious.

He grunts in affirmation. “Look at me, Elowen. I want to see those pretty eyes.” I raise my head from his neck and cringe at the warmth withdrawn from my face. “There’s a town close to here. You just have to keep going north.”

“Stop talking like you’re not coming with me.” I shake my head. “I’m not leaving you.” I tighten my arms around his neck. My first reflex isn’t even to find out how he knows about a town in the Seren Mountains; it’s to keep him close, where I can keep him safe. The thought of leaving Imirath without him...of living in Vareveth without him...it’s paralyzing. It shouldn’t be, but it is. It’s more paralyzing than this frigid water or facing down a dragon.

“I’m fully aware that you can handle yourself, but these circumstances are extreme, and I need to get you somewhere warm. I can handle killing a few beasts. I’m not letting you freeze to death before you’ve had your chance for everyone in this world to know just how powerful you are. Your safety is my highest priority, and I’ll do whatever it takes to assure it.” His sweet words linger in the space between us, and I soak them up like a sponge. Even his blue lips can speak words that create a warm sensation blooming in my chest.

I’ve told myself that he was a distraction for so many months, that this thing between us is just business. But I know distractions aren’t supposed to make your chest tighten, your blood heat, or your breathing uneven. Distractions aren’t supposed to keep you awake at night, wondering if they’re okay. You’re not supposed to want to get lost in a distraction and burn any map offered to you. Only Cayden can light me on fire in the biting cold.

“Don’t be an idiot. I’m not leaving you, so get that ignorant thought from your head. We’re staying together. We came here together, and we’re leaving together, end of discussion. Never doubt how much I can handle, Cayden. I may be freezing, but I’m too stubborn to die. You said the same thing last night. You always tell me that I’m stuck with you, but you’re stuck with me too, soldier.”

He looks at me in disbelief, like he can’t believe I’d choose him over a head start. It makes me wonder if anyone has ever chosen him. I harden my eyes to steel to show him how final my decision is. He’s not my diversion or something to discard with my back turned, and he’s more than just my ally. We’re getting out of here together, or I’m fighting by his side along the riverbank until we can go north together, or until the end.

He blows out a shaky sigh, “I had a feeling you’d say that but forgive me for trying to be your knight in shining armor, you hardheaded queen.”

I crinkle my nose and tilt my head, examining him, “It doesn’t suit you.” He pinches my uninjured thigh, and a shaky laugh rattles through me. “Do you have another bomb?” I ask hopefully.

“No, but I’m glad to know you like them.” He takes an arm off me and tilts me slightly to kick one of his legs up. When his hand resurfaces from the water, he grasps one of his silver knives. “We just need the beasts distracted long enough for us to get out of the water and break the tree line. The current will cover any sounds we make,” he says.

I unwrap myself from around him and stand on my own feet again, turning toward the tree line on the opposite side of the Emer. We’re more than halfway through the river, but we’ll still have to be swift.

“Ready?” he asks. I nod my head. “Go, now!” he commands while turning his body to throw the knife. We shuffle through the water as the beasts howl behind us.

There’s no steep drop-off on this side of the river, so I wade out of the water as fast as my soaked leathers and boots will allow and sprint toward the forest. My leg throbs painfully, but I don’t stop to check on it, and I don’t dare turn around to see if the beasts are gone. We sprint quietly for the next few minutes before slowing down to listen to our surroundings.

No beasts.

Just our heavy breathing, the creaky trees in the Etril Forest, and the distant sound of dragon roars. If I thought I was cold before I got in the

river, it has substantially increased now. I wrap my sopping arms around me, but it offers no relief.

“How far is the village?” I ask through my chattering teeth.

“Around a half-hour if we hurry,” he answers. His eyes track me with worry laced through them, but that’s all I need to hear to begin running again.

Cayden takes the lead after I start getting disoriented. I fight to keep my panic at bay, and relying on him is helping me, whether he knows it or not. Everything looks the same, and I’ve begun having visions of him and me freezing to death because I lead us in the wrong direction. I haven’t been in this forest since I fled Imirath. I was too distraught to absorb anything on the first few nights, not to mention how frightened I was to learn just how vast the world is—how high the sky stretches and how small humans are in comparison to trees. But now, all I can take in is how eerie the Etril is. It’s no wonder why hardly anyone settles here, or why it’s rumored to be where the Goddess of Souls rests. The trees are too perfect looking, in nearly perfect rows. There are no sounds of animals or life anywhere around us. Just the bitter wind whistling through the tallest trees I’ve ever seen.

We’re halfway through the journey when a wave of drowsiness hits me. I try to rest my hand on a tree trunk but don’t notice the low-hanging branch before it scrapes the wound on my leg. A cry of pain wells in my throat, and Cayden sharply turns in my direction with startlingly quick reflexes. I close my eyes to try to fend off the dizziness.

“What’s wrong, angel?” Cayden murmurs while dropping to his knees to check on my cut.

“I’m fine, just a little dizzy.” I shove the heels of my palms into my eyes before opening them again. The world still spins, but it’s not as bad.

“I’m going to carry you the rest of the way, stay as close to my skin as you can. We’re not far.” He moves to pick me up, but I step out of his hold.

“No, I’m better now. I can finish the run.” I don’t want to slow him down.

“That’s too bad,” he ignores my protest and crowds my space again, scooping me in his arms. By reflex, I loop my arms around his neck. “Because I’m calling in my favor,” he declares while running forward, “face in my neck, now.”

I do as he says and close my eyes once I’m comfortable. “You waited all this time only to use your favor to carry me.”

“You’d be surprised by how much I view that as a reward,” he responds, but his tone is missing the usual sarcastic flare. I snuggle closer to him and let him carry me the rest of the way through the forest. He runs in silence, and the sound of his heartbeat lulls me to a half-asleep state that I only resurface from when I hear a horse chuffing.

I pull my head from his neck and take in the small town he’s walking us through. It’s quaint and rundown; some houses seem to have sunken roofs that have never been fixed. Warm light streams out of other homes as smoke rises from chimneys into the chilly night. Snow lightly coats every roof, almost like it’s so cold here that the snow doesn’t bother melting because more will just pile on top of it. The road isn’t made of stone; twigs snap under Cayden’s boots as he walks us further into the town. It’s too cold for anyone to be out on their porches and too late for anyone to be awake and roaming the streets.

“How did you know about this place?” I inquire. It’s a small and insignificant village, and I’ve never seen it on any maps. I turn my head back toward him and take in his grave expression—his clenched jaw up to his stone-cold eyes. He keeps looking at one of the largest buildings in the town, which I assume is the inn, and doesn’t take in the dilapidated sights.

“It’s where I was born,” his tone is final, and I know he doesn’t want me to ask questions, so I let it drop in the space between us. I know how hard it is to have an unwelcome person dig into your past. He’s already revealed a handful within that sentence because from the look of it...he doesn’t have any family left here. I wrap my arms tighter around his neck, and his shoulders go rigid before easing into my hold.

“You should set me down,” I mumble as we near the inn’s front steps. Cayden hesitates for a moment but gently lowers me and sets me on my feet. He steps in front of me and holds the door open after quickly scanning the inside.

My knees weaken at the sudden blast of warmth, and I lean my back against the wall to get my bearings. A few people sit on barstools at the front of the inn; I guess being this far out doesn’t erase the normal setup for inns—tavern on the bottom. A few others linger amongst tables, smoking pipes or taking swigs from tankards. Cayden catches the eye of the man behind the counter while he tosses a towel over his burly shoulder and nods in our direction.

“Go stand by the fire, I won’t be long,” Cayden says, guiding me off the wall. I rub my hands together and walk in the opposite direction of Cayden, never being more grateful for warmth in my entire life. My cell in Imirath was cold, the first winter in Aestilian even more so, but nothing compares to the kind of cold we just experienced. I raise my shaking hands in front of me and try not to crumble to the ground to get as close to the flames as possible. My pale fingers grip the wooden mantle to keep me steady on my feet as the heat trickles into my soaked boots, returning some feeling to my toes.

“I can keep you warm, darling,” chimes a male voice from one of the tables next to me. I roll my eyes and tilt my head back to face the ceiling, not in the mood to deal with men. I take my time looking him over. Auburn hair, brown eyes, maybe a few years older than me, and a soldier’s build. His friends slap him on the back and stare at him as if he hung the stars in the sky.

My lip curls in disgust as I drum my fingers on the mantelpiece, “I don’t think I’d be able to get past your stench.”

The man gets to his feet while his friends watch in anticipation. “I do like them feisty,” he smirks. I narrow my eyes and square my shoulders, ready to pelt him with another insult, but a pair of hands snake around my waist, and my back presses into a firm chest.

“As do I,” Cayden states, staring the man down over my shoulder. I relax into his hold and rest my hands over his. “Was he bothering you, angel?”

“It was a joke, calm down,” the man begins to back down and walk toward his chair. His friend’s eyes flicker between Cayden and him.

“Is she laughing?” Cayden asks darkly. “Make another pass at her again, and the last thing you’ll see is a knife flying at you, straight between your eyes. You should know that I adore her violent streak and don’t mind cleaning up her messes.”

I tighten my hands on his to show my gratitude not only for stepping in, but for building me up and not downplaying my abilities. Cayden doesn’t wait for a response before tugging my body away from the fire and down the hall. He guides me to walk in front of him while keeping a hand on my hip. We round the corner and walk up a dimly lit flight of stairs to an open door on the right side of the hall. It’s a simple room, with no fuss or flare, and only one bed. I force my eyes away. If I stare at it too long, then I won’t

be able to stop my mind from traveling to places that shouldn't be my priority right now.

I take in a steadying breath; thankful Cayden can't read my thoughts and notice a door in the center of the wall across from the bed. That must be the bathroom. I hear someone in there filling a tub with water. There's a wooden dining table in the corner of the room. My boots leave a trail of water on the floor as I round the bed and aim for the fireplace, unable to resist the warmth that calls to my wet clothes. I undo the clasps that keep my corset closed and slide it off my arms, hanging it on one of the hooks in front of the fireplace and nearly moan when the pressure is relieved from my bruises. Cayden loosens the clasps at his neck, shoulders, and back to remove his black fighting gear and reveal his muscular torso.

I focus on the flames, not his muscles. The muscles that I'll be sleeping next to. I bend down to unlace my boots and rip them off my feet, setting them and my socks by the fire. Oh gods, we don't have any clothes to wear tonight. My mind wanders to what it would feel like to have his muscular frame pressed against me with nothing in between. The fluttering sensation in my belly is replaced by irritation when a maid comes out of the bathroom with empty buckets, looking Cayden up and down like he's a four-course meal. Without thinking better of it, I get to my feet and angle my body in front of his. I see him press his lips together in the corner of my eye, and he lightly caresses my hip bone before letting his hand fall to his side again.

"You should get in the tub before the water gets cold. I'm off for the night, and nobody else here is going to heat more water," the maid says, closing the door behind her, and leaving us alone in our room.

"You get in. I'll be fine with a cold bath," Cayden says before I can speak.

"No, you carried me here, so you deserve the hot bath," I argue, spinning on my heels to meet his eyes.

"Absolutely not, I didn't do that for you to use it against me." He points a finger at my face.

"I'm not using it against you." I swat his finger away.

"Though I find your stubbornness endearing, I am in no mood for it when you're shivering. Get in the tub," he commands.

"No." I plant my hands on my hips.

"Elowen, I will throw you in that tub if you keep this bullshit up," he groans, tilting his head down and pinching the bridge of his nose.

“I’ll get in if you get in with me.” My breathing catches in my throat when I notice how he pauses before dropping his hand and slowly looking up at me, his eyes filled with guarded uneasiness and blatant want.

“You’re sure?” he asks.

“Yes,” I try not to sound as breathless as I feel, but I have a hard time controlling my reactions when it comes to him. I’ve never had to control my reactions around anyone else because nobody has ever gotten a strong reaction from me. My chest tightens with his proximity, and I fight the urge to lace my fingers through his hair and press him into me. How is it possible that he can make me feel more by his presence and words than any other man could when they were physically touching my body?

He licks his lips and nods his head, “Tell me when you’re in the water, and I’ll come in after you.”

“You promise?” I whisper as he bends down to untie his boots. The sight of him on his knees gives me a flashback to the brothel, and when he looks up at me with hungry eyes, I wonder if he’s remembering the same thing.

“I promise.”

CHAPTER
FORTY-NINE



I strip out of the rest of my clothes while practically running to the bathtub; steam has never looked so endearing. My body sinks into the water, and I pull the red pins from my hair before plunging my head under the surface.

“I’m in,” I call out while scooching toward the front of the tub so Cayden can get in behind me. His legs are longer; he’ll need more room to be comfortable. His feet pad against the floor, but I don’t let myself look in his direction. The water rises to the brim of the tub with his added presence.

“Much better than the river,” he mutters in a husky voice that makes my cheeks flush.

“We can always add some ice if you’re feeling nostalgic.” My heart flutters in the center of my chest, and I keep my arms secure around me. I don’t trust my hands right now.

“Maybe next time,” he says while uncapping a bottle of soap from the side of the tub. A light floral scent fills the air and makes me wish for the first blossoms of spring. “May I wash your hair for you?” He sounds...shy. I’ve never heard him sound even remotely shy. He’s always as hard as ice, wrapped in confidence and power.

“Yes,” I answer in a small voice.

His long fingers start working on my scalp, gently rubbing their way through my hair and working their way down my long strands. I feel a jolt of exhilaration every time his fingers skim my back. He takes care, ridding my hair of knots without pulling too hard. After he’s done with my ends, he brings his fingers back up to my scalp and gently massages me. Nobody has

ever taken care of me like this. I let out a soft pleasure-filled hum and loosen my arms around myself, feeling utterly relaxed.

Cayden's fingers still in my hair, and his long legs stiffen on either side of me. My back goes rigid again when I realize he can see my bruises before I've even seen them. It hurts to think about them, and I've never been good at processing internal pain. I try to bury things, push forward and ignore them because it scares me to feel those kinds of emotions. My fingers dance over my torso and gently brush the bruises to get a feel for how big they are. I inhale a sharp breath when I press too hard, and Cayden drops a hand from my hair to wrap it around my wrist.

"Elowen, what—"

"What happened in the hall? You said something went wrong, and you're injured," I rush the words out so quickly I'm afraid he won't be able to understand me. He stays silent behind me, other than his uneven breathing that mingles with mine in this small space.

Silence between us is more deafening than arguing with each other.

He stays rigid but lets out a resigned sigh while releasing my wrist and tilting my head back. He picks up a tin bowl from the side of the tub and begins rinsing the soap from my hair. "Two guards must have heard the commotion over the music and came to investigate. I got distracted when they showed up, hence the cut on my arm and eye." I try to turn around to check on his cuts, but he stills my shoulders with his hands and continues to pour water on top of my head, repeating the hypnotic motion of running his fingers through my strands.

"Sorry," I grumble.

"Don't be." His soft chuckle dances across my neck as he leans forward to whisper in my ear, "I like your concern."

This time, I can't suppress the shiver that soars up my spine and clasp my hands in front of me to stop myself from reaching back to touch him. He takes in my reaction and laughs again, louder, less sheltered. The cold that had crept in while I was pressing my bruises is washed away just from the sound of his happiness, warming the dark parts of me in rays of golden light.

I smack his knee under the water. "Shut up," I mumble.

"My sincerest apologies," he says, not sounding the least bit remorseful. "After I killed the final guard that was in front of the dragon chamber, I ran after the two guards that had seen me. I was too far to catch up with them,

so I threw knives and killed them both. Someone else was at the end of the hall and saw them fall; I heard their scream. I couldn't see whoever else was there, so I turned around and ran back to the chamber. I didn't want to risk anyone getting between us."

Visuals of the dragon chamber flash in my mind—Cayden's weight on top of me, shielding me, it's engraved into my flesh and memory. The way he showed no fear while facing down a dragon with only a sword. Placing himself between myself and the creature. He saved me from an arrow aimed straight at my head, and laid himself on top of me, despite knowing I have the bond.

"Tell me what happened before I got to you," Cayden's voice filters forward. His hands return to the sides of the tub, and his knuckles turn white from how hard he's gripping it. He doesn't seem angry, but he's showing signs of anger...irritation...*restraint*. His arms tremble slightly, losing the brief calm in his movements when he was washing my hair.

"You can touch me if you want," I offer with my heart in my throat. He instantly releases his hold on the tub and places his large hands on my torso. Dragging them in soothing strokes over my bruises. His gentle, careful movements only amplify my emotions.

I shouldn't be comforted right now.

My bruises shouldn't be rubbed.

I deserved it, but I don't want to shy away from his touch.

"The dragons," I start, clearing my constricted throat, "they got mad when they saw me. Their chains were enchanted and—" I cut myself off as words betray me, and shame slithers through me like their tails slithered on the chamber floor...the chamber they were locked in for years. I fidget with my hands; I want to feel useful; I want to do something right...something good. "Can I wash your hair now?"

"You don't have to if you don't want to," he reasons, probably thinking I only want to do it to return the favor.

"I want to." It'll be easier for me to talk if I'm not only focused on how badly my words make me feel. I'm naked on the surface, but my words lay an entirely different part of me bare. I also have the overwhelming urge to look at him, to touch him, to feel his eyes on me. The cut on my leg isn't deep and has already stopped bleeding. My leathers protected me from the brunt of the hit. I shift onto my knees to look over my shoulder while kneeling between his legs.

I forget how to breathe for a moment.

The color has returned to his lips and cheeks, giving him a rosy glow. His eyes hold the same hunger as they did when he knelt in front of the fireplace, but there's also something deeper. He's not looking at me with only lust; he's looking at me like there's no other person he wants in front of him. His hands continue to rub circles on my bruises as he leans against the back of the tub. His chest, which falls up and down unevenly, looks like the perfect place to lay my head on.

I fully turn my body so I can face him properly. I've seen his torso plenty of times, but this is the most he has ever seen of me. His hands halt their steady movements as his heated eyes trace my body. His gaze is filled with a mixture of emotions that all border on need. His tongue slowly drags over his lips when his eyes snag on my peaked nipples. I try not to feed into the small voice that tells me to cover my chest with my arms, my breasts have always been an insecurity of mine, but I don't want Cayden to know that. The longer he takes me in, the more anxious I grow.

"Beautiful," he mumbles, more to himself than me. His admittance plows through my anxious thoughts and drags me back to the present. His throat bobs, "So entirely beautiful."

He rises off the back of the tub and comes closer to me so I can wash his hair without water being poured on the floor. His hard length pokes me in the stomach, and I suck in a sharp breath while pushing my thighs closer together. He can feel me shifting between his legs, and a knowing smirk slides onto his face. He drops a hand from my ribs to circle the bruise on my thigh, careful to avoid my cut. I bite my lip to stop a moan from slipping out, but he takes the other hand off my ribs and cradles the side of my face, gently using his thumb to ease my lip from between my teeth.

We gaze into each other's eyes; his breath warms my lips while his hand on my thigh warms everything I'm made of. My fingers gently rub some water over his cuts to get a better view of them. Thankfully, his armor took the brunt of the hits. They've stopped bleeding, but the cut on his arm should be bandaged. I'll search the room for a healing kit after we're done bathing. I reach out and place my hands on his chest, dancing my fingers over the scars that litter his skin.

"Please talk to me. It's killing me, angel," he whispers a few inches from my lips. The protectiveness in his tone only heightens my reaction to him. I've always despised being protected; I always thought it made me

weak, but Cayden knows I can handle myself, and chooses to protect me anyway.

I pull away slightly to grab the tin bowl he left on the side of the tub. I won't be able to concentrate on anything other than his lips if I stay this close to him. "Chin up, soldier," I smile while tapping my nails against the tin. His lips quirk up, but he obeys my order. His eyes move to look at the ceiling since he can no longer look at me with his head angled like this. *Don't kiss his neck, Elowen. Focus.* I raise myself up and pour water onto his hair. I gently stroke my fingers through, and push the hair off his forehead as his eyes slide shut. I wonder if anyone else has taken care of him. I selfishly hope that I'm the first to touch him like this.

"The amulet was the key to destroying the chains that held the dragons," I begin. "The chains were enchanted, which was why Garrick kept the dragons in a room with windows, it was to taunt them. After the chains broke, they whirled on me."

A wave of guilt floods through me while I reach for the soap bottle. I uncap it and squirt a decent amount into my hands before returning to his hair. His hands have moved back to their comforting place on my ribs. "They started to circle me as I tried to apologize. I didn't even know if they could understand me." The first sign of rising emotion is the tightness in my throat. I take a break from talking to wash the soap from his hair. "They hit me with their tails."

His eyes snap open in alarm, and water trickles down his sharp cheekbones and drips off his chin. He regards my bruises with a careful eye, and a crease of worry forms between his brows, "Did you try to run?"

"No," I blink away the mist in my eyes, "I took the hits."

He goes deadly still, "Why?"

I don't answer him right away; instead, I tip my head down and take in my bruises. He watches me in silence, waiting for an answer. I bring a wet hand to my ribs and brush them along my bruises. The one on the right is worse; it was the first one they gave me. It stretches from the side of my breast and ends close to my belly button. The one on the left is about half the size. A tear slips from the corner of my eye before I can stop it, "Because I deserve it."

He yanks me back down by my hips and cradles my face in his hands. He swipes the rogue tear from my cheek and brings his lips forward to kiss

the trail it left on my face. “Don’t think that. Don’t you dare think that, Elowen. You don’t deserve these.”

“Yes, I do.” I’m unable to stop the onslaught of emotions. Gods, I hate crying, but the tears won’t stop. “I was small and weak from living in the dungeon, but I should have found a way to get back to them.”

“*Shh*, angel, stop. It’s okay.” He continues to kiss my cheeks wherever tears fall.

“Gods, I’m sorry for getting like this,” I try to pull away from him, embarrassed for letting him see me like this. “I’m fine, I just got overwhelmed for a second, but I’m fine.”

“Listen to me, Elowen.” He keeps my face framed between his hands as his eyes blaze into mine. “You were a child when you left Imirath. Most soldiers with a lifetime of experience would never even consider going back to a place where they suffered in the ways you did. You are so incredibly brave, and for whatever it’s worth, I’m so proud of you. The dragons want you, they responded to your call in the forest, and I know for a fact that they’ll find you in Vareveth. You do not deserve any pain that is dealt to you. You endure it, but that doesn’t mean you deserve it.” More tears slip from my eyes, but it’s not because of my guilt—it’s because of him. For the words that hold me together when my guilt threatens to rip me to smithereens.

“You’re proud of me?” I ask as a small smile chisels a crack in my tears. I don’t remember the last time someone said they were proud of me. It’s such a small series of words, but when someone you value is truly proud of you, they mean an indescribable amount.

“Of course, I am,” he murmurs while leaning his forehead against mine. I reach up to where his hands rest on my cheeks and twine our fingers together.

“Sometimes I just feel so guilty,” I pause, “for surviving.” The dragons are far from dead, but he knows what I mean. Life in a cage isn’t actually living.

He closes his eyes and clenches his jaw. His hands tighten around mine as he brings a set of our joined hands forward to place my hand on his right cheek. He swallows before opening his eyes, “I know.”

I keep my face open and breathing neutral; I’m worried I’ll scare him off if I show too much of a reaction. “Will you tell me what happened?” I

whisper, running my thumb from the top of his scar, right next to his eye, to the bottom of his scar, close to his lips.

“Not while we’re here,” he shakes his head. My heart aches for him, someone like Cayden doesn’t seem like he had much of a childhood.

“How old were you?”

“Twelve.” My heart squeezes in my chest, and I quickly cover the pained expression on my face. He was just a boy.

“You can talk to me whenever you feel comfortable and give me the whole story or only the details you’re ready to share. I told you that I’ll never judge you, and that is an unyielding promise. Whoever you were when you got that scar would be so proud of the man you’ve become,” my voice wavers slightly. “And please know that I’m so grateful you survived whatever it was because I’m very thankful I met you. I’m proud of you, too, for whatever it’s worth.”

I bring my lips forward to kiss his scar, starting with the top of his cheek and trailing my way down, slowly, savoring the feel of his skin on my lips. His breathing catches in his throat the closer I get to his lips. I place my hands on his chest and feel his rapid heartbeat beneath my palms. He laces his fingers through my wet hair, keeping me close to him when I finish my trail. I slide my hands up and grip his broad shoulders. I press my legs together again, and one of his hands slides under the water, slowly trailing up my thigh.

“Why did you get between the dragons and me?” I whisper. His hand stills on my thigh, but the intensity in his eyes only grows. “Even after the arrow was shot, you could have moved away, but you didn’t. If the dragons directed their fire at us, they would have burned us both, not just you.” He would have died with me; he wouldn’t have saved me from the flames. This feels like another moment where we’re in our own world, with nobody else around us, and it’ll be like this the whole night. We’re prone to sinking into each other when we’re alone.

“Because...” Cayden trails off, pressing his lips together and looking like he did when we were standing next to the canal. He shakes his head slightly, and water droplets fall into the water surrounding us. “I couldn’t watch you die. I couldn’t watch you put yourself in danger while I stayed against the wall. Ever since I met you, my life has become brighter, and I don’t want it to get dark again. I was running to you before the arrow was even fired. I told you I would be with you in the end, and I would have run

to you even without the promise.” We’re so close that there’s no way he missed my small intake of breath or the way my throat bobs. My hands tighten on his shoulders as I recall the way he shielded me.

I’ve got you, angel. I promise I’ve got you.

He knew there was no escape once he entered the circle, and yet he ran to me with no hesitation. It defies logic.

“Why wouldn’t you leave me at the river? You were freezing and in pain, and I wouldn’t have blamed you for it,” he whispers his own question, and there is no part of me that wants to shield the truth from him.

“I would rather die fighting by your side than flee your side. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I let something happen to you. Not when you’ve protected me since the night we struck the deal. I hate admitting when I’m scared, but there is no place in Ravaryn that I fear more than Imirath, and yet I still wouldn’t have left without you.” He cuts me off from saying anything further when he leans forward and captures my mouth in a soft kiss. It’s hardly a whisper against my lips, but the amount of warmth it makes me feel could rival the frost that rages outside the inn.

“Cayden,” I breathlessly say after he pulls away. “We said we wouldn’t.”

“And yet, I can’t stay away,” he admits. “Do you want me to try harder to stay away from you?” His eyes stare into mine with deep intensity, but I know he’ll get off me if I deny him.

He’ll give me my space.

He’ll sleep on the floor.

But I don’t want any of that.

I want him.

“I want you to stop fighting,” I brush my lips against his, “but if we do this, I don’t want it to be a game.” I don’t want it to be something we can’t talk about or something we justify as using each other as a distraction.

“You were never a game to me,” he states, slamming his lips onto mine. I shift my legs from under me and spread them on either side of his hips. He uses the hand he has on my thigh to pull me forward and presses his hard cock into my sensitive clit. I moan into the kiss and wrap my legs tightly around him. He places both of his hands on my ass to support me.

His tongue slides into my mouth and dominates mine. He moves in slow, languid strokes like he’s trying to memorize the very feel of me without missing a single detail. It’s the kind of kiss I feel in every part of

my body. I feel every stroke, every hitch of breath, every muscle constricting as he pulls me as close as possible. He lights every nerve on fire and makes all my senses tune into him. We disconnect our lips briefly, and I stare into his glazed eyes alight with desire as I press my forehead against his. He glides his wet, parted lips over mine. My core pounds for him, and I squirm in his lap, desperate for friction as he reconnects our lips. I grind my hips down onto his, but I need more.

The kiss becomes more urgent. He glides my clit over his length, and I claw at his back. I want all of him. Sensing my need without breaking the kiss, he grips my ass and rises from the tub with my legs wrapped around his waist. I tighten my arms around his neck and press myself into his hard chest, reveling in the way it feels to have him pressed against me with no barriers between us.

He places me down on the edge of the bed and lays me back against the soft blankets. He removes his lips from mine and trails them down my neck, pausing on the sensitive spots he knows I love. I cry out and arch my back off the bed, removing my hands from around his neck and weaving them through his wet hair. He groans his approval at my reaction and bites harder. I lock my ankles around his torso and try to draw him closer, but he doesn't move. His thick arousal rests against my stomach, but I crave to be filled by him.

"You teased me at the brothel when I tasted you on my fingers," he huskily states in between neck kisses. "Not a day has gone by that I haven't thought about what you would taste like when I bury my head between your thighs."

"You imagined me?"

A sinful smirk crosses his features, "Angel, you are the sickness of my thoughts, and I have no intention of finding a cure." He moves his head lower and swirls his tongue around my erect nipple. His hand glides down my torso and dips between my thighs. He shoves two fingers in me, and I cover my mouth with my hand to suppress a scream of relief.

"Hand off or I'll stop, and believe me, I don't want to. You're already so wet for me, but gods, have I missed your moans," he confesses while hovering over me. Gliding his fingers in and out of me in a torturous rhythm, my legs are already shaking around him. I slowly lower my hand from my mouth. He rewards me by pumping his fingers faster, and I don't suppress the moan that shatters through my throat.

“Good girl,” he praises and begins kissing down my body. He veers from my torso and moves to my sides, kissing my bruises tenderly while sinking to his knees. I prop myself up on my elbows, not wanting to miss the sight of him kneeling between my thighs or the look of unbarred hunger he wears.

“I’ve never been a religious man, but I will worship you in ways that the gods will envy.” He dips his head and gives my center a long stroke with his tongue. His eyes roll back in his head at the taste of me. His touch sets me on fire and turns my bones to jelly. I fall back on the bed and fist my hands in the blankets. “You taste even better than I imagined,” he groans while placing his mouth back on me.

I writhe beneath him, unable to keep my cries of pleasure quiet—but it’s like they charge him. The more I cry out, the more he rewards me with his tongue. His hands grip my thighs, and he pulls me further off the bed. My knees are bent over his shoulders, and I move my hands to fist his hair. I grind my hips onto his tongue, and he laps up my wetness like I’m the wine of the gods.

“That’s it, gorgeous. Take what you need.” My pulse pounds throughout my entire body. I want to surrender myself to him and never stop feeling like this. He takes a hand off my thigh and uses it to slowly pump his length. My eyes roll back in my head, knowing this is making him want me so badly that he needs to stroke himself.

“Cayden,” I moan.

“You have no idea how much I love seeing you like this, knowing I made you this wet.”

“It’s all for you,” I confess. It has been since I met him. I haven’t imagined anyone else when I touch myself late at night, where only the darkness could judge me for wanting him. His lips wrap around my clit, and his tongue flicks upward. My legs aggressively shake on either side of his head. My hips continue to rock against his mouth, chasing every ounce of pleasure he’s giving me. His swirling licks push me closer and closer to the edge. He quickens his pace, sensing that I’m close.

“Come on my tongue, my angel,” he commands.

My angel.

The last lap of his tongue shatters me. I scream his name, gasping for air as he chases my orgasm, licking and sucking on my clit until I’ve come down from my high. He places a few kisses on my inner thighs before

slowly getting to his feet and kissing his way up my body. My shaking hands remain in his hair, and my legs fall limp on either side of him in the aftermath of what he's done.

There's no trace of cockiness or sarcasm in his eyes, just pure desire. I raise my shaking body on my elbows again and press my lips into his. I taste myself on his lips and deepen our kiss. I begin to crawl back on the bed, and he follows until my head is resting against the pillows and his hips are settled between my legs.

"Is this still okay, beautiful?" he asks while stroking a thumb down my cheek. His question takes me off guard. My throat constricts as I take in his sincere expression. That question shouldn't be a rarity, it should be the norm, but it's not. For most of my life, my body never felt like it was my own. It was beaten and chained without my consent; that was my reality for so long. Then, when I was old enough, I tried finding pleasure in positive ways. But I could never form a connection with any man I had been with. I was just a body, never a person. No matter how much I scrubbed my skin, their handprints remained. Those trysts left me feeling hollower and more alone than I had been before they happened. I thought something was wrong with me because I couldn't find pleasure in the ways I sought it out, but I just wanted someone to want *me*. I've been discarded, beaten, hidden, and unwanted for most of my life. I just wanted one person to look at me and want me exactly as I am.

Cayden wants me.

He knows me.

I'm more than just a body or a game.

I tighten my hold on his neck and bring his face closer to mine.

"I've never been with anyone as myself," I confess, his lips are just an inch away, and I can already feel them pulling me in. Possessiveness flashes in his eyes before he blinks it away.

"Then I'm honored to be the first, Elowen Atarah," he reconnects our lips, "but I must confess that I intend on being the last."

I bite down on his bottom lip, and a groan rips free from his throat. I reach between our bodies and glide my hand down his toned torso to grip his hard length. I slide my hand up and down his shaft, rubbing my thumb over the tip. "You want my cock?" His tone is rough.

"Please," I sigh against his lips as my core pounds for him. He reaches down to remove my hand and positions himself at my entrance. He slowly

starts to push himself in, and pain flares low in my abdomen. I suck in a sharp breath and dig my nails into his back.

“Relax, angel. I won’t be able to fit if you don’t relax,” he says in a strained voice. “We can go as slow as you need.”

“More,” I grit my teeth. I want all of him, I want him to fill me.

He pushes more of himself into me and reaches forward to grab the headboard. “Fuck,” he curses, closing his eyes briefly to gather himself.

“More,” I urge him again, my voice close to a whimper. “Give me all of you.” That’s all the persuading he needs, his hips sharply jut forward, and his thick cock is fully sheathed inside of me.

I scream into the crook of his neck, and he continues to rock himself in and out of me. I pull my head out of his neck as the pain melts into intense pleasure. He grinds himself deeper the wetter he makes me, brushing against my clit before pulling out and doing it all over again. He lets out a deep groan when I start moving my hips against his, wanting to give him as much pleasure as he’s giving me.

“You’re so fucking perfect,” he moans, dropping his head and capturing my lips. He presses more of his weight onto me, and his new position increases the drag on my clit. I raise my legs and wrap them around his waist again, allowing him to push deeper inside of me.

“Cayden, fuck,” I grit out against his lips, “faster.”

He increases his pace, slamming his hips into mine, “Is this what you wanted? Me fucking you just like this?” His hand tightens on the headboard as he drills into me. His muscles flex so deliciously. He gives me a sharp thrust from a different angle, and I squeal. “When I ask you a question, I expect an answer. Now, tell me—am I fucking you just how you wanted? Taking all of me like the greedy queen you are.”

“Yes.” I tilt my head down to watch him fuck me without mercy. Cayden is a commander inside the bedroom and outside of it. Every stroke he makes exudes power, control, and dominance. “You’re fucking me just how I want.”

He abruptly pulls out of me, and I try to pull him back in, instantly feeling empty. A smirk crosses his features while he grabs me and flips me on my stomach. “Put your hands on the damn headboard, angel.” I do as he commands, gripping the headboard and arching my back for him while spreading my legs. I look back at him over my shoulder and watch him drink me in while fisting his cock. He releases a groan before coming closer

and gripping my hips. I turn my head forward when he sharply enters me and doesn't give me time to adjust before he starts pounding into me. I grip the headboard that fiercely bangs into the wall in tune with his thrusts.

"Oh my gods," I moan as he fucks me with hard strokes. He reaches forward and wraps one hand in my hair, hauling me back against his chest while he continues to pump in and out of me. His other hand drops to my clit, rubbing fast circles. I squeeze my eyes shut and cry out in pleasure.

"The gods aren't in the bedroom, I am. You scream my fucking name. No god or man will ever fuck you like I can," his tone is unhinged, ravenous.

"Yes, Cayden," I feel myself tighten around him, and he lets out a deep moan. I'm close again. I can feel the pressure building, and I want to shatter for a second time with him inside of me. "I want to look at you." His teeth and tongue skim my neck again, and I grind down onto him, noises of pleasure flying from my lips.

"Your noises," a sharp thrust. "My name on your lips," another sharp thrust. "They're things I would kill for," he groans while pulling out. I nearly collapse in his arms; he's worked my body so thoroughly that I'm limp with pleasure. He lays me on my back and crawls on top of me, resuming his pace of intense thrusts. One of his arms rests on the pillow next to my head, and his other arm is snaked around my waist, keeping me close. His groan is cut off as he tries to control himself. I don't want him to control himself; I want him to be as lost in me as I am in him.

"Did you touch yourself after the brothel?" I lean forward to kiss his neck.

"Elowen," he moans, thrusts faltering for a second before regaining their pace.

"Did you think of me?" I suck and bite on his sensitive flesh while dragging my nails down his back.

"Yes," he groans.

"What exactly did you think of?" I struggle to form words; I won't last much longer.

"I thought about what you looked like on your knees, what you looked like when I fucked you with my fingers, how greedy you were for my kisses, how you reacted when I nibbled your delicious pussy through your panties." His words only push me further to the edge, and we're both cut off in a moan. "I thought about how your pleasure is mine and only mine." I

dig my nails further into his back and rake them down, clawing my way to release. “Keep doing that, angel. Fuck.”

I shatter around him, losing hold of my control. My eyes roll back in my head, and I arch into his chest. Intense pleasure courses through every inch of my body. He moans my name as he spills into me, only letting his thrusts slow when he’s sure he has fucked me through my entire orgasm. His chest is heaving in tandem with mine as he looks down at me while pulling out, searching my eyes to make sure I’m alright. A lazy smile spreads across my face as I pull him into a sweet kiss, humming against his lips when he relaxes in my hold. His hands stroke against my ribs.

“I’ll be right back.” He detaches his lips from mine before placing another quick kiss on them. I make a noise of protest and try to hold him to me, but he softly chuckles as he reaches around to remove my hands from his neck, and kisses both of my palms. “I’m just moving your clothes in front of the fire; I’ll be right back. Get under the covers,” he says before climbing off the bed and walking toward the bathroom.

I giggle to myself before climbing under the covers and laying my head on the soft pillows. I close my eyes, reveling in the rare calmness that settles over me. I hear him shuffle back into the room and hang my clothes on the fireplace hooks before I feel a dip in the bed. I open my eyes and watch him climb under the covers before turning to face me with a rag in hand. He reaches down, starting to clean me up.

“I can do that,” I sleepily protest and try to grab the rag from him.

He cuts me off by placing his lips on mine and sliding his tongue into my mouth. My toes curl, and my hands reverse their path toward the rag and make their way into his hair—twiddling the damp, chocolate brown strands. “You’re mine to take care of,” he mumbles against my lips.

He finishes cleaning me up and places a quick kiss on my shoulder before propping himself up on one elbow to gaze down at me. He must have tied a bandage around his arm while gathering my clothes. “Do you feel okay?” he asks. “Do you need me to get you anything?”

I giggle again, “We don’t have anything with us.”

“We just stole five dragons from a castle; I think I can manage to steal you something from an inn kitchen.”

“What if I want a nightgown?” I quirk a brow.

“Didn’t you hear?” Disbelief crosses his features, “There’s a nightgown shortage!”

I flick him on the shoulder and laugh with him, "I'm fine, Cayden." I sit up and press my lips into his, "Perfect, actually." I feel him smile against my lips before I pull away. He lays down next to me and pulls me on top of his chest. I snuggle closer, and he runs his fingers over my skin. I've never felt this peaceful in my life.

"Tell me something about yourself," I request in a sleepy voice.

"What do you want to know?"

"Hmm," I muse, kissing some of the scars on his chest. "Something I wouldn't expect."

"I play piano." I smile against his skin, thinking about him sitting at the piano bench I spotted in his house. I would love to watch his hands work the keys.

"Will you play me something when we get back?" I whisper.

"Yes, angel." He strokes his fingers down my spine, "Your turn." I search my brain for something to say, but it's like everything I know about myself vanishes.

"I have a garden in Aestilian. I grow all kinds of herbs, fruits, poisons, and vegetables. I love it. It's one of my favorite places to read as long as bugs don't attack me," I smile while recalling the memory, but a sense of sadness lingers in my chest, knowing I won't be in Aestilian to maintain my garden when this winter passes.

"Do you miss gardening?" he asks, trailing his fingers through my hair.

"Yes," I answer truthfully. "But there's so much to do in Vareveth that I haven't even thought about it."

"Set up a garden at my house when the weather gets warmer," he says. "I can get you any supplies you need."

My heart skips a beat, "Really?" I feel a wide smile spread across my face while I mimic his earlier position, propping myself on my elbow to look down at him.

His eyes flash down to my smile. "Yes, beautiful. I prefer staying at my house and don't plan on going to bed without you."

"You could have stayed at your house while I was at the castle," I murmur.

"Staying away from you has proven to be quite difficult for me." My cheeks heat, and I turn my head away from his gaze. He brings my eyes back to his by placing a hand on my chin. He sits up slightly, inching his face closer to mine. "I have another thing. You know when you said nobody

has been with you as you?” I nod my head in response. “I’ve never cuddled or slept next to someone before. Physical touch has never felt comfortable with anyone other than you,” he whispers.

“Well, Cayden Veles, I’m honored to be the first.” Warmth floods through every inch of my body. I press my lips onto his again, leaning him back. He’s my first, and I’m his, in the only ways that matter. We spend the rest of the night trading kisses and tangling our bodies together until sleep claims us.

CHAPTER FIFTY



A gust of wind rattles the shutters, stirring me from sleep. I reach out my hand, expecting Cayden to be there, but I'm met with nothing but a cold and empty space. My eyes snap open to confirm that he's not in bed with me. I sit up and glance toward the fireplace, where a crackling fresh log pours heat into the room. My clothes still hang on the hooks, and my boots and socks still lay on the floor, but Cayden's clothes are gone. Maybe he's in the bathroom. Maybe he just woke up and wants a moment to himself. What if he regrets last night? No. He said this is something we can talk about.

"Cayden?" I call out, hating how vulnerable I feel when I don't get a reply. My throat feels tight and scratchy. Footsteps are coming up the stairs, and I whip my head around the room, spotting my knives on the bedside table. Cayden must have put them there last night before getting into bed. My hand reaches over to grab one, and pain shoots through my ribs as I scramble to my feet. I use one hand to wrap a fleece blanket around me and the other to hold the knife toward the door. It swings open, revealing Cayden. He takes in my crazed state while I take in his calm one. He enters the room, clad in his fighting gear and holding a wooden breakfast tray. He steps forward to kick the door shut with his foot.

"Was the sex that bad?" he arches a brow at me, walking in my direction to set the wooden tray onto the dining table. I toss my knife on the bed as he steps closer.

"Terrible. Absolutely horrendous," I jest. The relief that he's still here spreads through me quickly. I hate my brain sometimes.

“Oh yeah?” He licks his lips while cradling my face in his hands. His proximity eases my nerves and ignites something wanton in me. I reach out to grab his belt loop, pulling him closer. I glance at his lips which quirk up at the side.

“Mhmm,” I nod. He tilts my chin higher and presses his lips to mine in a dominating kiss. I press my thighs together as his tongue dips into my mouth, stroking and teasing me. Butterflies erupt low in my belly, and I sink into his hold just as he pulls his mouth from mine and smiles down at me in accomplishment. I’ll challenge him more if he *always* feels the need to prove me wrong.

He loops an arm around my waist and leads me over to the table. He takes a seat in the chair with the tray in front of it, but before I can take the seat next to him, he pulls me onto his lap and situates me until I’m comfortable. I glance at the tray he brought in; two bowls of oatmeal, a few slices of toast, and two cups of coffee. I instantly get excited at the sight of coffee. My hand shoots forward to grasp a steaming cup and bring it to my lips. The warm liquid eases the roughness of my throat. He really does make good on all his promises; my throat is definitely raw from last night. Cayden laughs at the sour expression that overtakes my face when the bland and bitter coffee coats my tongue—there isn’t even sugar in it.

“That one is mine,” he says, removing the cup from my hands and taking a long sip. I reach for the other cup, expecting a bit of cream and sugar to be in it, but I taste the sweet hint of vanilla—my favorite. “You wouldn’t have made that mistake if you had stayed asleep like I planned.”

“I got nervous when you weren’t here,” I confess.

“I hate to be the one to inform you of this for the millionth time, but you’re stuck with me, angel,” he says while leaning forward to spoon some oats into his mouth. It’s not the first time he has said those words to me, but they’re different this time—especially after last night. I’m wrapped in a blanket and eating breakfast next to a fire while drinking *vanilla* coffee brought to me by the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen. Stuck with each other doesn’t sound like a bad place to be.

“You noticed I like vanilla,” I smile into my cup, taking another sip.

He shrugs his shoulders, “That’s the kind of coffee you always have. I’ve never seen you drink anything different.” A warm, fluttery feeling spreads through my chest, and the smile remains on my face while we finish our breakfast in comfortable silence. But my thoughts soon penetrate

the comfortable bubble we've escaped into. I gnaw at my bottom lip as my breakfast turns heavy in my belly.

"Do you think that the others are okay?" I ask. His arm wraps tighter around my waist in a comforting gesture, not tight enough to put too much pressure on my bruises.

"Yes," he nods while setting his empty coffee cup down on the tray before turning to me. "They had a head start, Imirath's attention was drawn to us the second the dragons were released, and we're traveling in completely opposite directions." He sounds so sure when he says it like that. I wonder what it would be like to be inside of his mind. I usually favor logic in my thought process, but when it comes to people I care about, I often throw caution to the wind. There are just some situations I can't remove all emotion from, and an image of Finnian being captured crosses my mind before I can stop it.

"We should get going," I blurt out while climbing off his lap and walking toward the fireplace to collect my clothes. I feel his concerned eyes on me, but I don't want to voice my fears when there's a chance they could be a reality.

"I'll go take care of the bill," he softly says while walking toward the door. I'm glad he remembered to keep some money on him.

I drop the blanket when I hear the door click in place and start with my bottoms. The tight pants fit uncomfortably against my bruised and cut leg, but it's not too painful. I slide my knit black shirt on next which is delightfully warm after hanging by the fire all night. I eye my corset with disdain. My bruises are sorer this morning, and I don't know how bad they'll feel when I put my corset on, but I don't have anything else. If we get into a fight, I'll be unprotected if I don't wear it. I slide my arms through the holes and groan in pain as I try to clasp the first hook. The clasp slips from my fingers, and I take a deep breath, trying to expel the pain.

My legs carry me over to the bed, and I sink onto the plush surface. I bend forward, trying to clasp it again. Pain shoots through my bruises, but I keep trying to close the hooks with shaking hands. Again, a groan of pain slips through my lips before I resign and slide the corset off to lay it on the bed. I untie the knot at the bottom to loosen the ties. I'll feel more force if I'm hit, but I can't squeeze my bruises and concentrate on fighting. The door opens while I'm tying off the looser corset.

"Your bruises?" Cayden inquires in a hard tone.

“I just have to loosen my corset a little, it’s not a big deal,” I shrug without looking at him.

His heavy boots cut through the space between us, “Stop dismissing your pain as if it means nothing.”

“You’re one to talk,” I throw him a leveling glare which he returns. He sits across from me on the bed and grabs the hem of my shirt to raise it just below my breasts. A dark expression crosses his face, and I have a feeling that if a human had given me these bruises, they would be dead already. The gentleness of his fingers betrays the brutality in his eyes.

“I’ll find you something to ease the pain when we get home,” he mutters with a scowl. I keep my mouth shut and refrain from *dismissing my pain* because I don’t feel like verbally sparring with him over something he won’t relent on and will ultimately ease the pain I feel. He doesn’t take his eyes off me as I slide my arms through the holes again. I suppress a wince as I begin closing my corset. It’s uncomfortable, but I loosened it enough for it to fit like my pants; uncomfortable but not painful. His eyes stay on me while I finish all the clasps, tracking exactly where my fingers travel. When I finish them off, I drop my hands on my lap and meet his gaze.

“Done fussing?” I ask. My lips tilt upward at the sight of his scowl.

“Not quite,” he sighs while getting to his feet and walking over to where our swords rest against the wall. “If we ride through the night, we should get back to Vareveth tomorrow morning. Would you be up for that?”

“By the gods, is Cayden Veles, esteemed Commander of Vareveth, suggesting we steal horses? One night with me, and you’re already corrupting your pristine morals.”

He glances over his shoulder while he finishes securing his sword around his waist and winks at me, “My soul is only yours to corrupt, angel.”

He turns away from me to grab his other sword, tossing it over his head and securing the strap across his chest. He’s already wearing his throwing knives along his muscular thighs, but he double-checks the straps to make sure they’re secure. I should put mine on now. My hands begin sliding the leather straps up my thighs—it’s like muscle memory at this point. I could probably put my knives on in my sleep. Once I’m finished, I walk over to where my sword rests against the wall and begin to wrap it around my waist, but rough, calloused hands enclose mine from behind.

Cayden takes the strap from me. My toes curl in my boots whenever his fingers skim the top of my thighs and hips. My breathing turns labored

while he takes his time securing the buckle and presses his hard bulge into me. The sword rests comfortably against my leg when he finishes. I turn in his arms to face him. His eyes are nearly black, and he's taking in steady, controlled breaths. My fingers trail over the leather strap on his chest that secures the sword on his back and revel in the way his hands tighten on my hips.

"Stop looking at me like that," his husky tone drifts down to my ears.

"How am I looking at you?" I ask in mock innocence, giving him my best doe-eyed expression.

"You know how you're looking at me," he inches closer to my face. "You're looking at me like you want to do exactly what I want to do." I tighten my hand around the leather strap, recalling how good he made me feel—every single time. He begins walking us toward the door, "And if you don't stop looking at me like that, we won't be leaving this room for the next five years." I lick my lips at the thought of that, arousal coursing through me. "Ten years," he amends while glancing at my lips and turning the knob to the door. He swings it open while walking us into the hall and swiftly shuts it behind us. "Greedy little minx."

"You adore it," I smile. Just like how he adores my violent streak.

"More than you know," he says as I take my first step down the stairs, and a cocky smile settles on my lips. We make it to the bottom level, which is much emptier compared to last night. Cayden already took care of the bill, so I keep my head down and walk toward the door with him at my back.

The cold is an unwelcome presence but surrounds me nonetheless. There's a rickety barn at the front of the street; there will be horses in there. Cayden pulls me to the side, behind the buildings that line the main road. There are a few shacks littered throughout the muddy terrain, but there's no structure to their pattern.

"What's wrong?" I inquire.

He glances around with cautious eyes, "I don't want anyone to recognize me."

I spill the first thought from my head before I can think better of it, "Do you have family here?"

A stormy expression hardens his features while looking toward a dilapidated shack closest to the tree line. Only the foundation made of charred black wood remains. "No," Cayden shortly states. His eyes stay

glued to the burned-down shack, lost in a memory of some kind. I want to reach out to him, but I don't know if that's a boundary he would want me to cross right now. He breaks his gaze from the remnants that once may have been a home and picks up his pace, moving forward before I can grasp his hand in mine. My extended hand falls back to my side, and I take out one of my knives to ignore the empty feeling.

A horse chuffs from the tree line behind us. My head turns in the direction the sound came from but can't make out the shape of anything in the distance other than trees. The trees surrounding the village resemble a regular forest, not like the eerie trees when we first crossed the river. Cayden reaches his arm out to stop me in my tracks. His stormy expression transforms into a calculative one. He gestures for me to take a step back and leans his back against one of the buildings we're walking behind. He presses his boot into a twig lying a few inches in front of him. The snap sounds through the air. Not even a second later, a hand shoots around the corner and moves to grab him. Cayden grabs the wrist and pulls an Imirath soldier into view, twists his wrist behind his back, and presses his body into the building with such force that the shutters rattle on their hinges. I step around Cayden while he knees the soldier in the back, and crouch down to swipe my leg out, tripping another soldier. I crawl on top of the man to pin him down while holding my knife to his throat.

"So lovely of you both to join us," I say with a smile. "It's a bit pathetic how long it took."

Cayden grabs his soldier by their hair and slams their face into the wood. I hear the crunch of bone and a cry of pain, blood pours from the soldier's nose. "Start talking because my annoyance will only increase the longer she's on top of you," Cayden snarls.

"We're not here to kill you!" the one beneath me shouts.

"How generous," I deadpan.

"Your father said he wants you alive! He's willing to form an alliance. He declared it a few hours ago." I press the knife into his neck and glance toward Cayden as grin rises on my lips. Garrick is scared. He knows I'm going to come after him with my dragons, and he's desperate, right where I want him.

Just as powerless as I felt.

But this is only the beginning.

“And if she refuses to go with you?” Cayden pinches a pressure point at the top of the man’s shoulder. “You’d slit her throat.”

“The next time I see my father will be on the battlefield,” I growl before slitting my soldier’s throat. Cayden snaps his soldier’s neck, letting the lifeless body crumble to the floor.

“Looks like we won’t be stealing horses,” I mutter while wiping the soldier’s blood on his armor.

I climb off him and flip him on his stomach. This is the second time I’m taking a cloak off a dead man on this journey. I fasten the tie around my neck and walk over to where Cayden waits for me. There’s no point in burying the bodies or carrying them to the forest; it’s a waste of time. We derail our original path from the stables to where we heard the horses chuffing in the woods. It’s better this way anyway, we avoid the town. Judging by how small it is, I doubt they get many visitors. Step by step, we leave this place behind and get closer to Vareveth, where my future remains.

CHAPTER
FIFTY-ONE



The brutal temperatures thaw into a chill the further we ride through the forest. We rode through the night, as we planned, and are gaining on the border. We took a short break by a trickling stream. I clench the reins in my hands as I recall the way Cayden's lips conquered mine.

I was walking back from taking a drink when he captured my face in his hands before laying me down on a soft patch of moss. He makes me feel breathless, but also like I'll suffocate if he pulls away. He's seen the dark things I can do, and yet he kisses me like I'm the only thing he wants to keep close to him. After seeing his stormy expression in the village, I would have given him anything to bring some life back into his eyes, but we mounted our horses before it could go any further. Though he gave me a very delicious promise, whispered against my lips, of exactly what he wants to do when we get back to Vareveth.

We make it down the steep hillside and onto a flatter forest floor. The greenery is still frost tipped, but there's no snow on the ground like there was higher in the mountains. There isn't as much terrain to focus on, and my mind begins to wander to less ideal thoughts. I can't stop thinking about how Ailliard will react. News of the dragons would have gotten back to Vareveth; there were too many people at the ball to even think about containing the knowledge. Ailliard probably sought me out the second he heard about the dragons getting released, only to find an empty tent, with not even Finnian there to calm his worries. He'll either be pleased or pissed, possibly both. He would have tried to stop me if he had known of the mission before we left.

Fatigue hasn't hit me yet, not when we're so close to the border. My heart pounds in my chest in tandem with the horse hooves clobbering the dirt, propelling us forward. Cayden cuts his horse to the left, and I follow suit. Excitement rises in me, knowing we're getting close. I hear the distant sounds of the war camp, the chatter of soldiers, and the clattering of steel. I see the peaks of tents loom into my vision above the forest brush. My racing heart swells at the sight of them.

My boot nudges my horse in the side, encouraging her to pick up the pace. I can't let myself feel the full extent of accomplishment until I know that the others are safe, but news about them would have trickled up the border from where they crossed. Still, I can't fight the happiness that surges in me, knowing we made it back. At the fact that Imirath didn't take anything from me again, I took something from them. Something that makes them scared, and I want to make them cower at the thought of my power and quake as they theorize how I'll wield it.

Soldiers lock their arrows at the edge of the border. Cayden unsheathes the sword that lies across his back and extends it in the air, letting the sunlight glint across the blade.

"Hold!" I hear a voice rise from the distance.

Saskia.

A shot of relief sings in my chest.

We ride toward the line of archers; their cheers drift our way at the sight of their commander making it out of enemy territory. This confirms that the news *has* spread like wildfire, but I don't care. Why should I keep my accomplishments in the dark while others scream theirs from the tops of mountains? Just because I'm used to living in the dark doesn't mean I have to stay there. We break the line of archers, and my vision flicks to Saskia. Her fist pumps in the air, and a broad smile coats her features. Her cheers are drowned out by the shouts around us, but the shouts aren't only for Cayden; they're for me as well.

"Queen Elowen!" I hear it repeated a few times in tandem with, "Commander Veles!" I smile down from my horse, keeping it on track toward Saskia. A redhead of curls exits a tent behind the crowd and makes a beeline toward me. My heart stutters in my chest, and the wave of relief that overtakes me is enough to almost throw me off my horse.

I dismount into the crowd and push through the soldiers while keeping my eyes on Finnian, who's racing this way. Tears slip from his eyes, and his

contagious grin beams toward me. I break through the crowd and am enveloped in a bone-crushing hug. I'm lifted in the air, and the familiar scent of citrus overtakes my senses, bringing tears to my eyes. Finnian's shouts are muffled in my chest, and the vibration mixed with his presence makes my senses hum in happiness. My head tilts back, and I cheer along with everyone else as Finnian holds me high. Pain knocks against my ribs, but Finnian's arms around me mean more. No pain can overpower the happiness I feel right now.

Finnian is alive. I reach toward his curls and ruffle them with my fingers. He's here, and he's holding me like he's done so many times, but this time it's different. We've never split up on missions before. We've gotten separated a few times, but we've never made an entire journey home without knowing the other one was safe. Finnian isn't a loss my soul could bear. He sets me down, and I look up into his freckle-dusted face, so immensely thankful he's here, unharmed aside from a few cuts on his arms.

Saskia has her arms wrapped around Cayden's neck, and he's patting her back, his lips quirked in a way that leads me to believe he's saying something sarcastic. Saskia confirms my thoughts when she reaches up and smacks the back of his head before pulling away. She looks toward me and runs at me with a broad smile, arms outstretched. Her bottom lip is swollen in the corner, but she's walking fine. I push through the pain in my legs from a mixture of riding, bruising, my cut, and my night with Cayden and meet her halfway—throwing my arms around her torso while she throws hers around my neck. Contagious laughter bubbles from her chest while she pulls me into her jasmine-scented embrace. I watch Cayden's frame stalk toward the tent Finnian came out of, and my blood chills. "Where's Ryder?" I ask.

"He's in the tent." Saskia eases her hold on my neck and grips my shoulders, but her smile is slightly dulled. "He got shot with an arrow in his torso. Imirath had soldiers stationed on the edge of the Emer where it meets the Dolent Sea." We begin walking toward the tent Cayden disappeared into. "Luckily, it didn't hit any major arteries, but there was so much blood," a shiver travels up her spine. "We got him to the medical tent as soon as we got back. We wanted to leave him on the other end of the border to recuperate, but he wouldn't let us leave without him, which I can't blame him for." She peels back one of the tent flaps and holds it open for me.

Ryder sits in a cushioned chair at the head of a long table, smiling at Cayden, who sits in the chair next to him. The last knot of worry unties itself, and my knees almost buckle. Both of their gazes drift toward the opening of the tent when Finnian lets the flap fall behind us, drowning out the cheers that continue throughout the camp and down the border. The news that we're back will reach Ailliard soon.

"The Dragon Queen has returned." Ryder smiles as I walk to the table and take the seat next to Cayden. "Valia might get jealous, and I know Eagor will."

"Jealousy is sometimes rooted in truth," Saskia jests while taking the spot next to Ryder. Finnian takes the spot at the opposite head of the table, next to me.

"Speaking of Eagor, have you heard anything since you've been back?" Cayden inquires.

Ryder rolls his eyes, "A celebration dinner tomorrow night." Cayden lets out a groan as his head falls back to rest against the chair. I can't say I'm much happier than he is. We just got back, and the idea of sitting in a room with the King and Queen of Vareveth, along with political advisors, isn't exactly high on my priority list. I'd rather have another tavern night with just the five of us, minus the assassin. I slump in my chair but flinch forward when one of the bones of my corset presses into a bruise. Cayden's head whips toward me, his eyes flaring in concern.

"Do you want my help taking the corset off?" he asks gently. I nod and rotate away from him. It's easier to untie it than it is to undo all the clasps; sometimes they get stuck. I face an all too invested Finnian who drums his fingers against his lips while he takes in my position. Cayden finishes untying my corset, and I let it fall from my arms. He pulls my chair closer to his and skims his hands over my sides in a comforting gesture.

"I called it!" Ryder shouts while pointing his finger at Saskia. Finnian does a silent dance in his chair that consists of wiggling in place, which honestly just makes him look like he has to relieve himself.

"Reward is sweet!" Finnian cheers while also turning toward Saskia, who rubs her temples and rests her elbows on the table.

"Seriously?" Cayden glares at Ryder.

"Did—" I wave my hands between the three of them, working my way to my conclusion. "Did you three have a bet about us sleeping together?"

“You can’t be mad considering it happened. Your anger cancels out, its basic math,” Finnian reasons.

“Everybody wins,” Ryder adds on.

“Exactly. You and I get money,” Finnian gestures between himself and Ryder, who nods enthusiastically. “You two got laid,” he gestures between Cayden and me before turning to Saskia again. “Well, you lose money, but you can relish in the fact you won’t have to watch them eye-fuck each other from across the room anymore,” he finishes off by placing his chin in his hand and smiling at her.

“I don’t resign from eye-fucking her,” Cayden raises his hand, and the other three groan.

“*Seriously?*” I spin toward him and imitate his voice.

“Have you seen yourself?” he asks.

“Fair point,” I smirk.

“I’ll be a winner if all of you shut up. I’m too sleep-deprived to deal with you all at once,” Saskia mutters, but the mirth in her eyes betrays her words. Her attempt at a scowl fails when her lips quirk upward, setting a sea of laughter washing over all of us.

“How long have you all been back?” Cayden asks after the laughter dies down.

“Several hours. Enough to eat and bathe before riding here,” Ryder says. As if on cue, my stomach grumbles at the mention of food.

Finnian chuckles softly while getting to his feet and says, “Go bathe. I’ll find you some food.” He points to a door in the back of the tent that I’m assuming leads toward the bathroom before leaning over and kissing the top of my head.

“I’ll come with you; I have some stuff to handle,” Cayden says. He slowly slides his arm from where it rests around my waist, dragging his fingers along my back. My cheeks heat under his touch and gaze, but I keep my eyes focused on the table as he removes himself from my side.

I head toward the door Finnian pointed to. A happy sigh leaves my lips when I see the faucet. Running water. I turn it on and let the tub fill with steaming water while I strip out of my knives and leathers, leaving them in a pile on the floor, and sink into the hot water. My head rests against the back of the tub, and I let the soothing temperature caress my bruises. I glance down to examine them, they’re slightly darker, but that just means they’re healing, which is a good sign.

My hunger is the only thing that motivates me to grab the soap to begin washing myself. I'm surprised by how much of a selection is here, but I remember Cayden saying he has tents set up all over the border in case his army needs him in a certain place. Nobody is in here, so I don't hide my smile when I notice the unopened soap bottle that's clearly labeled *Vanilla and Lavender*. The smile stays on my face while I scrub my hair and thread my fingers through the strands, only faltering when I realize I have no idea how to act with him when we go to dinner tomorrow.

Is Cayden courting me?

The question sounds trivial in comparison to everything that has happened between us. I don't think a courtly label can define exactly what we are, even I don't know a word for it. I just know I want him around me and that I feel it when he's not. Everything feels emptier without him. I wash the rest of the soap from my body and rise from the tub, grabbing a cotton towel from a rack, and walking over to the mirror. My hands scrunch the water from my hair with a different towel and let it hang loose around me since I don't have the energy to braid it.

Two sets of clothes rest on a table by the door; the green sweater and black cotton pants I've come to favor over the past few weeks are a welcomed sight. Finnian must have grabbed them for me on his way here. Cayden's clothes are too comfortable to resist. The sweater reaches my mid-thighs, and the black pants pool around my ankles. I look ridiculous, but I feel so cozy. I pick up my leathers and put them in the hamper before rejoining the group.

Their laughter makes my heart soar; we really made it. Finnian and Cayden are back, and the savory scent of herb-encrusted meats, seasoned vegetables, and potatoes drifts through the air, practically carrying me back to my seat at the table. A plate is already piled high with food for me. Cayden glances at me while I take my seat next to him, sliding his hand onto my thigh while fisting a pint of ale. The fluttery feeling appears in my chest again.

"How did you know we would be coming back through the very end of the border?" I ask while stabbing into my meat. I sense the mood in the room shift and look up from my plate.

"We heard the dragons and saw them fly into the sky while we were sailing down the canal. We knew you'd either be dead or forced to flee the castle from that room. There's no way you could've gotten back through the

door of the dragon chamber,” Saskia says with a grim smile. She hesitates for a moment, “What happened with the dragons?” Finnian bounces his leg anxiously under the table, and Ryder sits forward, obviously intrigued. Cayden continues to rub soothing circles on my thigh. I swallow the potatoes in my mouth before starting.

“The amulet destroyed their chains; Garrick must have had a mage or warlock enchant them. The dragons weren’t happy at first,” I remark, pointing toward my ribs, “bruises from their tails.” I ignore the guilt that turns my stomach as I recall the memory. “They remember me; if they didn’t, then they would have killed me.” Cayden’s thumb pauses briefly before resuming his usual strokes. I stab into my vegetables and bring them to my mouth. I may be uncomfortable with the conversation, but I’m not too uncomfortable to eat. “Cayden blew up a wall!” I excitedly state after swallowing.

“You blew up a wall?” Saskia and Ryder ask simultaneously. The latter looked elated.

“That’s my boy,” Ryder slaps Cayden on the shoulder.

Cayden shrugs, “As if you think I would go in there without a backup plan.”

“Your backup plans have never been bombs,” Saskia laughs.

“I’m a firm believer in widening my skill set to be as lethal as possible,” Cayden smirks. I shouldn’t find that attractive. Why do I find that attractive?

“Did you feel anything through the bond?” Finnian tentatively inquires.

I pause my glass of cider halfway to my lips, nodding. I take a long drag to help loosen my nerves. “They obeyed my command,” I softly state. Someone’s fork clatters on their plate. “I don’t know how it happened. I don’t even think I called on the bond; it was just there.”

“How did it start?” Cayden asks. I realize he never asked me specifics about the dragon bond at the inn. He just let me vent about my emotions and what I felt when I saw them again. Sometimes, subtle kindness is the most beautiful form of it. He always lets me talk, he makes me feel like I’m heard, but he never pushes for details I’m unwilling to give.

“Every dragon has different color eyes—blue, orange, purple, black, and red. I excused myself from the dinner a few weeks ago because I saw a pair of orange eyes when I kept repeating that I would find my way back to the dragons in my mind. I still don’t know what that means, but it was the

first interaction I had with the bond since I left Imirath. Soldiers were gaining on us when we were running through the mountains, coming at us on horseback and firing arrows in our direction. I just kept thinking of fire, of the soldiers burning behind us, and how much easier it would be for us to stay hidden if we had a head start. I kept seeing two pairs of eyes, blue and orange, flash in my mind. When the bond felt overpowering, I shouted *burn them all*, and the dragons obeyed. It's like I think something about them, and they appear." I take another sip of my cider; my hand shakes slightly as I bring the glass to my lips. It's weird to talk so openly about the dragons. Ailliard never wanted to discuss them. It was always a sore spot after my mother died, but I never knew Isira. Just because my parents gave me life doesn't entitle them to my love or loyalty.

"Elowen," Ryder blows out a long breath, perplexity coating his features, "I think I speak for all of Vareveth when I say I'm glad you're not our enemy."

"Hear! Hear!" Saskia cheers, raising her glass in the air and taking a sip of her fruity wine.

My shoulders loosen at their reactions. I like talking about it like it's normal because it has always been my norm. It's why I've always struggled with making friends other than Finnian. People see me only as the dragon link, or a queen and not a person. I love Aestilian, and I always will, but when I'm here, I don't feel like I have to dilute myself.

We finish the rest of the meal with pleasant conversations littered with laughter. The overall agreement is to stay here tonight and travel back to the castle tomorrow morning. The tent is complete with everything we need, so there's no sense in leaving. I don't want to see Ailliard without resting first. He'll probably grill me for every detail and stuff me with food until I feel like I can't breathe. Even though we may clash, he's always cared for me through the hard times.

My eyes start to droop, and I sharply pick my head up. Fatigue courses through me like a drug now that I'm warm, fed, and know everyone made it back alive. "I'm going to go to sleep," I announce while standing from the table. There are four bedrooms in the tent, so I assume I'll either be sleeping with Cayden or Finnian.

"Go to the back left room, angel," Cayden says, kissing my knuckles.

"Hold on," Ryder cuts in while holding a finger in the air, drawing all our attention. "Thin," he points at me. "Walls," he points at Cayden.

“We haven’t slept in over twenty-four hours,” Cayden levels him with a glare.

“Thin walls,” Ryder repeats, gesturing between the two of us before reclining in his seat with his ale.

“Don’t get any ideas, buddy. I get her while you bathe. She’s my girl first,” Finnian says while wrapping an arm around my shoulders and leading me from the table. I laugh softly, too tired to add anything, but lean further into Finnian’s body. I’ll always be his girl. He doesn’t lead me to whatever room he’s staying in; he leads me to Cayden’s.

It’s a simple room. Two dark wood bedside tables with lanterns on either side and a bed covered in simple blankets. An enchanted hearth sits in the corner of the room, blazing high and keeping the space warm. I pull the covers back and sink into the bed while cocooning myself in comfort. Finnian stays on top of the covers but takes his shoes off before reclining on the bed next to me.

I lay on my side to face him, and he does the same. I can’t remember how many nights we slept together, just like this, when our nightmares woke us up. We were just two tortured children, and the only shelter we had from the world was each other. He’s one of the main reasons I want to fight for a better world. Whenever I think of a thirteen-year-old Finnian lying next to me with tears in his big blue eyes, I make another vow to find a way to make this world better. I’ll never be perfect, I’ll never create anything perfect, but I can try to be better than the people we’ve suffered. Even now, his eyes look tortured.

“You okay?” I ask softly.

“Just soaking it in.” His eyes scan my face. “I was terrified.”

“I know the feeling.” Whenever a shot of pain traveled through my body while riding, Finnian was the thought that kept me going. “Didn’t stop you from gambling over my sex life, though.” I poke him in the cheek where his dimple usually is. His smile spreads, and my finger dips before I pull it away. “I can’t believe you made a bet,” I giggle.

“Don’t worry. I’ll buy you a cider with my winnings considering you’re responsible for them,” he grins.

I roll my eyes, which only increases his laughter. “Buy me a book instead. You very well could have lost money.”

He gives me an incredulous look, “Not likely, darling.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I yawn.

“Elowen, his breathing hitches whenever he looks at you, and he can’t keep his eyes off you when you’re in a room. It’s like he’s always seeing you for the first time.” I’m too tired to deny it or to mutter a response, so I just let the words wrap around me like a hug while darkness pulls me under. “Goodnight, Ellie,” Finnian murmurs while getting up from the bed.

“Night, Finny,” I mumble before fully losing my battle with sleep.

I thought I was too tired to be woken, but I stir from sleep after feeling a soft pressure on my forehead. “Go back to sleep, angel. It’s just me,” Cayden whispers while placing another kiss on my forehead; his thumb strokes my cheek. I hear the rustling of paper and open my eyes, blinking a few times to get my bearings. My sweater is pulled up just below my breasts, and Cayden sits on his side of the bed, facing me with his back to the door. One of the papers already rests against my ribs, and the heat radiating from it feels wonderful. “They’re heating patches. I got them when I went out earlier,” he says.

“Thank you.” My heart squeezes. I yawn while rubbing my eyes. “You should sleep. I can do that.” I try to sit up, but he gently lays me back down while placing the next one on my ribs with careful fingers, never pressing my bruise too hard.

“I’m fully aware you can do this,” he begins while rolling up my pants to get to the bruise on my leg, “but that doesn’t change the fact that I enjoy taking care of you.”

I gasp, “What will the world think when they hear the cold Commander of Vareveth has a soft side?”

“I’m afraid they won’t believe you, gorgeous.” He leans down to kiss my bruise before applying the last heating patch. “This side is reserved only for you.” He gently pulls my pants leg down and slips under the covers next to me. His arms wrap around my waist and pull me close to his chest, but not before I see the crease of worry between his brows.

“Is something wrong?” I ask while trailing my fingers over his skin.

“No,” he says a little too quickly, and I stiffen in his arms. I sit up, propping myself on an elbow to look down at him. “It’s nothing.”

“So, there is something?”

“There’s always something on my mind,” he sighs while stroking my cheek. I don’t want him to go to sleep upset, but I can’t push him for details he doesn’t want to give. He hasn’t slept in over a day; maybe he just wants

to be alone. He told me he doesn't sleep next to people, and I understand it may take him some time to acclimate to that.

"Would you rather be alone?" I quietly ask.

He uses the hand on my cheek to bring my lips to his. It's a slow, sweet kiss, filled with comfort and reassurance. He slowly parts my lips, gently sliding his tongue into my mouth. It's the half-asleep kind of kiss when you don't want to relinquish your hold on someone but know you should. It makes me want to bundle up in blankets and just trade kisses for a whole day. The rest of the world is asleep, and we're in our own little bubble. He pulls away and rests his forehead against mine, sliding his hand to where mine rests on his chest and linking our fingers together.

"I always want you here," he states. I tip my head forward and place a closed-mouth kiss on his lips. The crease between his brows fades from his forehead. "I promise I'll talk to you tomorrow but right now...I just want to hold you."

"Okay," I whisper in the space between us. He tips his head forward, pressing a firmer kiss on my lips, and I sigh into his mouth.

"Thin walls!" Ryder shouts from the room next to us. Cayden groans, and his head falls back on the pillow.

"We're not having sex!" Cayden shouts back.

"How the fuck did you even hear that?" Finnian's voice joins the swarm.

"I. Hear. Everything," Ryder states.

"Can you put earplugs in and shut up?" Saskia also joins.

"He won't need earplugs because we're not having sex," Cayden groans.

"We're not?" I whisper, pouting my lips. Cayden's eyes fill with hunger.

"Do you want to?" he whispers back, even though his features are plagued with fatigue.

"Down, soldier," I press a hand into his chest, "I was only kidding." As much as I want to, he needs to sleep. "If you all don't shut up, then we're going to have sex, and we'll be loud!" I shout. The pair of us softly laugh when that shuts them all up. We both need sleep to recuperate from the heist, so I sink back onto the mattress and turn my body away from him. He wraps his arms around my waist and firmly pulls my back into his chest. I wiggle myself to get comfortable and pause when I feel something hard press into my butt.

Gods, I love that he can't hide his reaction to me.

"Don't pretend like you don't know what you do to me. Goodnight, angel." He leans forward to kiss the back of my neck.

"Goodnight, soldier," I murmur as sleep pulls me under again.

CHAPTER
FIFTY-TWO



A faint yellow glow bounces off the water in front of me, accompanied by a chilly wind. I turn onto the colonnade that wraps around the side of the lake next to the castle. White columns covered in green ivy rise into the air. Hundreds of candles are sprinkled throughout the surface of the lake, resting on top of gold lily pads. The candlelight dances along the crystals on my dress, making me shimmer as I walk. My gown hugs my body in all the right places, and a slit travels up to the top of my thigh, exposing one of my dragon daggers. Thousands of tiny silver crystals litter the nude fabric, making me look like a star-filled sky. The sleeves cling to my arms but pool around the underside of my wrists, stretching toward the floor. I decided to keep the heating patches on my ribs, so I don't feel the bones of my corset as much as I normally would.

"Thank you for taking me here. It's gorgeous," I say to Braxton, who proposed the detour before we head to dinner. As gorgeous as the lake is, my eyes keep drifting toward the sky in hopes I'll catch a glimpse of one of my dragons.

"My niece had mentioned it was happening. I thought it might be nice for you to see it now, in case the dinner runs late," he replies.

"You have a niece?"

"Yes, you stitched her in the medical tent. She keeps asking me for a moonstone necklace." His amber eyes crinkle in the corners as he talks about her. A smile slides on my face when he mentions the moonstone pendant I've worn every day since leaving Imirath. I found it on the journey to Aestilian and never took it off. It was the first thing that was ever truly mine.

“It would make a lovely birthday present,” I suggest.

“We’ll see if she can wait that long.” His laughter trails off, “Is that Commander Veles?”

I whip my head forward, following the path his eyes lay in front of me. A docked gondola shakes in the water as a tall figure clad in black loads something that looks like a picnic basket onto it. The gondola is dark brown, with floral vines wrapped around the curved wood. As if Cayden can sense my gaze on him, his head snaps up, and our eyes collide.

Despite the chill in the air, his desire-filled gaze rakes over me and sets my body ablaze. His hair is styled, just as it was the night of the ball, only now he has a cut under his eye, which makes him look even more like a dark prince than he did that night. His expensive-looking black suit jacket hugs his muscular frame, and the sword, which hangs low on his hips, taps against his leg while he bounds up the dock to cut the distance between us. He looks like a wolf stalking his prey. The desire is plain on my face, and the closer he gets, the tighter my corset feels. It’s like he tightens it with every slow footfall. His eyes dance down to my parted lips while we stand toe to toe. His hands stay at his sides, as do mine, but the need to touch him is overwhelming.

“Good evening, beautiful,” Cayden’s deep voice caresses me. “Thank you for guarding Queen Elowen, Braxton. I can take it from here.”

“See you inside, sir.” Braxton bows at the waist before retreating inside.

“You weren’t supposed to see that,” Cayden murmurs after Braxton leaves.

“See what?” I attempt to feign confusion, but he levels me with a glare. He reaches forward and grasps my hand in his before spinning on his heels and leading me over to the last dock, closest to an ivy-covered boat house. The magical atmosphere hugs me like a fairy-filled forest. He helps me down the few steps that lead to the dock and bends into the boat to lift the lid of the basket. My chest tightens; the basket is filled with wine accompanied by two glasses, cheese, crackers, and several kinds of spreads, but the last thing I notice is what makes my already tight chest feel like someone tied a ribbon around my heart. It’s two of the cheese and raspberry danishes Saskia and I ate that I wanted Cayden to try. His boot nervously taps against the wooden dock as water laps beneath our feet.

“It’s too much, isn’t it? I’m sorry, I’ve never done this before, so I wasn’t sure what the proper procedure for all of this is.” Too much? He

thinks this is *too much*? It's wonderful. "I didn't mean to overwhelm you, you know—I just saw the lights in the lake, and I figured," he clears his throat, "I don't know what I figured, but I figured something." Oh my gods, he's embarrassed.

I reach out, grab his warm, blush-dusted cheeks, and smash his lips onto mine. My arms snake around his neck, keeping him close to me while his brain shuts off and he relaxes into the kiss. He sighs against my lips and slowly parts mine with his tongue, sliding it into my mouth while trailing his fingers up and down my spine. My fingers fiddle with the ends of his hair, and I rest my forehead against his after we pull apart.

"It's perfect, Cayden." I giggle at his relieved expression. It's the most beautiful thing anyone has ever planned for me. He must have asked Saskia what pastries to get. I would pay money to see how Saskia teased him when he told her it was so he could surprise me with them. "Thank you for planning this."

"It's what you deserve," his fingers trail up my spine and trace the dark blue sapphire crown I wear, "my queen." My toes curl in my shoes from the way my title sounds on his lips. He backs me into one of the wooden posts of the dock, shoving a knee between my legs and resting an arm above my head. A whimper escapes my lips from the glorious sensation his knee provides. My skin feels feverishly hot, and my nipples harden against the rough fabric of my dress. "Tell me you need this just as much as I do," he groans.

We shouldn't do this; we don't have much time, and he knows this. The dinner is going to begin shortly, and we can't be late. We weren't supposed to come to the docks until after the dinner finishes...but I can't resist him.

"I need you," I whisper.

His lips are on mine before the next second passes. His feverish hands roam my body and palm my ass. He groans against my lips and hoists me up. I wrap my legs around his waist and grind my core onto his already hard length, moaning into the kiss. He presses my back into the post and thrusts his hips up to meet mine while placing hungry kisses along my neck and down my plunging V-neckline. I squirm in his hold, letting out a frustrated whine while raking my nails along his jacket, craving the feeling of his skin.

"Later, angel," he says in between neck kisses. "Right now, my queen needs a quick fix, doesn't she?"

“Yes,” I moan. I want him inside of me desperately. He crashes his lips onto mine and lifts me away from the post, swiftly carrying me up the dock without breaking our lips apart. He shoves something open, and the scent of dust surrounds me. He lowers me onto a desk before breaking our lips apart. We’re in the boat house; I can tell from the gondolas, ropes, and nets littered throughout the room.

He moves his head to my neck again, teasing me with a light brush of his lips over my sensitive skin. I need his hungry kisses. I arch my back off the desk and grind my hips onto his bulge while shoving my hands beneath the bottom of his black dress shirt and digging my nails into his back, raking them up and down. He moans into my neck and begins biting, sucking, and licking every inch of my sensitive skin.

“Cayden, fuck me like you said you would.” I’m already dripping wet. I’ll scream in frustration if I don’t have a release soon. My core clenches as I grind my hips harder onto his.

“I love the way my name sounds on your lips,” he says while reaching for his belt. His hard length springs free, and he wastes no time pulling my panties to the side and shoving his whole cock inside of me. I scream in a mixture of relief and fullness. He tips his head forward and fucks my mouth with his tongue in tandem with his hard thrusts. He lifts my hips off the desk and drills himself into me. My core clenches around him, and he cuts our kiss off with a deep groan.

“After this dinner is over, I want you on my bed with your legs spread so I can taste you for hours,” he growls into my ear before nibbling on the lobe. My back arches off the desk again, and the new sensation causes my mouth to fall open in a silent moan. “I want to make your legs shake; I want you to scream my name like a prayer.” He trails kisses down my neck, sucking on the sensitive spots. The memory of what his tongue can do to me almost sends me over the edge. “I plan on memorizing exactly how you look when you moan my name.”

“Only if you promise to get on your knees again, soldier,” I smirk, threading my fingers through his hair. His thrusts become harder, deeper, and frenzied while he kisses the trail back up my neck. I turn my head to the side, giving him more access, but my eyes snag on a dusty mirror hanging on the wall across from us. It’s dark in here, but I can still make out the shape of our bodies moving together.

He looks desperate for me, and I for him. We look like two lovers that didn't bother discarding their clothes because they would waste precious moments being together in this forbidden affair. He grips the desk with one hand while continuing to hold me up with his other arm. He looks to where our bodies are joined together and moans at the sight of his cock entering me before looking to my face, following my eyes, and meeting mine in the mirror.

"Do you like watching me fuck you, angel?"

I grow wetter and release another moan, "Mhmm." The knot in my belly is growing incredibly tight, and my legs are shaking uncontrollably.

"Tell me what we look like," he demands.

"Desperate," I gasp. "Starved," another gasp. "You look like you'll never get enough of me." His moan turns my vision forward. I want to see the way he bows his head for me, fighting for control over himself.

"I can have you every day for the rest of my life, and I will still die a starving man." He winds me tighter. The desk scrapes against the floor as his thrusts take on a new level of power. He lifts my legs higher, forcing himself deeper, and I cross my ankles behind his neck. He leans forward, pinning my arms on either side of my head. His lips brush over mine but we're too lost in pleasure to properly kiss.

"I quite like having the most powerful man in Ravaryn wrapped around my finger." I lean forward to suck on his lower lip. "How does it feel for you?"

His deep groan turns into a dark chuckle as he releases one of my wrists to press on my lower stomach, forcing me to feel more of him. I can't fight back the sharp moan that shatters through me. "That's it, beautiful, scream for me. You look so pretty when you take all of me. To answer your question, Elowen, it feels like discovering a goddess after damning religion."

His words send me over the edge, and I scream his name as he drives me to my climax, prolonging my orgasm while chasing his own. He slams into me; my senses are overwhelmed by his unrelenting pace and the way his guttural voice moans my name as he comes undone. I drive him to this point of blind need and want. I'm gasping for breath by the time he slows his thrusts and lowers my hips to the desk while peppering kisses along my exposed collarbone. My shaking hands reach forward to frame his cheeks, and I place a gentle kiss on his lips while my body continues to come down

from the high. He rubs circles on my thighs while easing himself out of me and holding my legs around his waist.

"I don't want to go to dinner," I mumble and continue kissing him.

He groans, but not a groan filled with pleasure, "Don't say that."

"Why?" I laugh at his annoyed expression.

"Because you know I'll give you whatever you want, and one of us has to be the responsible one here."

I scoff and let my hands fall from his face and sprawl out on the desk, "I don't like you right now."

"That's fine," he says while securing his belt. "I have all night to make you change your mind." Hunger burns in his eyes when they drift down to where my tongue drags against my lips as the images of what we'll do tonight filter through my mind. I poke him in the chest before he decides to damn the dinner altogether and sit up on the desk. My legs dangle over the edge, and I place my head on his chest while he wraps his arms around me and kisses the top of my head. He's soaking in every moment it takes for me to get my bearings because he knows he did a good job. Good is an understatement. My legs feel like overcooked noodles, but that changes when his fingers catch a knot in my hair. Oh gods, I must look like a mess.

I swat his hands away and push myself off the desk, running on wobbly legs toward the mirror. My hands fly to my hair, smoothing out the frizz and salvaging the curls that Hyacinth did. "You made it look like we had sex!" I shriek while wiping my hands under my eyes and along my lips to remedy the smudges.

"That's because we *did* just have sex," he reasons, coming up behind me to wrap his arms around my waist.

"But we can't walk in there looking like we got off *The Sex Ship*!" My sleeve shimmers while I gesture in the general vicinity of the castle.

He laughs into my neck, "I'll be a happy captain of that ship."

"I'll sink it if you don't get your lips away from my neck," I mutter while swatting the top of his head that's dangerously close to my sensitive skin. His glare in the mirror is halfhearted while he continues to watch me fix myself and wipes my lipstick off his mouth.

"Do I look alright?" I ask, spinning in his arms after I've salvaged myself as much as I can without having makeup available to me.

"Alright?" He quirks a brow. "You look gorgeous."

“No,” I blush. “I mean do I pass for a *she’s late for reasons other than sexual* kind of alright?”

“No. You’re glowing too much. Look grumpier and sexually frustrated.”

“Got it. So, just like you the past few months? Thank you for the example. I’m a visual learner.” I peck his cheek before slipping out of his hold and hurrying from the boat house before he can make a retort or bend me over the desk.

CHAPTER
FIFTY-THREE



Cayden and I swoop through the threshold, joining the array of generals and political advisors. The gathering is held in a room right through the colonnade, with a gorgeous view of the lake—thankfully, there’s no view of the boathouse or last dock. Smiling faces and raised glasses beam in our direction. The dining table is set, but everyone is congregating in small groups while sipping on drinks.

“Two more of our honored guests!” Eagor grins at us, stepping forward to shake Cayden’s hand and kiss mine. My eyes find Finnian and Saskia immediately, but not Ryder. “There’s actually something I wanted to talk to you about,” he directs his statement to Cayden, who glances toward me, and I can tell he’d rather not leave my side.

“Go,” I slip my arm from his, “I should find Ailliard anyway.”

He gives me a tight nod before leaning down to kiss my cheek. “I’ll find you when we’re done.” My cheeks redden. I suppose that answers the courting question, not that I mind.

Ailliard cuts through the crowd as soon as Eagor steps to the side, enveloping me in a hug that lifts my feet off the ground. I suppress a pained shriek that threatens to surge forward as he presses against my bruises. I don’t want everyone to know I’m hurt. He releases me from his hold after several painful seconds, and I tuck my arms around me to subtly run my fingers up and down my sides in soothing strokes.

“I can’t believe you did it,” he says, a satisfied smile spreading on his face.

“You’re not mad?” I expected him to be at least slightly annoyed.

He brushes a hand through the air, “I wish you told me, but I understand why you didn’t. I probably would have lashed out again, but now all is well, and I’m so glad to see you’re alright.” One of his hands squeezes my shoulder. “I’d like to see the lights before the first course is served. Would you like to accompany an old man on a walk?”

It’s cold, but Ailliard should know the details of what happened before finding out with the rest of the party. He deserves better than that. “Sure,” I say while looping my arm through his and waving to Finnian across the room. “Should we announce we’re leaving?”

“We won’t be gone long; it doesn’t seem to make sense to interrupt their conversations for a stroll.” He guides through the glass doors that lead to the colonnade. “How was Imirath?” he asks after we walk a few feet away from the party, leaving the noise in our wake.

“It was odd...being back. I never saw much of it while I was there, so it didn’t even feel like being back,” I shrug.

“But you did enjoy Zinambra?”

“I suppose.” There was nothing wrong with the town, but I think my enjoyment stemmed from the people I was with. Ailliard cranes his neck around before hurrying us into an empty sitting room and shutting the door behind us. “What are you—”

“I have amazing news.” Ailliard paces across the room while smiling.

I blink in confusion, “That’s wonderful. What is it?”

“We can finally go home.”

My brows scrunch together. “Ailliard, you’ve always been able to go home. I was never holding you hostage.”

“No,” he shakes his head, finally standing in place, “*home*,” he emphasizes.

Home.

Home.

The confusion on my face bleeds into utter disbelief.

He can’t mean—

“Imirath.” My stomach knots painfully, and acid surges in my throat when he proclaims the word with such reverence. I press my elbow into my bruise to make sure I’m not dreaming.

“What are you talking about?” My heartbeat increases as I take in the sheer happiness on his face. Please, gods, let this be some twisted joke he decided to pull on me. I swallow the bile my stomach threatens to spill out

on the floor at the mere thought of Ailliard wanting to return to Imirath. By the looks of it, he yearns to return there. I force my hands to stay firm at my sides; he'll run a mile with any emotion I give him.

"Garrick has given orders to his soldiers to capture you, not kill you. He has rescinded the bounty on your head. He doesn't want to kill you anymore; he wants to work with you and your dragons."

My head tips toward the ceiling as a dry laugh rattles through me. "How generous of him. You know, I'm glad you never had children if that's your standard of fatherhood."

"He's not only a father, he is also the King of Imirath, and he was looking out for his kingdom." Ailliard's reasoning plows into me, setting my teeth on edge. He's defending Garrick, the man he hid me from for half my life.

"Yes, and I am the Queen of Aestilian and Princess of Imirath, not only a daughter, and will bleed him dry the first chance I get." Venom wraps around my words, and my eyes narrow into slits.

"Elowen, you can't possibly believe you can go up against him. He's the largest threat on the continent. You're a discarded princess that has the chance of being more." His condescension slams into me, and all I see is red. No, he doesn't get to stand here and belittle me while he's

betraying me. I'm fully aware I may not be the best niece, I know I don't clue him in on everything, but I would never do this to him. I would never stab someone I love in the back; though, I suppose he doesn't even love me. You don't send a person you love back into the place that spawned the darkest and angriest parts of them. Anger bubbles in my blood, boiling my temper and sharpening my claws.

"In case you missed what just happened, I set my dragons free, straight from the walls that he cowers behind. He will pay for what he has done, and I will enjoy making him pay for it. He's not a king, he's a coward, and he'll meet death as a coward." I roll my shoulders, feeling my poisonous anger course through me with no antidote. "Speaking of cowards, *uncle*, how many nights did you fall asleep on your feather-filled mattress while I bled onto the dungeon floor because of orders dealt by your precious King Garrick? Did you know?"

There's a chance he didn't know the full extent of it, considering he guarded my mother, but he hesitates a beat too long, confirming my suspicions in the silence. He knew, of course, he knew. He knew what was

happening to me and didn't do a single thing about it. "You know what? Let me put the details together myself. You took me out of Imirath because you wanted payback after Isira died. Is that correct? You only gave a fuck about me after she died. Then you realized too late that Garrick would never forgive you for taking me out of Imirath, so you pretended you did it out of the goodness of your heart."

"He won't kill me if we go back together. You should be by your father's side when the war begins, not next to some bastard." He doesn't even bother denying what I accused him of because he can't. I was a fool to think he loved me. He used to freak out whenever I left Aestilian. Now, I realize it wasn't because he wanted to keep me safe, but it was because he wanted to keep me alive until he could barter with my father to return home to his beloved Imirath.

"Insult Cayden one more time, and I'll cut your tongue from your mouth. As of right now, I'd love to never have to suffer your words again. You're a damn fool if you think I'll go back to Imirath with you. You're also a damn fool if you think, even for a second, that his fury can hold a flame to mine. I may have suffered him, but it's his turn to suffer me," I state in a deadly calm tone laced with the promise of blood.

"You're more like your father than you realize. You're both power hungry with tunnel vision; only he has more experience. He has a better chance of winning, which is why I implore you to change your mind. You're putting the people you love in danger by staying here. Think of Finnian. He will be safer in Imirath; your father will protect him." My father would kill Finnian or use him to manipulate me. "Your need for revenge is disgusting. Finnian will see that eventually. Nobody can love a vile creature. Be smarter than this, Elowen."

The similarity comment burns me, and the mention of Finnian almost sends me into a rage-filled frenzy, but I don't give him the satisfaction of acknowledging it. "I made a deal with Vareveth."

Ailliard's sharp laugh cuts me off. "Eagor knows exactly what I'm telling you. He wants to use you to bargain for money. He's convincing *your commander* right now; Cayden won't fight a war for one woman. Just because you opened your legs for him doesn't mean he'll fight for you. He got what he wanted." I hate that his comment makes me feel dirty and makes me doubt myself. No, Cayden wouldn't send me back there. He doesn't want peace, and he's too smart to think that Garrick would ever

even consider peace between the two kingdoms. You can't reason with tyrants.

I've lost my patience with this conversation. It hurts to look at Ailliard, to hear his voice say these things. The same voice that told me I was safe while leaving Imirath, the same voice that sang happy birthday every year while in Aestilian, the same voice that taught me how to use a knife and advised my fighting skills.

I shake my head, disgust coating my features. "I'll show you one mercy tonight," I begin. "I will let you leave this castle with your life. Don't go back to your room, don't go back to Aestilian. Get on a horse and get the fuck out of my sight because if I ever see you again after you leave this room, I will bury a knife so deep in your ribs that they'll have to bury you with it still inside of you," I growl, stepping forward. "You are to stay away from Finnian, Cayden, Ryder, and Saskia. In my eyes, you're as good as dead."

The betrayal burns me from the inside out. It's drowning me, pummeling me, bleeding me dry. I just want to get out of this damn room. I want to find the people that walked in and out of enemy territory with me and never thought once about handing me over to Garrick. Ailliard stares at me from across the room, looking at me as if he doesn't know me. But I'm still me; I'm the same Elowen he has always known. It's him who has changed. He stays silent for an extended beat, and my heart cracks more with every second that passes. He was the closest thing to a parent I ever had. He was never perfect, but he was there. The tension between us is so thick I can practically feel it pushing me back.

I take one last look at Ailliard, at my uncle. My throat constricts, and tears threaten to spill from my eyes, but I blink them back. I won't let him see the pain he has caused me. My feet move toward the door, but Ailliard springs forward, and a strong hand jerks me back by the roots of my hair. A sharp shooting pain travels through my ribs when something heavy slams into me, making me feel like I can't breathe. A solid gold candlestick clatters to the floor, and Ailliard shoots his fist in my direction, slamming it into my cheek. I fall to the ground, gasping for breath, but he drops with me, ripping the bandage off my leg and shoving his nails into the fresh cut to reopen it. Warm blood trickles down my thigh. Black spots dance in my vision, and I grit my teeth to keep my pained shriek contained in my throat. I finally shove him off me and jam my fist into his temple.

“You’re coming to Imirath with me,” he growls, scrambling to his feet and slamming the door. I hear him shove a chair under the doorknob. This room doesn’t have glass doors like the banquet room, and there are no windows. I feel like I’m a child again. Locked in a cage by those that should have loved me, that should have wanted to keep me safe. But instead, they beat me, they torture me, and they betray me.

But Ailliard is a fool in more ways than one tonight.

I’m far from who I was but have yet to become all that I am.

I force my emotions down; if I freak out now, then I’ll never get out of here. The sting of Ailliard’s betrayal is getting sharper every second he’s not in front of me. It’s easy to break down when you’re in private. *He’s coming back*, I tell myself, forcing my tears and nausea down. I feel like a pig raised for slaughter.

There’s no exit other than the door he blocked. I brush my fingertips over the hilt of my dagger, steadying my nerves. My hand wraps around the heavy candlestick, and I limp toward the door, slamming it into the hardwood. If I make a hole, I can reach the chair he shoved under the handle and set myself free. I slam the candlestick again, chipping the wood.

“Elowen!” a muffled voice shouts in the distance. “Elowen!”

“Ryder?” Relief floods through my chest.

“Thank the fucking gods.” His rushed footsteps halt in front of the door. It flies open a few seconds later. His troubled eyes scan my body and darken when they stop on my leg, noting the blood that now runs rampant.

“Please tell me you’re not here to kill me,” I jest while taking in his familiar features, relishing in how calming it feels to be near someone I can trust.

“I wouldn’t even attempt it,” a sad smile coats his features as he utters the words, and he opens his arms to me. I drop the candlestick and wrap my arms around him in a reassuring hug. His leather and teakwood scent surrounds me. The only people I’m sure of right now are Cayden, Finnian, Saskia, and Ryder. We were all in Imirath together, where they had multiple opportunities to hand me over to my father if that’s what they desired. Guards would have been on me in a second if they shouted my name in a public place.

“How did you know something was wrong?” I ask, pulling away from him. I’ll break the tight leash I have on my restrained emotions if I receive too much comfort.

“Eagor and Valia are known for their jealousy. Cayden told me last night that he was worried about something happening. He gave me orders to watch over you if he got pulled away.” Ryder presses a hand into my back, and we rush from the room, making a beeline for the banquet. “He’s probably going out of his mind and staying at the dinner so that Eagor doesn’t authorize any attacks on you under the guise of Cayden’s approval. Cayden knows I have eyes on you, or else he’d be tearing the castle apart to find you. Soldiers would have detained Ailliard before the two of you ever left. Cayden gave every guard orders to not let you leave the castle without him when we first got back today.”

Ryder pauses me before we enter the banquet, “If you want, I’ll station soldiers we can trust outside of your room. You don’t have to deal with this.” His eyes are sincere and unjudging, but I do want to be part of this.

“Ailliard betrayed me, and so did the Dasterians. I want to be in the middle of the mess,” I declare and shove the door open.

CHAPTER
FIFTY-FOUR



All voices fall silent, and all heads whip in our direction when the door bangs open. Everyone is seated at the dining table, but Ailliard is nowhere in sight. Cayden's nostrils flare when he notices my bleeding leg and plucks a knife from under his chair, throwing it at one of the advisors. He must have stashed them there earlier, considering Ryder said he was worried. Blood sprays from the hole in the advisor's neck, marring the white linen tablecloth and collecting in the soup bowl in front of him. Cayden threw the knife so hard that it pinned the man sitting upright in his seat. Valia shrieks as the blood shoots onto her face.

"Everyone stay seated and put your hands flat on the table," Cayden commands in a tone filled with the promise of retaliation if they don't comply. Everyone obeys, including Eagor and Valia. The only ones to refrain are Finnian and Saskia. "I've never been a forgiving person, and I don't intend on becoming one tonight," he adds.

I glance over my shoulder and take my knife from where it's sheathed on my thigh. I feel like Ailliard is going to swing from around the corner and put a literal knife on top of the figurative blade he impaled in my back. Ryder notes where my eyes have drifted and angles his body, so he's protecting my backside more. My anger is slowly morphing into a revenge-induced hysteria, and a smile makes its way onto my face as I move away from the door and enter the lion's den.

Finnian's shoulders are rigid, and his irises are blown wide, filled with a mixture of confusion and anger. "Ailliard," I mouth to him. His brows pinch together, and a shudder travels through his body. He runs a hand through his tousled hair, soaking in the news. Ailliard also played a large part in

Finnian's life, considering he was the one who brought Finnian back to Aestilian.

It's a strange feeling to mourn someone who's still breathing.

"I'm honored you think I'm so valuable," I say to Egor while taking the seat between Finnian and Cayden.

"What a delightful evening this has turned out to be," Cayden grins, taking a long drag of his wine.

Finnian reaches under the table and takes my hand in his, squeezing it tightly. I don't need Ailliard; I've always had Finnian. I think I lost Ailliard a long time ago, maybe I never even had him, but Finnian has always been the one person I was sure of in a sea of unknown factors. Ryder stays standing behind my chair, and Saskia moves from her seat beside Finnian to mirror Ryder's position. Her gold-shimmering dress is the sister to mine; she had them made before we left. She wanted us to have something to come home to after the heist.

Cayden twirls a knife in his hand and reaches his other over to rest on top of my uninjured thigh. My chest loosens; he's on my side. "You always forget the single, most crucial detail, Egor. You can't beat me."

"If we give her back to her father, we could gain money and bargain for peace," Egor tries to reason with Cayden, but the shakiness in his voice is clear. He's terrified. Cayden's hand tightens on the hilt of his dagger. Another wave of anger rolls through me at his choice of words. As if I'm some kind of possession my father lost. I curl a hand under the table and dig my nails into my palm to keep my voice steady.

"I would slit your throat before you even got the chance to revel in your facade of peace," I state as I glare in Egor's direction.

He looks ready to rip into me, but one of the doors that face the lake opens, and a beaten and bloodied Ailliard is escorted through by Braxton. His right eye is swollen shut, there's a gash on his forehead, and blood slides down the side of his face. His lip is busted, and from the way he's being escorted, he has some bodily wounds under his clothes. Braxton practically rips the chair back and shoves Ailliard into it, right across from me. I tighten my hold on Finnian, both to keep him from lunging across the table and reminding myself that I can't do that yet.

"Ailliard," Finnian growls his greeting, "I love what you've done with your face." Ailliard ignores Finnian's words and clutches his stomach,

moaning in pain. He looks just as pathetic as he sounds, as he is. Cayden sneers as he takes in Ailliard's presence.

"Garrick does not want peace, and neither do I. If you were successful in sending Elowen back to Imirath, which you've obviously and pathetically failed at, I would have started a war to get her back," Cayden finishes his statement while looking toward Eagor. I grip his wrist under the table as the weight of his words settles on me. He doesn't look at me, doesn't tear his eyes away from Eagor, but the firm grip he has on my thigh loosens slightly, and he drags his thumb along my skin.

We must be a united front, or everything can fall apart. He should have told me about his suspicions last night; he shouldn't have kept this from me. I told him kingdoms fall apart when their leaders don't communicate, so I just have to pretend like I know everything about anything that comes from his mouth. We have an audience, and they must be convinced.

"You would start a war for one woman?" Eagor lets out a sharp humorless laugh.

"Yes," Cayden answers, and the tightness returns to his hold on my thigh. My corset feels too tight and sweat collects at the base of my neck.

"I ordered you to stay away from her, to not become personally involved in politics," Eagor fires back.

"I find it humorous you think I view your orders as anything more than temper tantrums. You've been a dead man walking since I rose in power, and every breath you've taken these past few years has been mercy from me," Cayden snarls while looking around the table, skimming his eyes over every face. "I, Cayden Veles, Commander of Vareveth, invoke my right to challenge the throne should I deem the reigning monarchs unfit to rule."

The world around me stops moving. Valia wails loudly while Eagor starts shouting profanities. The advisors begin shouting at the generals, and I feel myself being pulled from my seat. Swords are being drawn by everyone present, including Eagor and Valia's guards that line the room.

"Cayden, what's happening?" I hiss below the noise.

"Please, you have to trust me," he pleads while ushering me toward a back corner, away from Eagor, Valia, their advisors, and Ailliard. Seeing him across the room only solidifies how deep his betrayal runs. He would rather stand with the King and Queen of Vareveth over me, not that I want him over here.

"You should have talked to me last night."

“I didn’t think I would ever have to use this option. You must know... this isn’t how...I promise I’ll make you happy,” Cayden says as a pained expression crosses his face. What the fuck is going on? Why is he looking at me like he’s about to tell me something I’ll hate? “We’re getting married,” he states before turning back toward Eagor. The floor feels like it’s shaking under my feet, and Saskia wraps an arm around my waist.

“It’s the only way he can challenge the throne,” Saskia whispers in my ear, but I hardly register her words.

Marriage.

Cayden will be my husband.

I just want someone to tell me what’s going on. Everything is moving so fast.

Valia sobs into her hands. I can’t see her through the thick line of advisors protecting her, but her wails can be heard in every corner of the room. Eagor is red-faced, and the vein in his forehead is popping out. “You have no right to the throne!” he shouts while waving his sword in our direction.

“You’re a fool for not doing your proper research,” Saskia practically spits the words, her arm still securely wrapped around me. By some miracle, I keep the emotion hidden from my face. “All you had to do was read through the full terms of the militaristic and political agreement to see that the Commander of Vareveth can challenge the throne if a monarch agrees to marry them. Elowen is of equal rank to both of you, and it’s the law.”

“That’s absurd!” Valia shrieks.

“That’s the law.” Saskia’s voice is filled with crisp intelligence. “The difference between you and I is that I know I’m intelligent, but I work every day to find new information. I read through our law books the second I met Queen Elowen; your advisors should have done the same. It’s not my fault you settle for the bare minimum while I strive for perfection.”

“Wait!” a political advisor I can’t recall the name of shouts. “I recall that law; you need the support of one political advisor.”

“Indeed, we do. However, if you recall the last paragraph on the forty-fifth page, you’ll note the clause that states *my vote*, the vote of a militaristic advisor, will count as a political vote so long as I attended every meeting with Queen Elowen present, considering Elowen is both a militaristic and political ally. Ryder Neredras, First General of Vareveth,

stepped in for me if I couldn't attend. Therefore, my vote counts." Outraged shouts rise from the group of advisors, but Saskia continues over them, "Please, by all means, continue to squirm considering it's rather rewarding. It won't change the truth; I outsmarted every damn one of you."

Even through my shocked state, I reach up to squeeze Saskia's hand that rests on my hip. I wish she had told me about the clause, but her loyalty is to Cayden—he should have told me. But I'm still proud of her, I know how much she values her intelligence, and it must feel immeasurably good staring down a group of advisors that believe in the old ways and beating them.

"The two of you are awfully quiet," Valia's voice rises in the mix. "Has Elowen even agreed to marriage?"

Cayden hasn't said he'll marry me out loud, and I have a feeling he'll challenge the throne, whether it be legally or illegally. It'll be a lot easier to gain allies in this war if we do it legally. By the gods...I can't believe I'm doing this. I gather myself to push away from Saskia and stand beside Cayden, slipping my hand in his. Finnian and Saskia stand by my side, and Ryder stands at his.

We may be the Lady and Lord of Revenge, Retribution, and Vengeance, but we've gained new titles tonight, forged in all three of those things.

The King and Queen of Vareveth.

He's waiting for me to make my decision before he speaks. He always has a backup plan. But he obviously figured this out late; what if he doesn't have one? Would a life with Cayden really be so bad? No. Not at all. It hurts to think of a future void of his presence, his happiness, his touches. I never thought that I would marry, but Cayden will be my only exception. He needs a queen, and I want power.

"I, Elowen Atarah, Queen of Aestilian and Princess of Imirath, challenge the throne alongside the Commander of Vareveth, Cayden Veles." I feel Cayden's shoulders relax slightly at my words, and he presses himself further into me, detaching our hands and wrapping an arm securely around my waist. He must be able to feel how fast my heart is racing.

I will marry Cayden Veles—the person I swore I could never have. This night has turned my entire life spiraling out of control, but Cayden is here, next to me, holding me upright through the storm that rages around us. Even though the beginning of our union is less than ideal, completely unorthodox, and I'm still extremely annoyed at him for not talking to me,

it's comforting to know I'll have his presence with me through any other times like this.

"She's practically a commoner!" one of the advisors shouts in outrage.

"Really? Do you have a link to five dragons?" Finnian joins the fight.

"They're not even with her," another advisor continues the spat.

"They respond to her. They'll be here, so I suggest you remedy your attitude," Ryder adds.

"How do you know that?" the advisor demands with a hint of fear in his tone.

"Because my father would have burned this place to the ground if they responded to him. The same way I burned Imirath soldiers to get back here and bury your reign in the ashes," I hiss. Cayden's hand brushes my ribs in approval.

"Perhaps your father is more merciful than you are," Eagor chimes in.

"Don't be ridiculous," Cayden laughs. "It's embarrassing for you."

"No kingdom will respect you!" Valia sobs. "You stole from a king, infiltrated his castle, and burned his soldiers. You're a band of thieves, not esteemed figures."

"The Band of Thieves," Finnian snickers.

"It has a nice ring to it," Ryder smirks.

"Tell us, *King Cayden*," Eagor uses the title in a tone filled with bitterness, "did you learn of your queen's value when you spied on her or when she opened her legs for you?"

"Careful how you speak about my fiancée. Vengeance is a promise signed in blood," Cayden growls.

The words slam into me harder than my dragons' tails. Gods, just when I think I'm getting solid footing, the rug is ripped out from under me again. It takes much more effort to keep my emotions free from my face. Cayden is murmuring something in my ear, something that sounds like an apology, but I can't absorb his words. His deception twists the knife that Ailliard impaled in my back. The only thing stopping me from keeling over and vomiting is Cayden holding me up.

Cayden...spied on me.

Cayden spied on me.

The words echo over and over in my head, but they don't sound real, and I don't want them to be real. I try to force my breathing to remain steady, but my heart is beating so fast that I feel like my lungs can't catch

up. *Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out.* My hand drifts up to my hip to clutch Cayden's so nobody else can see how badly my hands are shaking. His breathing has turned ragged. He clenches his jaw, trying to contain himself, but I can see he's losing control. He wants to explode just as much as I do. I wrap my hands tighter around him to stop myself from screaming. That's all I want to do right now. I want to let the rage, confusion, and betrayal rip free from me. I want to banish it from my body. I feel so utterly and completely stupid.

Only years of hiding my emotions are aiding me in keeping my face blank. The inside of my head is a wasteland of vexation and fury. Cayden spied on me. I don't know the extent of it, but he spied on me, and he didn't tell me. Did he stop spying on me before we had sex? Our joined hands, where I felt strength moments ago, mock me.

I don't want to be touched. I don't want people near me right now. I don't want to be in a castle. I want to be in an open field with nobody and nothing around me—a place where I can expel every emotion dragging me down with nobody to witness it.

The control I have over myself and the situation is slipping away from me. I need to spin this on Egor, but I'm so exhausted. Cayden's treachery twists my heart; his hurts more than Ailliard's. A part of me always knew Ailliard never accepted me for who I am. Cayden made me feel heard. He made me feel understood and important. He promised me no games, but how could Egor know we slept together? Did Cayden tell him? No. He wouldn't. Would he? Was everything a lie? I want to grab his shoulders and shake him.

Gods, I want to turn my thoughts off.

I fight my mind; I need to get a hold of myself. I have my dragons. I can still have a kingdom. I can have power. I won't let anyone, or anything stand in my pursuit. I've come too far, and I've sacrificed too much just to let it slip from my fingers now. I came from nothing, and now I have a kingdom ripe for my taking. A grown man feared me as an infant because I had more power than him before I could even speak.

I will shake the very stars the gods hung in the sky and crumble the mountains they forged on the earth.

My eyes cut across the space and zone in on Egor, "Do you think I would marry him if I was not privy to that information?" I square my

shoulders. “You underestimate my knowledge, and though I do love proving people wrong, you do come off a bit ignorant.”

“You would marry a man that spied on you?” Ailliard shouts his question in a shrill tone.

“My sincerest apologies, but I missed the part where your opinion still matters,” I bite out, redirecting my glare toward Ailliard. There’s a sadness in his eyes, and it only increases my anger, though I am reveling in his helplessness.

“You’ve lost your mind.” Ailliard looks as feral as he sounds. He’s never been good at wielding his emotions, and it has always made him sloppy. It’s the exact reason he prematurely took me from Imirath. He didn’t think; he acted rashly and regretted it.

“I would say you lost yours, but you can’t lose what you never had,” Cayden snarls at Ailliard.

“You will not speak ill of my queen,” Saskia adds. The pride in my chest is drowned in a sea of wariness. Did she know about Cayden spying on me? Did Ryder know?

Eagor raises his hand in the air and shakes his head. “This is madness,” he mutters. “Guards, seize them!”

“Guards, stay where you are,” Cayden calmly commands.

The guards stay where they are. I look toward Saskia; she’s unarmed, not even a knife on her thigh. Only men wear swords on their belts for these kinds of occasions. I take one of my hands off Cayden and reach toward her.

“We need to get swords,” I mutter while suctioning her to my side.

“There’s an armory a few doors down,” she whispers.

There are the five of us, three if you’re not including Saskia and I who still need to get swords, and four of Cayden’s generals—giving us nine in total. Two of the generals are also women and need weapons. Eagor has twenty-eight advisors and invited the entirety of them. They’re all armed with swords on their belts.

“Guards, draw your swords,” Cayden commands. The six guards that line the walls comply with Cayden’s order. “They may be your guards, but they’re my soldiers.” Cayden smirks while twirling his sword in his hand, “You may have worn the crown, but the title belonged to me. I always was the King of Vareveth; you were just my puppet.” Eagor lets out a frustrated growl as the guards closest to us come to stand on our side of the room. The

two guards by the entrance stay behind Egor and his advisors, swords drawn in their direction.

This is a coup.

We're still outnumbered, but the odds are better now that the guards are on our side. I take my hand out of Cayden's without saying anything to him and turn away. I gesture for the two female generals to follow us. We slip from the door just as I hear Cayden yell for them to charge. The clashing of steel shortly follows.

The burden of everything that's happened tonight weighs on my shoulders, but I don't let it drag me down since I still have too much to do. I follow Saskia wordlessly to a door at the end of the hall. She reaches into a sconce and pulls a gold key free from behind the candle. She shoves the door open and grabs the first sword she sees. I follow her in and do the same, grabbing another throwing knife and tucking it into my holster.

"Saskia, tell me truthfully," I begin as we run back toward the room, "did you know anything—the spying or about what was going on tonight?"

"Not a single fucking thing," she snarls, sounding just as angry as I am.

We whip the door open and join the fray. Blood already coats the polished floors, and at least three advisors are down. My eyes are drawn away from searching for the others when three soldiers rush toward Saskia and me. I take my dragon dagger from my thigh and throw it at the middle advisor rushing at us. They're close enough in range that it's easy to throw the dagger into his chest; he collapses to the floor while Saskia and I charge the other two coming our way. Normally, I play defense first to get a feel for the other fighter, but tonight I crave blood. I swing my blade out, letting the advisor deflect it before bringing my foot upward and kicking him in the groin. He crumples into himself, and I slice his neck open while spinning around his body to move on to the next advisor.

This one is more skilled with a blade. I continue to block his advances. I pull my arm back to deliver a menacing blow, but the sleeve of my dress catches on the top of one of the dining chairs. All I can manage to do is block his next swing as he brings his fist forward and hits me in my bruised ribs. I hunch forward, trying to fight the pain when he swings his leg and kicks the cut and bruise that's visible through the slit in my dress.

My leg wobbles, but I use the chair to keep me upright. I make the split decision to drop my sword while he raises his in the air. I whip my hand across my body and take the last knife from my holster and drag it across

his stomach, jerking my head away before his blood can spray in my eyes. He falls forward, and I rip my dress sleeve to scramble to the side and avoid his body landing on top of me. I kneel on the floor next to him while I rub the spot on my ribs he hit. It hurts to breathe, and my cut throbs terribly. Blood continues to trickle down my leg, matching my busted lip and bruised cheek.

My eyes search for the others within the mob. I first spot Finnian; his hair always makes it easy. He's on the opposite side of the room by the wall of doors that face the lake, battling one burly advisor. Next, I find Ryder; two advisors are on him. He whirls his swords like an ancient dance of war. He fights with so much fluidity. I don't think he even contemplates his moves; he lets his blades conduct him.

Where is Cayden? My anxiety spikes.

My eyes move back and forth rapidly over the battle, but I don't see him anywhere. Most advisors are down, which doesn't surprise me considering they're battling soldiers. Eagor is backed into a corner with two advisors defending him, but I don't see Valia with him. My eyes catch a wave of movement within the crowd—it's Ailliard. He's running diagonally in front of me with his sword drawn. He doesn't move as swiftly as he usually does. My eyes track his target, and my heart sinks to the floor when I take in Cayden's unguarded back. Ailliard is rushing at Cayden's back while he takes on three advisors in front of him.

"Ailliard, stop!" I shout. "Ailliard!" My commands are drowned out by the battle. I feel every footstep he takes closer to Cayden in my bones. My eyes glance at the knife in my hand and then back to Ailliard, recalling Ailliard correcting my sword fighting stance, Ailliard bringing me a cake on my birthday, Ailliard teaching me how to dance because he wanted me to remember I was a princess, Ailliard teaching me how to read, Ailliard bringing me new seeds for my garden.

That Ailliard is dead. He's in the past and will forever remain there. Cayden's treachery still sours my stomach. He spied on me, he lied to me, he hid things from me, but he is where my future is. I don't know what that future looks like now, but he's in it.

Not Ailliard.

Cayden threw himself in front of a dragon for me, and Ailliard threw me to the wolves the second he heard a whisper from Imirath.

I zone in on Ailliard's back and throw my knife.

CHAPTER
FIFTY-FIVE



My knife whirls through the air and sinks between Ailliard's shoulder blades. Time moves in slow motion as I watch his body fall to the floor, head smacking against the polished tile. He used to be one of the strongest people in the world to me, and now he's dead. I look at my empty hand and then at Ailliard again.

I killed him.

Tears prickle my eyes, and a sob erupts from my throat. I feel hot all over my body, and my breathing is coming in short and ragged gasps. *I killed him.* There's nobody between him and I. Most of the advisors are dead. Cayden killed two out of the three that were on him and is finishing the last.

My lifeless steps carry me forward, gown dragging in the pools of blood between Ailliard and me until I finally reach him. I'm still in a daze when I drop to my knees into the puddle of his blood. This isn't how it was supposed to feel; killing him was supposed to feel good. I slowly reach my shaking hands forward and wrap them around the hilt of the knife. I tug once, but nothing happens. I pull it again, but I can't remove it—I threw it too hard. I press down on his back, and blood oozes from his wound and coats my hands. It drips down the side of him and coats my thighs. I continue to tug on the knife, but the only thing that comes out of him is more blood.

There's so much blood.

You're just like your father.

You're a monster.

You're disgusting.

Ailliard's voice replays in my head.

My head bows as another sob rips free from my throat. "I'm so sorry," I whisper. "You shouldn't have betrayed me. You shouldn't have tried to kill Cayden. I told you I would kill you." The tears flow out of me, and my body shakes so hard I feel my teeth chatter together. He wasn't supposed to betray me. He wasn't supposed to call me a monster and then force my hand. What else was I supposed to do? He was going to kill Cayden, *my Cayden*. I give up on the knife and turn him onto his side.

I deserve to face what I've done.

Stop crying, Elowen.

Grow up, Elowen.

Nobody will respect you if you get emotional, Elowen.

"Get out of my head." I screw my eyes shut and bring my blood-covered hands up to cover my ears, but Ailliard's verbal assault continues. His insults are branded into my memory, and the visual of his corpse is branded behind my eyelids.

Be stronger.

Be kinder.

Be better.

Ailliard's criticism doesn't relent.

I feel someone's hands wrap around my wrists, and I snap my eyes open. Cayden's concerned eyes bore into mine, but I shake my head when he tries to pull my hands away from my face. His face is splattered with blood. I try to make out what he's saying, but I can't focus on his lips. I can't focus on anything; everything feels like it's too much to process.

Ailliard's betrayal.

Ailliard's death.

Cayden's treachery.

Cayden's treachery. I rip my wrists out of his hold and shove him back. "You lied to me," my voice is hoarse, and it feels like I've been screaming; maybe I have.

"Elowen, please," Cayden comes into my space again, "let me take you back to our room, and we can talk."

"No," I shake my head. "Where's Finnian?" I ask. "Where's Finnian? Finnian!" I become frantic, whipping my head in all directions, trying to find him. A pair of strong arms spin me away from Ailliard's lifeless body, and Finnian shoves my head into his neck.

“I’m right here, Ellie. Just breathe.” I suck in short, frantic breaths, but my head grows light from the lack of oxygen. Finnian runs a hand through my tangled hair, whispering that everything is okay. I fist his shirt and pull him closer, breathing in his scent, but nothing calms my rapid heart. I can’t hold it back anymore—I sob into his neck. I scream and sob until my throat burns. Tears soak his skin and leave fresh trails down my bloodstained face.

I pull my head back and search his eyes, “Please don’t be scared of me.”

“I could never be scared of you.” Tears trail down his face.

“I would never do this to you.” I try to turn back to Ailliard, but Finnian keeps his hands firm on my shoulders, preventing me from doing so. Ailliard’s words about choosing revenge over Finnian are fresh in my mind, repeating on a loop at a deafening volume. “Please, you must know I would never do this to you. I would never choose revenge over you. Ailliard didn’t love me, he...he...” My voice trails off, and Finnian wipes my tears with his fingers while cupping my face. His throat bobs, and tears spill out of his eyes.

“I know. You love me, and I love you. You’re not a monster, Ellie,” Finnian murmurs.

“He was running at Cayden’s back; I had to do it!” I hear a gasp followed by a sword clattering to the ground beside me, but I don’t turn my head away from Finnian.

“I know, darling.” I move my hands to wipe his tears, but my eyes snag on my blood-covered skin. The blood travels from my fingers to my elbows. It looks like I’m wearing crimson red gloves. I turn my hands around, taking them in before I let my eyes travel along the rest of my body. My silver dress is covered in blood; I’m covered in Ailliard’s blood. It pools around me, seeping into my soul, staining it more than it already is. My breathing picks up, and my stomach clenches painfully.

“If you touch her right now, more blood will be added to the floor tonight,” Finnian snarls while rubbing circles on my back.

My eyes catch on Finnian’s arm, which is bleeding. “You’re hurt,” I hoarsely whisper. There’s a bruise forming on his left eye. I glance to the right of me. Saskia’s gold dress is drenched in blood, and she has a slash on her calf. I raise my eyes to take in her face, but there’s no damage aside from the tears that streak down her cheeks. Ryder clutches his side while he has his arm wrapped around Cayden’s shoulders—his face is a mixture of concern and pain. Cayden’s jacket is torn on his bicep, there’s a slash on his

chest, and there's blood trickling from the reopened wound under his eye. His face is twisted in anguish. It looks like it's painful for him to stay away from me. Both of their outfits are black, but I can see the way blood soaks through the fabric.

"You're all hurt. I can fix this." I try to get to my feet, but Finnian pulls me back down. "No, I can fix this," I say while trying to rise again.

"It's okay, we're fine," Finnian whispers.

"Please, let me fix something." I feel myself falling into hysterics again. "I need to fix something." I'm only pulled from my growing hysterics when a shadow slams into the colonnade and shatters the glass doors in front of us, followed by a mighty roar that shakes the very stones of the castle.

The roar is echoed by four more in the air.

Not a shadow.

My dragon.

I feel the bond tug in my chest, pulling me together after Ailliard pulled me apart. The red-eyed dragon tucks their wings in and enters the room, growling at the sight of blood. I suppose I should be frightened at the sight of a growling dragon coming toward me, but it calms me slightly. The bond tethers me to sanity.

The dragon stops a few feet in front of me and lowers their head. Their eyes are no longer filled with hatred. I can't quite place the emotion, but I think it's something close to affectionate. Their nose dances along my legs, sniffing the blood that coats them, and growls a deep, rumbling threat before sinking their fangs into Ailliard. Finnian pulls me back against his chest while the dragon carries Ailliard's lifeless body from the room and flies into the sky. I hear the other four screech in unison above the castle while I rise on shaky legs.

I wouldn't feel right giving Ailliard a funeral anyway.

Finnian wraps his arm around my waist and leads me out of the room. I don't look at Cayden as I pass him, but I hear his footsteps slap the blood-covered floor in my wake, followed by Saskia and Ryder. I keep hold of Finnian while we walk through the halls. None of us talk.

Finnian reaches his hand out and swings the door to my room open. The five of us file in, but the first thing I do is walk to my bathing chamber and turn on the faucet. I begin washing the blood off my hands.

Once.

Twice.

Three times before I see the color of my skin again.

“Will someone explain to me what the fuck just happened and why Elowen, Finnian, and myself were not informed?” Saskia shouts her question. Her temper builds a dam against my sadness but opens the floodgate for my anger. I wash the blood from my face and before rejoining the group. Cayden stops his pacing in front of the fireplace when I enter. I feel everyone’s eyes bounce between him and me, probably wondering if I’ll go to him.

But I don’t.

None of us are sitting, considering we’re all drenched in blood, but I stand on the opposite side of the circle, putting some much-needed space between us. His expression doesn’t change, but I can practically feel the disappointment radiating off him.

“I was only sure of what was happening when Egor spoke to me about sending Elowen back to Imirath,” Cayden says.

“Something was obviously on your mind last night when I asked you to tell me what was going on,” my voice rises toward the end of my statement.

“The only thing on my mind last night was worrying how Egor and Valia would react to your growth in power, that’s it. The reason I didn’t tell you was because I had nothing to back it up with, and I didn’t want to worry you for no reason. Do you honestly think I would have brought you somewhere I knew would put you in danger? I had my suspicions about Ailliard from the moment you ran into me after you had that breakfast with him, but I was strongly advised not to bring it up to you.”

“Why?” I press.

“Because I once again had no reason to be suspicious other than the fact that I didn’t like how you stiffened up whenever you were around him. You’re vibrant around us, but he always sucked the life out of you,” Cayden declares.

“That’s my fault, I’m afraid,” Ryder cuts in. “I advised him not to bring it up to you.”

“You should have,” I fire at Cayden.

“Would you have believed me?” he inquires.

“I trusted you!” I shout. “You were supposed to be my partner in this whole thing. Even if I didn’t believe you at first, at least I would have been aware.” The past tense I use muddies the space between us.

“Don’t say *trusted*,” he says while taking a step toward me. I hold my hand up to stop him in place, and Finnian takes a step closer to him, silently telling him to back off. Cayden could beat Finnian in hand-to-hand fighting, but Cayden resigns. Watching the two of them fight, tonight of all nights would do severe harm and no good.

“Eagor and Valia are dead?” I ask. We need to discuss technicalities now; the spying can be discussed when Cayden and I are alone.

“Yes,” Ryder answers. “I checked before we left the room.”

“Who killed them?” Saskia asks.

“Eagor,” Cayden raises his hand.

“Valia,” Finnian raises his.

“How much retaliation do you think we’ll get for the coup?” I look toward Saskia.

She gnaws on her bottom lip, contemplating and weighing theories in the vast void of her mind. “Most of the people already preferred Cayden. Politically, we may face some challenges, but I don’t think it will amount to anything we can’t handle as long as you’re both committed rulers and committed to each other. The way the events happened tonight made it seem like the coup was based on love rather than treachery. We need to announce the...engagement soon. We must be the ones to break the news in a formal statement to make it seem like you’re overjoyed.”

“Do you think people will believe it’s an authentic engagement?” I ask.

“There have been rumors about the two of you since you came to Vareveth, and the marriage clause isn’t exactly unknown. The Dasterians and their advisors were just ignorant,” Saskia says. I nod my head. I think Cayden and I fought wanting each other for so long because we knew we were inevitable. Most alliances are secured with marriage. Cayden and I are two eerily similar people; it only seems fitting that we end up together.

“I need a few minutes alone with Elowen,” Cayden states. Finnian stiffens beside me. Saskia and Ryder look between the two of us, wondering what the best option is.

“Fine,” I mutter, cutting across the circle and walking past him toward the fire. I sit down on the warm tile, standing feels like a chore. My leg needs a break, and my body feels like it’s being weighed down. I hear the door between our rooms click shut before he takes a seat on the tile next to me. He reaches a hand toward me. “Don’t touch me.”

His hand recoils immediately. “Elowen, I—”

“You know where Aestilian is,” I cut him off. I remember what he said to me during one of our first interactions. *There isn't a single place in this world you can hide from me, you understand?* I take his silence as an affirmation. “How long were you spying on me?”

“I didn't *spy* on you. I was looking for you in the Terrwyn Forest, and I knew who you were the second you walked into the tavern. Don't ask me how. I don't know how; I just knew that you were the person I was looking for. I followed you into that attic, everything lined up, and it felt right. I followed you back to Aestilian after you rode away from me in the forest because I needed to assure your safety. I didn't wait around to record numbers or details. We had just made the deal, and all I wanted to do was protect you. I left as soon as you crossed into Aestilian—I don't even know what it looks like. I didn't tell anyone of its location either.”

My heart stutters in my chest before I can stop it. He needed to assure my safety because he needed Elowen Atarah, Princess of Imirath. Not Elowen, myself. I can't fault him for it. In the beginning, I only wanted him for his army and resources.

“Eagor wanted to include revealing Aestilian's location as part of the treaty so the world would recognize you as a more legitimate ruler, but I told him you would never agree to that because you care more about your people than what the world thinks of you. I told him that I knew the location and that was all the security he would receive in that aspect. I've been looking for you for years. I thought that if I could make an alliance with someone that hated Garrick as much as me, if not more so, then I would have a better chance in the war,” Cayden finishes, looking at me with pleading eyes. He's handing over every single detail with no hesitation. If he was lying, there would be loose ends to his statements.

“I'm not even upset you followed me back to Aestilian,” a laugh that sounds more like a sob ripples through me. “Maybe that makes me an idiot, but so be it. I can't be upset that you followed me because it's something that I would've done if I was in your position.” I swallow through the tightness in my throat, feeling angry as helpless as tears spring in my eyes. I hate this kind of anger. I like the kind of anger that makes me feel strong or that I can conquer an entire battlefield by myself. This type of anger just makes me feel powerless. His hands clench at his sides, and I know he's fighting the urge to reach out to me. But if he touches me, I'll break. “I'm upset because you never told me. This entire time, I thought we were

working on our communication and getting better at it as a team. But you kept this from me, and it's something you knew I would want to know. You looked me in the face every single day and chose to hide this from me."

"I was going to tell you, I swear. I was just trying to find the right time," he pleads.

"There is no right time for a conversation like that; you just have to have it. But I would have preferred to have it with you in private rather than in front of a courtly gathering after my uncle betrayed me and marriage was sprung onto us." I get to my knees and use an iron poker to stoke the fire to distract myself from the tears that continue to gather in my eyes. I wipe the few that fall down my cheeks.

"My intention was never to spy on you, but after I met you...I couldn't stop myself from following you. You know how much I want revenge, and you were the only person I thought was worth taking a chance on—still are. I didn't know you; you were nothing more than leverage, but when you tackled me in the attic and held a knife to my throat...you fought with such ferocity. It made me feel like I met someone that burns as much as I do, that would fight as hard as I do. In that moment, I knew I would be an idiot to make an enemy of you before I made you my ally. Some part of me, a part that I thought was shriveled up and dead, came alive. You were stuck in my head from the first night in the tavern, and I would have regretted letting you slip into shadow for the rest of my life. Nobody sticks in my head, but you intrigued me." His words mend the fresh wound that Ailliard and Egor tore into my heart and make me want to sink into him. It still hurts, but at least Cayden bandaged it slightly. "I wanted to tell you so badly. I just didn't want to lose you—whatever part I had of you. The more time I spent with you, the more time I *wanted* to spend with you."

"Did you..." My throat constricts. This is the question I'm most dreading. His use of past tense while speaking of the part he *has* of me burns. I may be mad at him, furious actually, but I can't cut him out from where he embedded himself inside of me. I stab a log harshly. It splits apart, and embers litter the front of my hearth. My eyes watch them, mesmerized by the changing colors. "Did you tell him we slept together?"

He moves between me and the fire and kneels in front of me. Still not touching me, but close enough that he may as well be. After the events of tonight, all I want to do is fall asleep with his arms around me. I want him to hold me until the shattered pieces mold together and feel right again, but

they won't feel right tonight. No amount of hugging can erase what I've done or what has been done. I still see Ailliard's lifeless body whenever I blink. I hear the knife piercing his skin and lodging in his bones. But I won't just invite Cayden into my bed or wrap my arms around him. If we're going to spend the rest of our lives together, then he needs to get it through his head that he can't screw me over or withhold details and still expect a happy wife beckoning him into bed. I won't live a life in ignorance for the sake of anyone's happiness.

"You are not a game to me. You are not a thing to brag about or something that I'd discuss over a pint. You are going to be my wife, and even if you weren't, I would never talk about you like that. I would be quicker to praise your mind, beauty, wit, or fighting skills rather than intimate details between us." His eyes bore into mine, practically begging me to believe him. I do. Eagor and Ailliard were desperate and probably decided to spew as much nonsense as they could so we would break apart before the coup even started. It's not hard to assume Cayden and I slept together; most of the kingdom believed it before it even happened. But it's better to question some allies in private rather than argue in public.

"Okay," I whisper while getting to my feet. His eyes are too intense, and his body is too alluring. I turn away from him and cross my arms over my chest while looking out the window. "Have you considered it might be easier if we did this in name only?" I ask.

I can see his reflection in the window, even though he thinks I can't. I watch his shoulders cave in. I note the way he pinches the bridge of his nose before dragging his hand through his hair and swaying on his feet. He looks to the ceiling as if he's offering up a silent prayer for strength or mercy.

"Is that what you want?" His voice is clear despite his reaction.

No. It's not remotely close to what I want. Cayden and I trying to do this in name only is as unrealistic as waiting for the ocean to dry up or the stars to fall from the sky. But the pain I feel right now is suffocating, agonizing. I avoid his question because I refuse to lie to him.

"I wanted you to talk to me." I turn away from the window and face him. "I wanted you to tell me things before they were thrown in my face. I told you what I wanted! You should have told me about the marriage clause." My voice breaks on the last word, and tears slip from my eyes. He cuts across the room but stops in place when I whisper a hoarse, "No." He

grits his teeth and fists his hands at his sides while looking at me with broken eyes.

“I’m a man, not a boy, and I’m not ashamed to admit what I want. I want you. I don’t know when I started wanting you, maybe part of me always has, but all I know is that I can’t stop. In my mind, I would never need to invoke the clause because I had no desire to be king in public. I preferred to pull the strings in private. But I will do anything to keep you safe, and I’ll spend the rest of my life making this up to you.” For the first time since I met him, Cayden looks defeated. His eyes are glassy and bloodshot, his hair is disheveled, and his lips are turned down in a frown. Blood is splattered across his cheeks and leaks from his cuts.

“Have you ever thought about marriage before?” I whisper.

He swallows, “Not exactly.” I don’t have the energy to press him for more information tonight.

“We’re in a fight.” My emotions ping pong between devastated and venomous with brief moments of calmness. The events of tonight weigh on me like a thousand bricks are tied around my ankles. “And I don’t forgive you yet.” My lips wobble. He looks like he’s going to explode. “But I really want you to hold me for a few seconds.”

He springs forward, enveloping me in a hug that makes me feel like I have a brief reprieve from the world. One of his hands slides into my tangled hair, pressing my face into his neck, and the other holds me securely against him. Tears silently fall from my eyes and soak his shirt, mixing with the blood that’s already there. My eyes glance at us in the mirror above my fireplace while Cayden’s eyes slip shut. The pair of us are drenched in blood, and I feel like he’s driven a wedge into my heart, but he’s also the only one who can take it out.

“I’m going to make it up to you, angel, I promise,” he whispers into my hair while holding me like he’s scared I’ll evaporate into thin air.

I grit my teeth and don’t bother wiping my tears away as I push myself out of his hold. That’s all I’m allowing myself. He needs to learn that I won’t run back to him after he does something like this; I deserve more than that. I haven’t hidden a single thing from him. I’ve worked at talking to him more. I need him to know that this isn’t something I’ll brush under the rug just because his arms make me feel whole again. I’d rather be broken and respected than loved and affronted.

“I want to be alone.” I need to figure my head out for myself, too much is piling on top of me at once, and I just need to be alone with my thoughts, even if they’ll torture me. If it gets to be too much, then I’ll find Finnian, but I refuse to spend the night with Cayden when it’s the same night he hurt me—even if it isn’t as bad as Egor made it seem.

“Are you sure you don’t want Finnian to stay with you?” he asks in a low tone, drenched in resignation and defeat. I know he wants to stay with me, but he knows not to push me right now. However, I have a feeling he would sleep on my floor if his room wasn’t attached to mine.

“You will not be the judge of what’s best for me right now. I’ll see you in the morning for our engagement announcement.” I turn away from him, ripping a nightgown from my closet and walking over to my bathing chamber. I pause before shutting the door, “You said you enjoy challenges, *fiancé*.” Life sparks behind his defeated eyes. “Consider me your greatest challenge. Tonight you said you’re not a forgiving person, but I am far less forgiving than you, soldier,” I add before slamming the door shut.

CHAPTER
FIFTY-SIX



The familiar pull in my chest drags my mind from its drowsy state. I haven't been able to fall asleep, no matter how much my body craves it. I keep thinking I'll have to relive the moment I watched Ailliard fall to the ground if I close my eyes. Cayden left the door between our rooms open, and I'm sure he has heard me shuffle to and from the door when my willpower grows weak, his movements still whenever I get close. I hear him rustling through papers on his desk; maybe he's going over kingly protocol. I'll have to start going over Vareveth's politics tomorrow. I already know a handful, but nowhere near enough to be able to run the kingdom.

A headache already pounds against my forehead—a mixture of exhaustion and grief setting in. My throat feels raw from screaming. A maid brought tea into my room, most likely at Cayden's request, but it sits untouched on my nightstand.

The same memories of Ailliard flash in my mind, on a constant loop of desecration. Every memory now seems murky, and they've become tarnished by his words. None of it was real. My entire childhood was fake. He raised me in the hopes of one day rectifying his mistake of leaving Imirath. The reason he became more lenient about me leaving Aestilian as I got older was not because he trusted me; but because he was gradually losing hope that my father would ever want me to return.

I first thought mourning someone alive and breathing would be difficult. I never thought I'd have to mourn someone that died by my hand. Why should I grieve for someone that betrayed me? But how can I ignore this gut-twisting emotion?

Golden light shines through the darkness of my room. It's not snakes this time, but golden wisps slither into the air around me. They shoot from my palms and glide along the canopy above my bed. More gold shoots from my palms and crawls its way up my arms. I sit up in bed and stare into the mirror above my fireplace. The golden wisps have congregated around my head, crowning me in a shimmering luminescent circlet.

Come to me, Daughter of Flame. Let me stoke the embers that live within you, says a soothing voice in my head. The pull in my chest urges me to follow the voice. I have been backstabbed too many times tonight to seek any kind of counsel, this power radiates from my bones, and I trust myself. My feet meet the cold floor and pad over to the mirror. Gold wisps continue to shoot from my palms, wrap around my torso, and stretch into the space around me. The circlet shimmers on my head while it rotates in a slow circle.

I close my eyes, but instead of one pair of eyes greeting me in the darkness, I see five—my dragon's vibrant irises openly staring back at me. No traces of hatred or animosity, just curiosity. I feel the bond flutter in my chest, and I flick my eyes open. My brown eyes have become a molten gold color to match the wisps that swirl around me.

"Elowen?" Cayden's tentative voice comes from the space between our rooms. I turn my head to face him, and the gold wisps dance around him as he steps closer, running through his already tousled hair and swirling around his arms. His breathing hitches when he sees my golden eyes, but he doesn't back away.

I don't say anything before I turn away from him and walk toward my door, swinging it open. The two guards Cayden stationed outside balk in my direction and stare at me with a mixture of awe and fear. The wisps don't reach out to them; they stay close to me.

"Y-Your Majesty?" the guard questions through his stutters.

"Step aside," Cayden's command comes from behind me as I glide past the guards. "Tell Finnian, Saskia, and Ryder what's happening, and tell them to find us."

I ignore his words and continue to glide forward. The wisps and the pull in my chest lead me toward the lake. My bare feet pad against the cool tile until I make it to the exit. The wisps grow around me, and the pull in my chest becomes stronger the closer I get. A red hooded figure stands by the lake. *Come to me, Queen of Fire. You have never feared the flames, but*

others will fear yours, the figure whispers in my mind. The wisps stretch in her direction, and I follow them; I trust them. My feet tread on the grass, carrying me toward the hooded figure.

“Sheath your sword, King Cayden Veles. No harm will befall our queen at my hand.” The figure reaches two hands forward and removes the hood from her face, revealing a dark-skinned priestess with voluminous curls. The wind carries the spray of the waterfall toward us, but nothing can combat the warmth the wisps make me feel.

“Your queen?” Cayden inquires. His sword is still out, and the wisps swirl around his wrist and glide down his blade. I reach over and gently push his wrist down. When my skin touches his, the wisps band around us and momentarily hold our hands together before dancing away.

“I go where the flames command me, and all wind carries the flames closer to Elowen. I told you we would meet again. I am merely a catalyst to bring forth the inevitable,” the priestess says. The earth rumbles as five dragons firmly land in the earth surrounding the lake. Some stones fall from the cliffside and land in the river below us. “The bond is worn down after years of mistrust and mistreatment, and we need to mend it in order for it to fully snap in place.”

“Why do I need your help?” I ask, not out of resentment, but I’m wary of trusting anyone right now.

“Did you manage to translate the bond ceremony portion of the dragon text?” She quirks a perfectly sculpted brow. So, she *is* the priestess that we stole the book from. She never pulled her hood down when we met her, so I never saw her face.

“Fucking gods,” Saskia curses a few feet behind us.

I turn my head to check if Finnian and Ryder are also here. They are. The three of them stand a few feet behind Cayden and me in their night clothes. The gold wisps still swirl around Cayden’s wrist but don’t stretch farther than him. I turn forward when the priestess shifts closer to me. Her hand stretches toward me, stopping a few inches away. “I am the Head Priestess of the Fire Cult. I have studied the ancient lore of gods and dragons and can open the gates of the bond. You just have to do as I say.”

My eyes glance down toward her outstretched palm and then to my dragons, who wait reverently around the lake. I know I shouldn’t allow a stranger to direct me on any kind of path, but I lived half my life next to a traitor. I am more than people think I am. I wring possibilities from the

impossible. I was born into a cell, and yet here I stand with my dragons as Queen of Vareveth.

I force any animosity away, and the gold surrounding me burns brighter. I listen to the bond that calls out to me, telling me to do as the priestess says. I place my hand in hers, though the gold still clings only to me. She leads me forward to the lake, wading into the cool, crisp waters as the dragons ruffle their wings.

The gold wisps that extend down to my ankles now slither through the water, reaching out in five different directions toward the dragons. When the wisps get close enough, they shoot from the water and latch on the tips of all five sets of wings. I watch, mesmerized, as the gold strands that latch onto their wings morph into the color of their eyes, creating a web of gold, red, black, purple, orange, and blue in the water. The strands shimmer and twine together, dancing and mingling beneath the moonlight.

I move my feet farther into the lake, the water soaks through my slip, and it soon reaches my neck. My feet kick off from the bottom and swim where the bond pulls me. I reach the center of the lake, where the intertwining colors rotate together at a staggering pace. They form a cylinder around me and dance all the way to the bottom of the lake. The water comes alive in a sea of color. I have lost plenty tonight, but perhaps I have not lost all.

I turn toward the shore, but I can't make out anyone's faces. However, plenty more people have come out of the castle. Shadows line the steps, grass, and docks. There's a sharp pain in my chest, and I turn my eyes back toward the water. The wisps have stopped moving. My heavy breaths bounce against the water as I move my limbs to stay afloat.

A sharp crack explodes through the air, like two boulders slamming together, and a dome of gold shoots up from the perimeter of the lake, sealing me in here with the dragons and the priestess. The dome stretches high above me and shimmers at the top. The colors begin to move again, and the dragons screech while fluttering their wings. The wisps rise from the water and become a labyrinth around me—rising to the top of the dome.

"This is the first stage of the bond ceremony, the introduction," the priestess shouts across the distance, "pluck a strand!"

I reach my hand from the water and raise it to the red strand. I'm surprised at how solid it feels. It looks as if my hand would pass through it, but I tightly wrap my finger around the strand and pull it back. It vibrates

back and forth in the air, and a dragon roar sounds from my left. The red-eyed dragon spreads their wings and rises in the air. Their mighty wings carry them to the top of the dome.

Venatrix, I hear through the vibrations of the red strand. It's so quiet, the name is nothing but a whisper, but it's one of the five answers I've been longing for since I can remember.

I reach my hand toward the next strand and pluck the black one. The black-eyed dragon lets out a roar and rises in the air.

Sorin.

I pluck the orange strand.

Calithea.

The orange-eyed dragon rises to take flight.

I pluck the purple strand.

Basilus.

The purple-eyed dragon takes flight.

I pluck the final blue strand.

Delmira.

The blue-eyed dragon rises to fly in tandem with the others circling the top of the dome. I watch the way their wings shine in the golden light and how it dances along their black-scaled bodies. The pain I had felt in my chest melts into a fullness that I've never felt before and don't know how I've lived without. It fills a part of me I didn't even know was missing. I float on my back, looking up at my dragons and watch them. I can't count the nights I wished I could have done exactly this, just exist with them.

The wisps rise from the water and ram into the gold dome, shattering it, and vibrant colors fill the air before they fade from the night sky. The dragons dart from the sky and take their original places around the lake. They let out a synchronized roar, and five gusts of flames shoot from their mouths and meet directly above me. I continue to float on my back, letting the warmth of their flames caress my heart and chilled body. I can feel their flames in my soul. My eyes watch a star shoot across the sky, and my mind falls quiet. I've questioned where I was supposed to be in life so many times. I'm always contemplating my next move and looking toward the future. But right now, I know everything that happened after I left Imirath happened so that I could be here.

This feels right.

The priestess stands on the bridge at the top of the waterfall and stretches her hand in my direction. I swim to the opposite side of the lake since my body drifted closer to there and climb onto the slick rocks that lead toward the bridge. The dragons fly over my head and make a sharp downturn along the waterfall. I grip the thick railing in my fingertips and watch them fly into the waterfall, disappearing behind it. There must be a cave down there.

My night slip suction to my skin, and I wrap my arms around myself to conserve warmth. The wisps are no longer here to warm my body. My breath clouds in front of my face while I wait for the directions of the second step. Water drips from my slip and pools at my feet.

“What’s next?” I ask through my chattering teeth.

“This next step is fairly,” her lips quirk up on one side, “interpretive. Other than tails, what’s the one limb those dragons have that you don’t?”

“Wings.”

“Precisely.” She clasps her hands together in front of her. “A dragon’s trust is unyielding but very hard to come by. You had their trust by default when you were born, but now you need to strengthen that trust. You must show them how far you’re willing to go for them.”

Dread settles deep in my bones, smothering the flames that burned there moments ago. It’s a different kind of chill than ordinary; it’s a chill from a brutal realization. “You want me to jump,” I state.

“I don’t want anything. This is about what the dragons want.”

“Do you happen to have a roar-to-text translation hidden in your robes somewhere?”

She glares at my sarcastic tone. “You don’t have to complete the ceremony, the dragons will never harm you, but they will also never be fully yours. You can still fight your war without them, but I can assure you that you have a higher chance of success with the dragons.”

I peek over the edge and take in the jagged cliffside. Sharp rocks jut upward from the bottom of the waterfall, and the river that runs in front of the castle is too shallow for me to land in a solid body of water. Even if the sharp rocks don’t pierce me, I will die on the smaller rocks that litter the riverbed. I turn away from the edge and walk to the opposite side of the bridge. I hear voices arguing and squint into the darkness. Cayden and Finnian are trying to get closer to the bridge, but Ryder, Saskia, and a few other guards look like they’re trying to convince them to stay by the castle.

If they make it over here, they'll tie me to the bridge before I even have the chance to jump.

"You said I am the Daughter of Flame and Queen of Fire. What did you mean by that?"

"Your soul is forged in flames and blessed by the gods. You're the only person that can share a link with those dragons. The fire of the gods resides in you," the priestess answers.

I've never been much of a believer. Whenever I prayed to the gods and pleaded for them to alleviate my suffering, I was ignored. The priestess may believe the fire of the gods resides in my soul, but she's wrong. I rubbed the stones together and set my soul ablaze years ago.

Cayden and Finnian tread backward on the grass and are getting closer, but their attention is drawn to the people they're arguing with.

The fire of the gods does not reside in me—my own flames do. My flames were not given to me on a whim; I've been tending them for years. I bow to nothing other than my crown and kneel to no god.

I am the Daughter of Flame.

I am the Queen of Fire.

I push myself onto the banister and swing my legs over, planting my feet on the small ledge while holding the railing behind me. Anxiety floods my senses as I look down at the rocks below me.

"Elowen!"

"Stop!"

"No!"

"Please!"

Four voices rise from behind me, and footsteps pound against the grass. I sneak a glance over my shoulder and take in the four people I practically went to hell and back with. It wasn't supposed to be like this; I wasn't supposed to become attached. We're just five people with a knack for surviving against all odds. I've found people to survive with, but I've also found people to risk myself for.

I won't let them die in this war, knowing I could have done something right now to give us an upper hand. If I don't do this, then we would have gone to Imirath for nothing. I take in their stricken faces. Finnian pumps his arms so fiercely I wouldn't be surprised if he flies off the ground. Terrified tears leak from Saskia's eyes. Ryder clutches his side as he forces himself to

keep going. Cayden...Cayden looks like he's about to rip the earth apart to get to me faster.

"If I die," I swallow the lump in my throat, "tell them it's okay. Tell them to win this damn war and that I'm thankful for every minute I spent with them. It was the greatest gift I ever received. Tell Cayden I forgive him and that he'll be a wonderful king." Cayden's betrayal still stings, but I won't let him live with the agony of an unresolved argument.

I don't wait for the priestess to answer before I release my hold on the railing and fall forward. Wind rushes through my ears, drowning out any cries I'm leaving behind. My wet hair whips behind me.

Where are the dragons?

I call on the bond, but I can't grasp anything. The only thing that fills my chest is a sharp sense of panic. My stomach twists and I feel like I need to scream, but I can't get enough air in to produce one. I'm falling fast, and nobody can save me now, only the dragons. I don't hear a roar, not a rustle of wings, nothing other than the finality of my decision whipping through me.

I'm halfway down the waterfall, and there's no sign of them.

Maybe Cayden was wrong; maybe the dragons don't want me anymore. I left them when they needed me, so why should they come to my aid when I need them? I'm gaining on the sharp rocks below, and I know there's nothing I can do to help myself; no dagger can get me out of this. I slip my eyes shut and let memories play behind my lids.

My first memory is when Finnian came to Aestilian. That day changed my life for the better. Nothing has brought me as much joy as Finnian has. Saskia dress shopping and beaming my way. She welcomed me into her life from the first day I met her. Ryder's belly laughter in the tavern while he clutched his pint like his life depended on it. Lastly, my brain snags on Cayden, laughing under me when I tickled him in my bed. It was the first time I ever saw him truly smile without restraint. Then it flashes to Cayden kissing my tears away while we bathed together. Nobody ever made me feel as wanted as he has. I wish we had more time. I wanted to experience so much more with him, with everyone. Time is cruel, you don't know how much you have left until the end is staring at you in the face and you're powerless against it.

Water sprays from behind me, and a solid winged figure appears below me. My stomach lands on a hard, scaled back, and I'm whisked into the air.

I let out a shriek of relief and wrap my arms around the dragon's neck.

Venatrix, the name is whispered in my mind.

She throws her head back and screeches into the night air, and four other screeches echo in her wake. I slowly sit up and slide my legs on either side of her body to glance behind me; four dragons follow her. *Venatrix* stays level, which is good considering I'll fall off if she maneuvers herself in any other way. She does a lap around the castle before screeching again.

Despite everything that has happened tonight, a smile makes its way onto my face, which transforms into a full-blown grin until I'm laughing in shock while riding a dragon. The wind whips through my wet hair, but the cold is the last thing on my mind. My stomach fills with butterflies that make me throw my head back and stare up at the moon and stars. I'm doing what no other person has ever done; I'm riding a dragon. All those years in the dungeon were trying to steal me away from this, but I'm still here, and I'm flying. I look down and see the lake dance in the moonlight, I watch my friends hug each other on the grass, and I hear the cheers of the people of *Vareveth* below.

I'm not playing at being queen; I've just become a different kind of queen.

The Dragon Queen, *Elowen Atarah*.

Venatrix gradually dips her flight path and plants her claws in the earth by the lake. The other four dragons follow her lead, and we sit at the point of their pyramid. My chest heaves as I take in the crowd before me.

Ryder is cheering with his fist in the air, and *Saskia's* tears of strife have turned into tears of joy. *Finnian* has his hands clasped together, offering a prayer to the gods. *Cayden* clutches his chest and looks at me with the sincerest form of relief and pride I've ever seen. I feel his gaze in every fiber of my vibrating body. My blood sings from the short flight, and I crave more.

Fire itself can't burn brighter than I am right now.

"May I present the first dragon-riding queen in history, Queen *Elowen Atarah*. Long may she reign!" the priestess shouts.

"Long may she reign!" echoes the crowd.

Slowly, *Cayden* takes several steps in front of the crowd, his eyes never leaving mine—not even when my dragons growl at him. He just continues his steady pace forward, stopping a few feet in front of me. I know everyone is watching him, waiting to see what he's doing.

Cayden does something he has never done for anyone.

He unsheathes his sword from his side, and he kneels—sinking into the dirt while bowing his head and offering up his sword to me. It's a sign of respect that soldiers give their commanders and that citizens give their monarchs. The rest of the crowd follows suit, and they sink to the ground like a rippling effect. Stretching from the steps of the castle, down into the town until my eyes can't stretch farther.

“Bow before your queen or burn and bleed!” Cayden declares.

A united front.

I am burn, and he is bleed.

He is my king.

I am his queen.

Together we reign.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I've been on this journey for the past three years—chasing dragons, dancing in taverns, and battling assassins. The idea of *Fear the Flames* came to me at a dark part in my life. It was a time where I felt stuck, and I wouldn't have known where to go if you handed me a map of my mind. That is until I met Elowen Atarah; followed by Cayden Veles, Finnian Eira, Saskia Neredras, and Ryder Neredras. These five characters gave me something to look forward to. Not only did they make me feel alive, but they also helped me heal from things I couldn't say out loud.

I'm so grateful to these characters, but also to many people in my life that have supported me on this journey.

To my mom, dad, and brother: Mom and Dad, thank you for making the sacrifices you did that enabled me to attend University and study something I've always been passionate about. It has always been my dream to be an author, as you both know, and I truly will never be able to thank either of you enough for encouraging that dream. Mom, thank you for baking me book themed snacks and for always telling me I could do anything I set my mind to. Dad, thank you for reading to me whenever you came home from work when I was younger, no matter how tired you were, and for carrying my book bags when they got too heavy. To my brother, Andrew, thank you for being my first best friend and for encouraging my fantasy addiction by pondering Game of Thrones theories in the kitchen until 3AM. I'm so proud of you, and I'm so glad you're my brother.

To Tanner: Thank you for believing in me on my worst days, and for drying my tears when I doubted myself. You've been unconditionally supportive throughout my writing journey, and your faith in me has helped me in more ways than I can say. I also heavily appreciate the neck massages after being hunched over my laptop for several hours! Thank you for taking me to bookstores and going on walks when writing became overwhelming.

To Ashley: My longest friend and the person that was with me through my awkward years. We've come a long way since high school homeroom,

but I'll never stop being thankful we were seated next to each other. In the same way Finnian is Elowen's brother, you are my sister. Everyone go buy from her makeup brand *Narcissus Beauty*! You won't regret it.

To Sarah Lee: The woman, the myth, the graphic designer! Thank you endlessly for creating the cover of my dreams, the maps, and all the little details that make *Fear the Flames* visually beautiful. You were the first person to ever read *Fear the Flames* and I'm so grateful for that. Thank you for everything you've done throughout the process, and for also forcing me to go to sleep.

To Sha Alves: The person that heard the idea of *Fear the Flames* before *Fear the Flames* was even *Fear the Flames*. Thank you so much for being a constant pillar of support. It's truly a tragedy we haven't met in person yet. You're the best proofreader I could ever ask for, and I better be getting more live reactions for all the books in the series!

To B Thomas: My website designer and baking buddy! One day we'll bake together instead of sending each other recipes and pretty baking tins over text. B, I am a grandma with technology, and you are a goddess. Thank you so much for not only designing my website, but for also consistently supporting me on every milestone.

To Grace Rached: My girl on the other side of the globe! Thank you for talking through several business decisions with me, and for hyping me up whenever I needed it. I'm so grateful to have you in my corner.

To Rebecca, Colton, and Joey: Adventuring with you all was one of the best experiences of my life. One day we'll heist something...but until then I'll just keep writing them! Thank you for giving me a little family on the other side of the world.

To Mallory Kent (The Nutty Formatter): Thank you, Mallory for formatting *Fear the Flames*! I would also like to thank Marie Lau, the author of *A Symphony of Fallen Stars*, for pointing me in your direction.

Lastly, I want to thank anyone that reads this book. I hope you stick around for the rest of the books in *The Fear the Flames Series*! I am forever grateful for every reader, every kind message on my social-media accounts throughout writing this book, and every person that took the time to step into Ravaryn. Thank you for meeting my characters—all are welcome in Ravaryn, and I hope you have a pint and stay for a while!

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Olivia split her time growing up between New York and Manchester, VT. She developed a passion for writing from a very young age- always scribbling poems onto napkins and short stories into her school notebooks. She graduated from Pace University and attained a degree in English with a concentration in Creative Writing. Lord of the Rings were her favorite movies growing up and formed her fantasy obsession. Being an author and living a life filled with words and magic has always been her dream.

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