



Shadows of Betrayal

Brenda K. Davies

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Book 3: The Forsaken

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Cole released Lexi as soon as he stepped out of the portal. He stalked over to one of the window openings overlooking the Gloaming. The glow of the approaching flames cast shadows across the land and lit the night as the opposing fae army came over the top of a hill.

There were hundreds of them marching on *his* home. His hands fisted as he glared at the traitors. When he found out who was behind this, he would make them pay.

"Stay here," he said as he turned away from the window.

"I'm staying with you until you leave this palace," Lexi said.

Cole didn't have the time to argue with her. "Stay close to me."

He strode toward the door to his room, flung it open, and swiftly descended the stairs. Her soft footsteps followed him down. Once they reached the first floor, she ran beside him as he raced for the weapons room.

He grasped the handle and pushed open one of the doors to the cavernous space. He waved Lexi inside and pressed his hand to the wall before closing the door behind him.

He wasn't sure the palace was going to welcome her into this room. It had allowed her into one of the other weapons rooms, but this was the King's room, and few were allowed here. It had accepted her far more than most others, but the palace was an endless mystery. He would know soon if it allowed her to stay or if he'd have to ask her to leave.

The second the door closed, the wall beneath his hand heated. Lexi would be allowed to stay. The weapons room was a separate building adjoined to the palace. Its pointed ceiling was fifty feet off the ground.

As the wall warmed, the ceiling lit with the dim glow of moonlight. It spilled around the room to illuminate the hundreds of weapons lining the walls. More weapons were stashed inside the trunks around the room and hidden in containers set into the walls and floor. Few knew how to access those containers, but he was one of them.

"What? How?" Lexi breathed as the room grew brighter.

"Few are allowed in here, so there is no one to keep the torches lit. Instead, the ceiling draws energy from the rays of the moons, stores it, and uses it to light the room when those who are allowed into it enter. It recognizes our touch on the wall."

"Amazing," she whispered.

Over his many years and countless hours of training in this room with his father and brothers, he'd forgotten how amazing it was. But then, the whole palace had a life of its own.

He didn't make a sound as he strode out to the middle of the white marble floor before stopping to kneel. After his father told him how to access the weapons in this hidden spot, it had taken many tries for him to locate them without fail.

When he was younger, he had to count the steps from the door to this secret cache. All the while, he worried he'd stepped too far to one side or the other. Many times, he did, and his father would have him start all over again.

One tiring day, he'd attempted to find the spot nearly two dozen times. Under his father's watchful eye and endless patience, Cole tried and tried again until he finally located it. He never missed again after that.

When he placed his palm on the floor, it warmed against his skin until a golden glow shone around the edges of his hand. The familiar sensation wasn't unpleasant as the palace recognized his touch and gave up one of its secrets.

Lexi gasped when the ground slid back to reveal the thick steel case beneath. Once the floor was completely out of the way, he pulled open the case to expose the weapons inside.

Numerous lethal weapons lay within, but he sought the sword in the center. The black, oplyx stone in the middle of the exquisitely crafted hilt shone as he twisted the long sword in his hands. He pulled the weapon halfway from its sheath to examine the honed blade.

It was as lethal as he remembered.

"Is that yours?" Lexi asked.

"It was my father's."

His father had spent countless hours sharpening and polishing this blade. And now that it was his, Cole would do the same. Numerous kings had held this sword in their hands, countless enemies had lost their lives to this sword, and Cole would take more of those lives tonight.

"Is it fae metal?" Lexi asked.

"No, but whoever started this rebellion will not survive this blade."

Not even during a rebellion would he use fae metal against his kind. Those rebelling against him would not survive, but he refused to break one of the most sacred rules amongst the fae.

These assholes might deserve it, but the dark fae did not wield fae metal against their own.

Of course, some didn't always respect the boundary. He was sure some of them were on that field now.

Cole dropped the sword on his back to the ground and slung his father's sword over his shoulder. He would go into battle wielding his father's weapon.

When he lifted his head, he discovered Lexi watching him with dread. Her sun-kissed skin was much paler than normal, and her full lower lip quivered before she stiffened it.

Bending, he clasped her cheeks in his palms. "I must go. Don't leave this palace."

"Go? What about battle armor?"

"I don't wear any."

"You can't go out there without armor."

"I never wear armor into a battle. It's too constraining, and I can't move as fast in it."

"Cole—"

"I've never worn it before, Lexi. I'm not about to start now. I have to go."

She looked about to argue more but closed her eyes and nodded. "Please, be careful."

"Always."

He kissed her forehead, her nose, and finally her lips before releasing her and walking away. As he crossed the room, the floor over the hidden cache slid back into place with a familiar click.

He didn't look back as he opened the door and left the room.

Lexi stared after Cole as he left the room. She didn't move until she heard the front door open and close. She was afraid if she moved before then, she would sprint after him and beg him not to go.

He's not wearing battle armor.

It didn't matter if he never wore it or not and had survived the war. He was going out there more exposed than most of the others on that field. *All* of him would be open and susceptible to an attack.

How could he not wear battle armor?

Lexi tried to rein in her terror before it got out of control. It was too late to stop him. He was already going out there, already charging out there to fight an enemy that should *never* have been an enemy.

What were these dark fae thinking to rise against him? Didn't they have enough troubles with the Lord and the war that just ended without having to create *more*? She would never understand some immortals or mortals.

Once the front door closed, she sprinted across the room. She stopped in front of the weapons that first caught her attention when the lights came on. Lexi examined them before removing a small sword and the leather belt hanging with it.

The sword was small enough she'd be able to wield it without tiring for a little while. It wasn't too heavy and would do some serious damage to anyone who tried to harm her.

Ignoring the sting of the healing burn on her palm from Orin, she slid the belt around her waist and buckled it before sheathing the sword. Lexi had no intention of leaving this palace. She wouldn't become a distraction to Cole, and despite all the training Brokk had been putting her through, she wouldn't last on that battlefield, but she wouldn't remain weaponless either.

Searching the walls, she discovered throwing stars hanging fifteen feet away. She smiled as her fingers itched for them. Unlike the sword that she had little practice with, she was good with throwing stars, and they wouldn't tire her out as fast as using a blade she'd never wielded before.

She ran over to the stars and started to reach for them. She froze when she saw the intricate designs marking the thick metal. The sword she'd selected was not welded from fae metal, but the stars were.

However, she wasn't fae. It wasn't against the rules for *her* to use fae metal against them. Of course, it probably wasn't the best idea for her to use

fae metal against the fae she might one day rule over, but it had been a worse idea for them to rise against Cole.

And she would make them pay for that if it became necessary.

She removed a brown satchel from a hook next to the stars and tied it to the other side of her waist. When she was sure it was secure and wouldn't interfere with the sword, she shoved the stars inside.

• • •

Gathered by the gates, the hundred or so soldiers of the king's army stood as they waited for Cole to arrive. Their horses pranced as the torches drew nearer and the noise of the approaching army, and those fleeing it, increased.

Shouts from the fae folk living in the homes on the hills resonated through the night as they fled toward the palace. Refugees from the town were already pouring through the side door next to the gates.

Sobs and screams filled the air. Women hugged their children as their husbands ushered them forward. Some of the single men, and a few of the husbands, asked for weapons to join against the rebellion.

Normally, Cole would not welcome untrained farmers, merchants, smiths, and artisans on the battlefield, but at one time, the king's army numbered much higher. That was before the Lord's war decimated their numbers. And now, he couldn't turn a willing fighter down.

The army marching against him would be filled with many of the same as what was gathering near his gates. There would also be skilled fighters amid the group, but not as many as before the war.

Cole fought with many of the king's men during the Lord's war, but his father was king. Their loyalty was with his father, and he had no idea how many now considered themselves loyal to *him*.

During the war, he'd saved many of these men's lives, but that didn't mean he could count on them not to stab him in the back. He had no way of knowing how long this rebellion had been in the works, who organized it, or whose loyalty might have been bought by the traitor. Any number of these men could also be a relative of the organizer or *organizers*.

He was about to ride into battle with his enemies ahead of him and countless more at his back. His skin prickled as he studied the men. Their faces all blended as their horses twisted and turned.

He was about to leave Lexi behind as he rode into battle. Though he hadn't said anything in front of her and Orin, he did find her silver markings odd. He recalled the silver mark he saw on her forehead after he'd nearly killed her while in the grip of a nightmare.

He'd blown it off then as having come from the bed when she fell out of it. But could he blow off another silver mark on her?

And how could she possibly be anything more than what she believed herself to be? She didn't have any powers.

Unfortunately, right now, he couldn't stop to figure out what was going on. He despised the idea of leaving her here alone, especially with all the questions churning in his mind, but the palace would keep her safe, and he had to stop this rebellion.

"Bring me a horse!" Cole shouted to the stable boy running between horses.

He'd much prefer to ride Torigon into this battle, but he left his steadfast mount at Lexi's manor. It was one more thing working against him at the moment.

More screams and shouts rolled down the hills as the fae fled their homes for the safety of the palace. Those cries echoed throughout the courtyard and rebounded off the palace walls, the houses in the bailey, and stables.

"Milord," Niall greeted as he rode up and stopped his mount in front of Cole.

Out of everyone here, he trusted Niall the most. They were the same age, and his father was once a general in Cole's father's army. When they were children, they played on top of hay bales together, ran through the fields, skipped rocks, shared dreams of being mighty warriors, and later trained in the art of war.

They spent countless nights together carousing with women, drinking, and fighting. Niall had saved his life nearly as many times as Cole saved him during the war. He was one of Cole's most trusted friends.

The stable boy ran up to him. He was holding the reins of a bay stallion who stood calmly by, as confusion ruled in the courtyard. The animal wasn't as large as Torigon, but his legs were in good shape, and he wouldn't shy away during the fight.

All the horses in the stables were battle tried and trained to withstand the noise and chaos sure to follow. That was what mattered most.

Grabbing the pommel, Cole swung himself onto the brown leather saddle and settled himself onto the horse's back. He seized the reins as he surveyed the men surrounding him.

He was about to find out who was loyal to him and who planned to stab him in the back. He nudged his horse and raised his voice to be heard over the cries of the innocent while he rode before his men.

"Destroy all those who rise against me but, if possible, leave the leaders of this rebellion to me. I will see to their deaths!"

A cheer went through the soldiers, and the horses stomped their feet in anticipation of the battle to come. Turning his horse's head, he rode up to the palace gates. When he gripped one of the bars, the gates sprang open.

As he rode through the gates, he pushed them further open so the rest of them could follow. He didn't bother to close them; they would do so on their own once all the men were through.

His horse's hooves thundered across the earth, eating up the ground as they galloped up the hills toward the approaching enemy. When he leaned over his horse's neck and urged the animal faster, the wind blew his hair back and plastered his clothes to him.

Unlike him, many of his men wore armor to keep them protected; the silver mesh and chains making up their armor rattled in the wind. The glow of the four moons illuminated the land and bathed it in a beautiful, silvery light.

When shadows jumped and swayed all around, the ones within him responded to their movements, swelling within him. He sensed the strength in the shadows surrounding him, but he didn't draw on them or release the shadows inside him. That was still his secret to keep and spring on the Lord when the time was right.

He kept waiting for an arrow or sword to pierce through his back, but so far, he wasn't feeling the sharp pain of betrayal. The fae still trying to flee the approaching traitors raced past him and toward the palace as the rebel army topped the crest of the next hill.

Cole was closing in on the fighters when the first arrow flew at him. But it did not come from the approaching army. No, as he'd suspected, there were traitors amongst his men too, and they wanted him dead.

The bolt whistled past his ear and struck the ground twenty feet in front of him. It quivered as it stood straight up from the earth. Shouts sounded from behind him, and when he glanced back, some of his men were closing in on one of their own.

A blow from one of his guards knocked the traitorous fae from his saddle. He disappeared beneath the pounding hooves of the horses surrounding him, but Cole knew he would not be the last enemy to come from behind.

Since he didn't have eyes in the back of his head, he would have to rely on those who were loyal to keep him safe. He turned back in the saddle and focused on the enemy galloping down the hill toward him.

Cole swung out with his sword and sliced the head from the first fae to reach him. Another arrow came from behind him. The whistling sound of it alerted his lycan senses that it was coming.

He turned in the saddle in time to avoid taking the bolt to his shoulder. Since none of the rebels had gotten past him yet, he knew it had come from another one of his men.

Then, he was surrounded by the enemy as they collided in the middle of a hill that became their battlefield. The clash of steel against steel resonated across the land; the shouts of men fighting and the screams of the injured and dying filled the night.

The scent of blood and horse sweat filled his nostrils, as did the rich aroma of the earth churning up beneath the horse's hooves. Warm blood splattered his face and clothes as he cut down one dark fae after another.

The sights and sounds of this battle would haunt his nightmares, but for now, he remained focused on one thing... surviving. He did not allow fear or pity to take him over, and he didn't hesitate as he delivered blow after blow to his enemy. He didn't know how many he killed outright and how many he maimed, but when this was over, none of the rebels would be left alive.

His horse's hooves pounded over bodies as they stomped them into the ground. Despite the noise, the blood, and the death, the animal never shied away or attempted to bolt.

Cole deflected the blade of one fae but missed the sword of another one. It split open his flesh as it sliced across his bicep, and blood spilled down his arm.

Spinning in his saddle, he was about to destroy his attacker when Niall's blade swung out and severed the man's head from his shoulders. Niall's black eyes shone with fury when they met Cole's, and blood dripped from his black hair.

Though he was pure dark fae, Niall was a little broader and heavier than most others. That came from years of honing his fighting skills.

Cole nodded his thanks to him, and Niall's grin revealed all his white teeth. And then, he was pushed back and swallowed by the sea of enemy racing between them.

Despite the sheer number of them, Cole didn't tire as he used his sword to cut them down. When a ball of fire shot at his head, he ducked and threw

up a hand to catch the flame in his palm. He had no idea where it had come from, but it was now his to wield.

Flipping his hand over, he flicked his wrist and flung the ball into the face of a dark fae charging at him. The man screamed, and his hands flew to his face. As they did so, Cole drove his sword into the man's heart.

With a savage shout, he sliced upward, cleaving the man in half from his chest through his head. Once his sword was free, he chopped off the fae's head to ensure his death, before twisting in the saddle to face the pounding hooves coming at him from behind.

He jerked his horse's reins to the side, and the horse instantly obeyed his command to twist away. The animal was fast and sure and managed to avoid being plowed into by the horse charging them. Cole recognized the attacker as one of his men.

The betrayal burned like acid in his throat, and as the horse raced toward him, Cole shifted his hold on his sword. This bastard would never expect what was coming at him.

When the man was close enough, Cole swung out with his free hand, and extending his claws, he embedded them under the fae's chin. He ripped the man from his horse.

The man kicked and made gurgling noises as his fingers tore into Cole's hand. With his sword still in hand, Cole gripped the man's shoulder and tore his head off. Retracting his claws, he palmed the head and threw it at the next fae coming at him.

It bounced off the man's forehead and sent him tumbling from the saddle. The horse continued toward them but veered away before it ran into Cole's horse. He aimed his horse at the fallen rider; the animal didn't hesitate before trampling him.

From somewhere further up the hill, a fire blazed to life. It whipped across the lush grass and down the hill toward him and a dozen other riders.

Cole almost laughed out loud as the fire encircled them. He was sure that whoever controlled the flames probably thought they'd intimidate him, but after what he endured during the trials, this fire was pathetic.

Kicking his feet free of the stirrups, Cole jumped from his horse's back and strode toward the flames. On the other side of the fire, he spotted Durin standing with Nissa and Fiadh, Aelfdane's brother and sister.

A smile curved his lips as he realized who had organized and was leading this rebellion. He would make them pay for their treachery.

As he stalked toward them, the three dark fae lifted their arms, and the flames leapt higher. The dark fae could control the elements, and they were using the air to whip the fire into an inferno, one that still did nothing to intimidate him.

If he stopped and took the time, he could take control of the fire. It would be tiring since there were three of them and they were powerful fae, but he could do it. He wouldn't waste the time or energy it would take.

Besides, he thought with a grim smile, these assholes think they have me cornered, and they're in for a big surprise.

Cole bellowed as he raced toward the three of them.

Lexi held her breath as Cole charged toward the flames. Blood splattered him, and his torn clothes were little more than rags as their remnants clung to his broad frame. The growing fire pushed the men trapped with him closer together.

The dark fae could control the elements, but someone else already controlled this fire. *Three* someone else's... or so that's what it looked like from her viewpoint.

She didn't know if Cole could wrest control away from them. She suspected he could, but it would take too much time or energy for him to do so.

As she watched him battle the enemy with unwavering strength and determination, she'd understood why the troubadours sang about his feats during the war. Why others whispered about his fighting skills and the legends of him were larger than life.

And he didn't fear the flames; every part of her froze as he ran toward them. He was so incredibly powerful but still killable.

He was almost to the fire when he sheathed his sword. She couldn't move; her hands ached from clutching them, and a scream lodged in her throat as, with his next steps, Cole transformed into a wolf. His powerful haunches bunched as he leapt into the air.

As the wolf flew above the conflagration, it twisted to avoid the inferno surging higher into the air. Soaring above the flames, fire licked at its fur but didn't catch as the wolf spun in midair.

The beautiful creature was so powerful and mesmerizing that Lexi forgot to breathe as the sword slid from his back and toppled to the ground on the other side of the fire. While the wolf was falling on the other side of the flames, his massive jaws snapped down on a fae man. Cole twisted and, landing on four feet, smashed the fae into the ground.

The man didn't move again.

"Miss?"

Lexi jumped when someone spoke from behind her. She spun away from the window to discover Amaris standing in the doorway of the empty room Lexi occupied. She'd searched the palace until she found a room she could enter that would give her a good view of the battle.

"Ye-yes?" Lexi whispered tremulously.

"Miss, why don't you come away from the window?"

"Call me Lexi."

"Lexi then, please come away from the window. You shouldn't watch this."

"No, I shouldn't, but I'm going to."

Lexi turned back to the window and rested her hands on the stone sill as she leaned out to watch. The growing flames and moonlight illuminated the bodies littering the field. Horses ran through and over those bodies while the injured tried to crawl away.

The blood soaking the ground had turned it from a vibrant green to a gruesome maroon. Horses were down amongst the fallen fae; their screams mingled with the cries of the wounded and dying.

She'd never heard such sounds before and hoped never to hear them again.

Her nails dug into the stone as one of the fae nearest Cole unleashed a dagger. It spun through the air before embedding in the wolf's shoulder. It had to hurt, but it didn't stop him from tearing the head off the fae he'd smashed into the ground.

• • •

Cole spit out Fiadh's head and spun on Durin and Nissa. *One down. Two more to go.*

"No!" Nissa screamed.

She lunged forward, but her fighters fell between them to keep her separated from Cole. He'd lost his clothes when he transformed, but he didn't care. All he cared about was destroying these fuckers.

"I'll kill you!" she shrieked.

Cole transformed, and as he rose, he ripped the dagger from his shoulder. A hot rush of blood poured down his back, soaking his flesh. As he turned the blade before him, he wasn't surprised to discover it was fae metal.

Hefting the weapon in his hand, he lifted his head and smiled at Nissa as the rebels charged at him. He didn't throw the blade at them; it would find its home in Nissa. He'd entered this battle without fae metal, but if one of his enemies were stupid enough to use a fae metal weapon against him and lose it to him, then it was only fair they got it back through their heart.

The charging rebels were almost to him when he sank Nissa's blade into the ground and knelt to rest his fingers on the earth. He drew forth the shadows surrounding him and smiled when they slid over his flesh; his attackers were nearly to him when he vanished, reclaimed the blade, cloaked it, and danced away before they arrived at where he'd been.

They gazed around in confusion as they skidded to a halt in the spot where he once stood. He didn't set the shadows within himself free; there were too many here who would report what they saw to the Lord if he did.

He'd done what any other dark fae could, but he'd cloaked himself in shadows far faster and more thoroughly than any of them. Not only that, with the amount of power he possessed, none of these assholes could see him. A dark fae stronger than another could see through their cloaking, but he was more powerful than anyone else in this realm.

Moving faster than a shadow fleeing the light, he reclaimed his father's sword and its sheath. Their eyes swung toward him as he lifted the sword, but it was only a couple of inches off the ground before it vanished too. He slid the sword into the sheath and swung it onto his back.

With the stealth of a spirit slipping through the night, he came up behind one of the rebels and plunged the blade straight through his heart. As the man went down, Cole caught the sword he'd been holding and turned it over.

The flames caught and reflected off the pristine metal forged by the hands of a dark fae. And the dark fae were the best weapons makers in all the realms. They were also the only ones who melded dark fae metal, which was exactly what this man held.

All of the rebels were wielding fae metal.

The betrayal of that was a worse sting than the rebellion. Even if it infuriated him, he could understand this uprising. Powerful men and women, who sought revenge for the death of their brother and who believed they should be the ones to lead, engineered it.

But using the only weapon that could kill a dark fae against their kind—this breaking of the unwritten rule—was something far worse.

And he would make them pay for it.

They couldn't see him, but the rebels saw the fae going down as blood spread across his chest. They spun and started coming toward him, but he darted to the side and away from them before they could arrive.

The rebels stopped moving and exchanged uneasy looks. Even if he weren't completely silent in his movements, the screams of the dying and the crackle of the flames would hide them. He sliced the head from one of the fae before driving the dagger through the heart of another.

"Unleash the arrows!" Durin commanded and pointed at the fae he'd just slain.

He didn't have enough time to get out of the way of a volley of arrows as many of the rebels pulled crossbows free from their sides and lifted them. Wrapping his arm around the throat of a rebel, Cole jerked his body around to use as a shield.

The twang of the arrows releasing was barely audible over the sounds of the battle, but they rang in Cole's ears. The fae struggled in his hold, but as the arrows pummeled his body, his resistance faded until he went limp in Cole's arms.

Continuing to hold the limp body, Cole ran at the men with the crossbows. From behind them, Niall and a group of the king's army came into view. Bloody and battered, they still released a bellow as they charged toward the rebels, Durin, and Nissa.

"The arrows are fae metal!" Cole shouted.

He threw down the dead dark fae and spun to wave his hand at the circle of fire that originally imprisoned him. Now that his enemies had become distracted and given up their control of the fire, he could seize it.

When the flames jumped out of the way, they created an opening that allowed more of his men to spill free. As soon as they emerged, Cole released the shadows to reveal himself.

It was *him* these traitorous bastards wanted most, and he would not let his men suffer and die while he remained hidden.

"No," Lexi whispered when the shadows peeled away to reveal Cole.

She couldn't take much more of this uncertainty. She couldn't stand to see him out there, surrounded by so many enemies and exposed to them again. Her fingers dug into the stone of the windowsill as she chewed on her bottom lip.

She'd hated not being able to see Cole, but she hated seeing him more.

"Miss," Amaris said. "I mean, Lexi. Please, come away from the window. It will be better for you."

When Amaris grasped her arm, Lexi pulled it away. "I have to go down there."

Lexi spun away from the window and ran from the room. Her booted feet barely hit the floor as she raced down the hallway. She had no idea what to do; she couldn't go onto the battlefield. She'd never survive and would probably get Cole killed if she did something foolish, but she couldn't stand there and watch anymore either.

Once on the stairs, she moved so fast she tripped over her feet and only managed to keep herself from plummeting to the bottom by throwing herself against the wall. Catching her balance, she paused for only a second before continuing down the stairs.

When she made it to the hall, she ran for the door as something outside released one of the most awful shrieks she'd ever heard. Lexi's head shot up as the sound came from all around them, but of course, she couldn't see through the ceiling to whatever lay beyond these walls.

A dragon hadn't made that noise; she'd become accustomed to their roars. This was something she'd never heard before; it was high-pitched, angry, and *hungry*.

The noise slowed her enough that Amaris caught up to her. The fae woman held her side as she panted for air.

"What was that?" Lexi breathed.

"There are many ravenous things in this land," Amaris said.

In her head, Lexi heard the echo of Cole's words from the first night they met... "There are all kinds of creatures in this land. Some are like the human realm, and others... well, others would give you nightmares for a week."

"The fight has probably awakened their hunger," Amaris said.

"What...?" Her question trailed off as another echoing screech reverberated over the land. It echoed off the walls until it came from all around them. "Cole."

She ran for the front door again.

"Wait!" Amaris shouted after her.

Lexi didn't hesitate before she threw open the door. She skidded to a halt when she saw she wasn't looking at the courtyard but thick woods. Despite the light of the moons, an impenetrable blackness obscured anything beyond the first row of tree trunks.

The chirrup of what sounded like crickets on steroids came from the trees. From behind one of the tree trunks, eyes the color of a rotten peach blinked at her.

Before she could decide what to do, the door ripped away from her hand and slammed shut. Lexi stepped away from it as it vibrated in its frame.

"That's not the way out," Amaris said as she skidded to a halt beside her. "You do *not* want to go out there."

"It looks the same as the main door, and I swear those stairs...."

She glanced back at the stairs that were duplicates of the ones she'd climbed after leaving the main hall behind. The ones she'd climbed with Cole before.

"It's easy to get turned around in here. Sometimes, I think the palace does it on purpose," Amaris said.

Lexi didn't doubt it, but she didn't think that's what happened now. She didn't understand why, but the palace protected her before, and it did pull the door from her.

It wanted her to see what was out there, or maybe it was hoping she would still think this was the main entrance and wouldn't go out there. She had no idea how the palace worked, but it had a mind of its own.

"This way," Amaris said and clasped her elbow.

She led the way around the stairs and down another hall before they turned a corner, and another double set of doors came into view. When she glanced at Amaris, the helot nodded, and Lexi sprinted for the exit.

Flinging the doors open, she nearly recoiled when the stench in the air hit her. It must not have drifted up to the room she was in before, but down here, it reeked of blood and death as well as the rich aroma of churned-up earth.

Normally, that last part wasn't an unpleasant scent, but it made her stomach turn when mingled with the other aromas. The air also held the odor of something else, something feral and rotten. Something she'd never encountered before.

Another screech drew her attention to the sky as a massive bird-like thing swept into view. Its enormous, bat-like wings briefly obscured one of the moons. Designed to tear the flesh from its victims, it had a long, pointed nose.

Is that a pterodactyl?

No, it can't be.

But it looked so much like one that, for a second, she wondered if she'd stepped back in time. However, there were some differences between this thing and the long-dead dinosaur. Like this thing was a vivid red, but then perhaps the dinosaur was red too.

Bones didn't exactly reveal the color of things, or maybe they did. She wasn't an archeologist, but she was looking at something ancient. Something that had never walked or flown in the human realm.

This was something straight out of the shadow realms as it opened its mouth to reveal hundreds of razor-sharp teeth the size of her hand.

"It's a craz," Amaris whispered. "They usually stay in the caves of Wright Mountain, where they feast on the wild goats. The battle must have drawn them out."

As she spoke, two more vicious-looking things flew into view and dove toward the field. The fae below scattered to get out of the way, but one of them wasn't fast enough.

The craz's powerful beak clamped down on his upper body, and the man's legs kicked in the air as the craz soared upward. Its throat worked like a pelican consuming a fish as it gulped the fae down.

The dark fae, who'd fled into the courtyard for protection, screamed as they threw up their hands and ran for shelter. Many of them ran for the stables while others fled into the homes of the king's soldiers.

She almost shouted at them to come to the palace but bit the words back. She had no idea who any of these immortals were or if she could trust them. Inviting them into Cole's home was probably a horrible idea and one that Cole, and probably the palace, would not take kindly to.

"Shit," Lexi whispered as more of them flew into view.

Her gaze found Cole on the field as he battled through the men trying to destroy him. He had to know these monsters were here, but he didn't look up as another rocketed down to claim another victim.

Another round of arrows launched at him. Cole spun in time to deflect many of them with his father's sword while dodging the others with a fluid grace none of the others possessed. Though none of the arrows hit him, she saw what they'd truly intended to do with those bolts... distract him.

"No!" she screamed as half a dozen dark fae charged at him from behind.

Cole spun and took down three of them. He ducked back from a fourth who lunged at him, but the fifth had come up behind him. The steel of the fae's sword glinted in the firelight as Cole spun toward him, but he wasn't in time to stop the fae's blade from plunging into him.

The blade pierced through Cole's shoulder and burst out the other side. Whatever it hit in there caused his nerve endings to send a command he did not issue as his hand went lax, and he released his sword. It hit the ground as the fae twisted the blade within him.

Cole gritted his teeth as, instead of trying to tear himself free of the sword as the fae expected, he pushed his way forward and toward the fae. As he moved, the blade cut through sinew and muscle while plunging deeper into his body.

The man was so shocked that Cole was impaling himself, he stood and gawked at him. When he looked away, Cole knew he was contemplating releasing the sword and running, but it was already too late.

His claws extended, and with one swipe, he cut the fae's head from his shoulders. Others ran toward him as he gripped the sword handle and tore it free.

It was made of fae metal, but he didn't hesitate before turning it on his attackers. With one hand, he swung the sword at the fae charging toward him, disemboweling one and cutting the hand from another before the others jumped back.

His dominant hand remained unmoving at his side, but he'd spent years training with both hands and was as good with his left hand as he was with his right. Another screech from above drew the fae's attention to the skies as the craz soared into view.

Cole didn't look up. The creatures were hunting, and they had plenty to feast on down here. Instead, he used his enemy's distraction to throw the sword that had impaled him into the fire and retrieve his father's sword. He'd secured Nissa's dagger in the sheath for his sword by plunging it into the side to keep it in place.

When one of the craz plummeted from the sky and streaked toward them, the fae closest to him turned and ran. Behind them, Durin mounted his horse as more fae turned and started to flee from the malicious birds.

With his weapons secured, Cole finally looked up to discover nearly a hundred craz crowding the sky and choking out the moonlight. Nissa turned and started to run too.

Cole shifted his hold on his sword and pulled the dagger from his sheath. Once it was free, he sheathed his sword.

He could not let her and Durin escape. They would only try to regroup and continue the rebellion if they did. Without them as leaders, this uprising would come to a fast and bloody end. If one of them survived to lead, it could continue for weeks or months.

There was no way he would allow the loss of life that would result.

A craz dove at him as he sprinted after his enemies. When it landed before him and opened its mouth, he shifted the dagger into his other hand. The feeling was starting to return, and his fingers closed around the dagger's hilt.

Without missing a step, Cole lifted a lost sword from the ground and plunged it straight down the craz's gullet. The animal choked, but he didn't see what it did next as he sprinted past it.

Nissa climbed onto her horse and gathered her reins. Most of her guards had fled from the craz, but some remained. A few turned toward him as he approached.

Cole ducked beneath the first sword arcing toward him and swung up with the dagger. It plunged into the man's solar plexus before Cole ripped it free. The fae grasped at the wound as he staggered back, but more fell in to take his place. And they all wielded weapons made of fae metal.

When another swung a sword at him, Cole blocked the arc with the forearm of his still-healing arm. The metal sliced through his flesh and embedded in muscle. He bit back a shout as he used his arm to keep the fae from tearing his sword free.

Cole stuck the dagger into the fae's belly, grasped the sword's handle, and jerked it free. He swung the blade out in time to clash with the swords of more rebels. Over their shoulders, he saw Niall thundering across the ground with his sword raised high.

Behind him, more of the king's army closed in on the others, but as they encircled the leaders, the craz descended. Some of the king's men were plucked straight from their horse's backs; others managed to avoid the creatures as they clashed with the rebels.

Cole yanked the dagger free of the fae's gut and, lowering his shoulder, attempted to charge through the ten fae who remained. He used the sword to block their lethal blows, elbowed them out of the way, pushed them aside, and punched to the best of his ability.

They swarmed over him like locusts, kicking and stabbing as he deflected one sword after another. He was determined to make it through

this even if he couldn't see beyond their barricade.

And as he was about to break free, fiery pain lanced across his nerve endings.

One blade had gotten through to find its mark.

Throughout all his battles, he'd endured countless blows, cuts, gashes, and slices to his body. He'd been stabbed, burned, and buried alive beneath the sand of the trials.

But he'd never felt pain like that of fae metal piercing through his muscle and bone to embed deep in his heart. The organ lumbered to beat around the intrusive blade as the fae who stabbed him bared his teeth in a twisted smile.

"That was a short reign, *milord*," he spit the word "milord" as if it were a foul taste on his tongue.

Cole grinned back at him as he leaned forward and plunged the dagger into the fae's heart. The man's eyes widened; a gurgled sound issued from him as blood bubbled out of his mouth.

Cole punched the man in the face, knocking him away from the sword. He didn't grasp the handle to rip the blade out as he staggered forward and went down.

"Oh no," Amaris whispered before gripping Lexi's arm. "Come, we must get you out of here."

Lexi pulled her arm free of Amaris's hold. "No."

"Miss... Lexi. You shouldn't be here when the council arrives to claim the palace. They won't... they won't appreciate your presence here."

Becca really wouldn't appreciate it, but Lexi didn't care what they wanted as she watched Cole go down. She'd never experienced such terror and sorrow as a steel vice gripped her heart and squeezed until she was sure she'd go to her knees as Cole had.

But she couldn't do that. He needed her to remain strong, and she would.

"The council is not coming in here," Lexi stated.

"With the king dead, the council has a right to the palace."

"He's not dead!" Lexi retorted.

When Amaris recoiled, Lexi regretted the harshness of her words. But he *wasn't* dead. He would *not* die.

"Lexi," Amaris said tenderly. "I know you aren't of our world, but a dark fae cannot survive fae metal through the heart. And that sword was fae metal."

But a lycan can. Or at least she hoped they could. Brokk was half vampire, and he'd survived when he took a fae sword through the heart; Cole would too.

If she could get him off the battlefield. The others would all think him as good as dead. Some might try to retrieve his body, but with everything going on out there, not many of them would risk their lives for what they believed was a dead man.

Amaris rested her hand on Lexi's arm again. "Lexi—"

"I have to go."

Except she didn't turn and flee into the palace like Amaris wanted. Instead, she ran out the door and into the courtyard. If she somehow survived this, Cole would kill her, but she couldn't leave him out there.

The others would all count him out, but not her.

Sprinting across the open courtyard, Lexi grasped the reins of a large, gray horse that had trotted back in with some of the other riderless animals.

She'd homed in on the one least covered with blood, grasped its reins, and vaulted onto its back as her mind raced and her heart hammered.

Cole has a blade through his heart!

And so did Brokk.

She kept reminding herself of this as time crawled by. If Cole survived the blade through his heart, the longer he was out there, the more vulnerable he was and the more likely he was to die.

Seconds became hours as all the minute details around her stood starkly out. The earth and blood scent of the battle became so acute, she could taste them both. The screams of the dying faded as the rapid beat of her pulse drowned them out.

She turned the horse toward the open side door that the horses, and some of the injured had returned through. The main gates remained locked, and she suspected the palace wouldn't open them for her or the council.

She didn't want them to open anyway. She would get to Cole, but she couldn't leave those inside the palace vulnerable to an attack. That side door was her only way out.

"Lexi, no!" Amaris shouted after her as she dug her heels into the horse's side.

The small sword and throwing stars bounced against her sides as she nudged the horse into a gallop. Its hooves thundered across the earth as she neared the small side door. When she was still twenty feet away, it started to close.

It didn't surprise her. The palace had protected her against Becca and whatever lay in those woods. It was seeking to protect her now, but she would not have it.

"NO!" she shouted, and for a second, the door hesitated, but then it continued to close.

Lexi leaned over the horse's neck as it galloped faster. She would crash into that door before she stopped, something the palace seemed to realize as the closing door slowed before swinging open again.

Then she was going through it. The door brushed her side but didn't knock her from the horse as she raced onto the battlefield. Most of the fleeing civilian fae had already arrived at the safety of the palace; the ones still fleeing now were fighters.

The wind tore at her hair and plastered her clothes against her as the horse flew across the ground. A craz landed in front of them and released a

hideous shriek. The horse leapt to the side as it twisted away from the monster.

The sudden motion nearly unseated her, but years of riding had made her capable of handling most anything when it came to horses. She righted herself and regained control of the horse as it danced away from the craz.

The glow of the fires played over the monstrous beast, illuminating its leathery flesh and yellow eyes. It was revolting and determined to eat them.

When the craz lunged for them, Lexi slid her hand into her pocket and removed one of the skin-melting potions she'd taken from Sahira's stash. She ignored the twinge of discomfort that came when she shifted the reins into her burned hand.

She steadied the horse and threw the vial as the craz came at them with its jaws hanging open. The vial burst in its mouth before its jaws clamped around it.

The creature screeched hideously, but she didn't look back as she steered the horse toward where she last saw Cole. And then, she topped a rise in the earth and spotted him on the battlefield.

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Cole shoved aside another dark fae as he strained to get at Durin and Nissa. He clenched his teeth against the agony of the blade in his heart as every movement caused it to shift and cut deeper.

Fuck! He inwardly snarled and nearly went to his knees when someone stumbled back and hit the hilt of the sword.

Durin and his men were trying to fight their way through Niall and some craz. Nissa's men were struggling to get her free of the king's men and the craz. He used his claws to decapitate a dark fae who ran at him before plunging the dagger into the heart of another.

He nearly went down again but managed to catch himself by grabbing the arm of Nissa's man. The blade of a sword whistled through the air, and though he couldn't see it, a breeze cooled his cheek as it arced toward him.

He swung his head to the side in time to avoid losing an eye. The blade slicing across his temple spilled more of his blood. He didn't think he had much left in him to lose.

The craz above screeched excitedly as they dove out of the sky. With their talons fully extended, they impaled their victims into the ground and picked their skin away like crows on carrion. He was about to hammer his fist into another fae's chest when a craz crashed into the man's side and tore him away to expose *Nissa*.

Cole sneered as he lunged forward. His claws extended, and fangs filled his mouth as the lycan sought to break free. Unsure of how much more damage it would cause him if he transformed, he suppressed the impulse.

Nissa scrambled to get on her horse, but she wasn't fast enough. Grasping her shoulder, Cole yanked her back as one of her men sank a sword into his ribs.

He grunted as it pierced through bone and embedded in his lungs. He tried to draw in air, but the sharp pang the motion caused made it impossible.

Releasing Nissa, he twisted as much as he could with the fae still holding the sword, seized the man's throat, dug his claws into it, and tore it out. When the man staggered away, he pulled the sword with him.

Cole winced as the sword scraped across his ribs before tearing free of his flesh. Blood filled his lungs while he gasped for breath. He didn't know how much longer he could remain standing, but he would take his enemies down before he fell.

He lunged for Nissa. This time, when he got his hands on her, he didn't let go. Pulling his hand back, his fingers clamped around her throat, and he sank the dagger into her heart.

Nissa's mouth parted, and her hands shook as she clawed at Cole's face. Cole smiled as he twisted the blade deeper.

"Fuck you," she spat, and blood sprayed his face. "You're already dead too."

Cole didn't reply as he yanked the dagger free. Blood gushed forth, and Nissa's hands went to her chest as she sank to her knees. Cole turned to fend off the rest of the men protecting her, but they'd already turned to flee when their mistress fell.

More were fleeing the craz and the king's guard as they hacked their way through the rebels. He smiled grimly when Niall cleaved Durin's head from his shoulders. It rolled across the ground before a craz dove down to swallow it.

And just like that, what remained of the rebellion fell apart as its leaders perished. The fighters turned and fled.

The craz killed most of the ones who the king's guard didn't take down, but some fled over the hills. He would have to send men after them, but

first, he had to get off this field.

The blade in his heart shifted when he staggered toward Niall, who was carving his way through what remained of the rebellion. He was almost to Cole and extending a hand toward him when a craz crashed onto Niall's back and dragged him from his horse.

Niall and the craz vanished as they rolled across the ground, with Niall battling the craz as they rolled over a hill. Cole released the dagger as he stretched a hand over his back for his sword.

A scream rushed up his throat and clogged there as the movement sent a wave of blackness across his eyes. Straining against passing out, Cole pulled his sword free. `

He panted for air as sweat ran down his forehead and into his eyes. He didn't dare try to wipe it away; he'd probably pass out if he did.

Cole stepped toward where Niall vanished before his legs gave out, and he went to his knees. His sword fell at his side as he remained kneeling with his head bowed as he tried to draw air into his brutalized lungs.

With thick, fumbling fingers, he clawed at the handle of the blade in his chest as the blood seeping around it soaked his chest and dripped onto the ground. He no longer cared if removing it would cause him to bleed more; he couldn't have the thing poking and digging into him every time he moved.

No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get it out. Giving up on trying to remove it, he lifted his head and gazed at the spreading fire as it leapt higher. Fae and horses fled from the slaughter of the craz as more of the birds dove from the sky.

Lexi. I have to get back to her.

He dug his fingers into the ground as he pushed himself to his feet. He couldn't die out here on this field and leave her behind, not after what happened with the Lord and Malakai.

They would tear her apart.

The possibility of that happening propelled him forward a couple of steps toward the closest horse. Grasping the reins and the pommel, he tried to pull himself onto the saddle, but the blade in his heart made climbing onto the horse difficult.

He released the reins. Teeth clenched, he smashed his fist onto the hilt of the sword again and again.

He grunted, and blood sprayed from his mouth as the blade pierced out his back, and he buried it to the hilt in his chest. Clinging to the saddle, he swayed as he tried not to pass out.

Sweat dripped off his face, his vision blurred, and the horse leaned to the side as he slumped against it. But he didn't pass out, and once he could see clearly again, he could move better now that only the hilt of the sword protruded from him.

Better able to maneuver, he grasped the reins and started to pull himself up when a craz hit the side of the horse. The animal screamed and lurched forward as the craz snapped at it. Rearing, the horse spun and hit Cole.

Flung back by the blow, Cole hit the ground and crashed into a couple of bodies before coming to a halt. The impact knocked the air from him.

He labored to inhale oxygen into his already brutalized lungs as his mind spun and weakness crept through his muscles. His fingers had gone numb, and he couldn't feel his feet, but it wasn't enough to keep him down.

His fingers sank into the blood-drenched earth as he pushed himself to his knees. The thud of something hitting the ground drew his attention as a craz landed three feet away from him.

The creature released a screeching bellow that sounded like a cross between a lion and an irate hawk. As it charged toward him, Cole reached for his sword again. It didn't matter if he could breathe or not; he'd carve this thing to pieces.

It opened its mouth to reveal its flesh-rending teeth as it raced toward him on its two, stork-like legs. He managed to pull the sword free and rise as he braced himself for the impact of the nearly two-hundred-pound creature.

It was nearly to him when it released another screech that could shatter glass. And then, it began to dissolve even as it tried to take flight again.

Its skin sloughed off the side of its face, falling to the ground in a puddle that bubbled as it dissolved. Its wings flapped like a butterfly with broken wings, and it didn't get an inch off the ground before collapsing.

From behind it, a large gray horse came into view as it raced toward him. What remained of his heart lurched when he spotted the red flowing around the horse's neck. He couldn't see her face behind the horse's head, but he'd recognize that shade of red anywhere.

Lexi.

Cole opened his mouth to tell her to leave, but she was already dismounting and running toward him. As she did, another craz landed and ran at her. She spun and threw a vial at it. When the contents exploded over the creature, its skin started to boil before peeling away.

Her long hair, having worked its way free of its braid, whipped around her face as the spreading fire ate the land with deafening intensity. As the dark fae scrambled to escape the battle and the craz, there was no one left to put out the fire. And he certainly wasn't in any condition to do it.

The light of the flames playing over Lexi's face emphasized not only her beauty but also the steely determination etched onto her features.

"Get out of here," he hissed when she arrived at his side. It was difficult to get words out when he could still barely get air into his lungs, and every movement caused the sword to dig deeper into his heart.

"Not without you."

"You shouldn't have left the palace."

"I know."

He hadn't expected the acknowledgment on her part, and for a second, it knocked some of his anger away. He lifted his head to survey the battlefield full of dead men, horses, and craz. Blood, death, and fire consumed the land, and she should *not* be anywhere near any of it.

"We have to go!" she shouted to be heard over the fire.

She clasped his hand and draped his arm around her shoulders. Cole refused to let her see how much agony he was in or the weakness seeping through his body. He steadied his wobbly legs as she led him to the horse.

The animal's head was held high; its ears flicked as it took in the noises around it. It looked ready to bolt from the spreading fire but held its ground.

She leaned him against the saddle as Niall burst through the smoke and raced up to them. Blood streaked his face, and ugly gashes marred his shoulder and left arm. Lexi pulled out another vial and prepared to throw it at him before Cole seized her arm.

"Not Niall," he told her. "You can trust him."

She frowned at him but put the vial away as Niall skidded to a halt beside them. His breath came in rapid pants; he was bloody and bruised but still quick and sure.

His eyes fell on the sword in Cole's chest, and his eyebrows shot up before he met Cole's gaze again. If there was ever a time to try to kill him, it was now when he was weakened and more focused on getting Lexi to safety, but Niall would not try to do it.

"Durin is dead," Niall said.

"So are Nissa and Fiadh," Cole said. "The rebellion's leaders have fallen, and the remaining traitors are running. When we've had time to regroup, send men to hunt down the rebels and destroy them."

He would do it himself, but if they survived this field and made it back to the palace, he wouldn't have much left in him for commands.

"It will be done," Niall vowed before glancing at Lexi.

"Keep her alive," Cole commanded.

"I will."

"Get on the horse," Cole said to Lexi.

"After you," she said.

"Lexi," he growled.

"If you're sitting behind me, you could fall off. I should be behind you. I can avoid the sword."

"And you're going to be strong enough to stop me from falling?"

Lexi lifted her chin as she glared at him. "I made it this far, and I'll do whatever it takes to get you safely back to the palace."

The fire in her eyes eased his dread over having her standing on this field. She *would* do whatever it took to protect him, and she'd made it farther than many others. What amazed him most was she'd done it for *him*.

He knew she loved him, but many immortals and mortals loved another and wouldn't risk their lives for them. Not his Lexi, though; she was brave, selfless, and she loved him as deeply as he loved her.

He clasped her chin and gave it a small squeeze before gathering what little remnants of strength he still had to sheath his sword and grab her waist. With shaking arms, he lifted her off the ground and onto the horse.

She was still sputtering protests when he grasped the reins and pulled himself onto the horse behind her. It was the most awkward and uncomfortable way he'd ever settled onto a horse.

He almost released the lines and fell when he jarred the sword in his chest, but willpower and Niall grasping his foot to push him further up finally got him settled in the saddle. Stars erupted before his eyes as he hissed in a breath.

"Cole?" Lexi asked.

"I'm fine," he grated out.

When he was sure he wouldn't pass out, Cole lifted her a little and settled her on his lap the best he could before grasping the reins.

"I'll lead the way," Niall said.

It was then Cole saw that he'd found another horse and was already sitting on it.

Did I black out for a little bit?

If he had, he couldn't let it happen again. He had to get Lexi safely back to the palace, and if he fell off the horse, she would stop for him. She was not going to leave him out here, and while it only made him love her more, he wouldn't allow her to die because of him.

It took everything Cole had to stay on the horse as Niall led the way across the field. The rebels had scattered; all that remained were their bodies and the craz who feasted on them. More of the craz circled overhead, diving toward the remains and the allure of the fleeing fae.

Cole tried not to slump against Lexi, she would only worry if she realized how weak he was, but as the horse galloped across the earth, the sword shifted inside him each time it landed. It was getting more difficult to maintain an appearance of strength while his heart was shredding.

She took the reins from him and, leaning forward in the saddle, guided the horse with the expertise of one born to ride. She steered clear of the obstacles in their way while also managing to throw two more vials of melting potion at the craz.

Niall hacked his way through a few more craz as Lexi removed a throwing star from the pouch at her side. She whipped it side-armed at a craz diving toward them. The weapon shot into the craz's open mouth and knocked the monster on its ass.

He'd known she was training with Brokk, but he hadn't realized how much she learned while he was going through the trials. He'd fought with men who'd trained for years and weren't as courageous as her on the battlefield.

He slid his arm around her waist and slipped another star from the pouch. He briefly admired the fae metal before flinging it at another craz. The movement pulled at his flesh and spilled more blood, but he reached into the bag and pulled out another one.

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Though he tried to hide it, Lexi could tell Cole was growing increasingly weak as he slumped against her more and more. Still, he managed to throw another star that knocked the craz descending toward them off its target.

Blood bloomed across the front of the bird's chest as it spiraled away from them and the closed gates they approached. They had to get through the door and into the bailey; she had to get Cole to safety.

She focused on those gates while Cole and Niall fought off the craz who weren't occupied by eating the dead. As they neared them, the door also

came into view, and she breathed a sigh of relief when she saw it remained open.

Digging her heels into the horse's side, she urged it faster as their safety loomed closer and closer. Twenty feet... Fifteen... At ten, she was certain a craz would crash into their back or the door would slam shut.

The palace wouldn't shut them out, but some didn't want Cole to rule. Would the palace open the door for them again if it was closed?

Five feet...

Come on. Come on....

And then they were flying through the open side door and into the courtyard. Many sought shelter when the craz arrived, but it was still crowded with dark fae seeking refuge from the battle and craz.

The injured lay on the ground, and survivors ran around as they tended to them. Her horse's hooves dug up the earth when she pulled up on the reins. The animal skidded to a halt a few feet from the palace stairs.

When Cole shifted behind her, she grasped his forearm as he slid to the side and nearly went down. Kicking her feet free of the stirrups, she leapt off the horse and landed beside him. Cole kept his shoulders back as she wrapped her arm around his waist and led him toward the steps.

"Let me help," Niall offered.

"No!" Lexi snapped. "Stay away."

Her free hand found the last remaining star in her pouch. She didn't care if Cole said she could trust Niall and that he'd helped get them off the battlefield. She didn't trust anyone other than herself around Cole right now. He was far too vulnerable.

"Easy," Cole whispered in her ear. Others might think it was a tender, loving gesture, but she knew it was because he couldn't hold his head up anymore. "I told you, you can trust Niall."

"Can you?" she retorted.

His blue eyes swam with pain when he turned his head toward her. Staring into those eyes, etched with lines that weren't there before and surrounded by dark shadows, she was more terrified now than when she was on the field.

"Yes," Cole whispered.

Lexi eased her grip on the star and didn't protest when Niall draped Cole's other arm around his shoulders. The palace doors opened when they arrived at the top of the stairs.

Amaris hovered nervously in the hallway. Her dark eyes were wide as she stared at Cole. He was a bloody, awful mess, pale and barely standing, but any other dark fae would have been dead by now. The fact he was still breathing was mind-blowing; that he was still *walking* was a miracle.

"Can I get you anything?" Amaris asked as she rushed over to Niall's side.

"No," Lexi said.

Cole said she could trust Niall, but she wouldn't trust anyone else with his life. Traitors surrounded them in this realm; she liked Amaris, but she'd be damned if she let anyone else do anything with Cole.

Cole's weight pulled more and more against her shoulders and strained her back as they ascended the stairs. By the time they finally made it to his rooms, his feet dragged across the ground, and when they laid him on the bed, he was unconscious.

Lexi tried not to panic as she stared at his unmoving form. Had it been pure willpower driving him this far?

Is he dead?

"Stay away from him!" Lexi commanded in a far too high-pitched voice as Niall leaned over Cole.

She wasn't exactly portraying strength by nearly shrieking at him, but she couldn't control the gallop of her heart or the terror spiking her adrenaline to epic levels. Then Cole inhaled a rattling, wet breath that didn't bode well for his health but told her that he was still alive.

That knowledge didn't ease her stress. He was alive but so vulnerable, and she was the only one she trusted to protect him. She would make sure he stayed alive.

The dark fae rose slightly to study her. He lifted his hands, but she saw the hostility in his black eyes.

"He's my king and my friend," Niall said. "He's safe with me."

He's the love of my life, and I don't care what you say.

But she held the words back. None of the dark fae cared about love or feelings. They respected control and power. To them, love was a weakness.

"I'll take care of him," she said.

"You'll need my help."

"Stand outside the doors and guard them. Do *not* let anyone else in here."

A muscle twitched in his cheek; he didn't like taking orders from her, but when his eyes returned to Cole, his stance relaxed a little.

"He is my king. I cannot leave him with you," Niall said. "How do I know *you* won't kill him."

Lexi was stunned he would consider such a thing. "I am to be your queen. You will do as I say."

His eyes narrowed as Lexi's shoulders went back.

"How do I know you are to be my queen? He has not proposed to you."

She had no power over Niall and certainly wasn't strong enough to force him from the room, but she wouldn't back down either. However, his words reminded her how tenuous her position in this world was.

She was alive and here because Cole had brought her here, and this man respected that; many others wouldn't.

"He brought me here. How many other women has he done that with?" she demanded.

The way his eyes darted away gave her the answer she'd sought.

"I went onto that field to get him. I saved him. I would *never* hurt him, and he'd expect you to listen to me," she said.

The irritation on his face made her reconsider her bravado, but when his attention turned back to Cole, his eyes softened. Cole was more than a king to this man; Niall also cared about him.

She still preferred not to have anyone else near him when he was this vulnerable.

"I can help you save him," Niall said.

Lexi wasn't sure anyone could help her save him. At least not without the aid of a witch, and Sahira was hunting for the harrow stone with Brokk. The only other witches she knew were at the new marketplace, and it would take too much time for her to get there.

Sahira had more potions at the manor, some of them must be healing potions, but she couldn't leave Cole alone with another dark fae. No matter how much Cole trusted this man, she couldn't leave them alone while Cole was so weak.

"You can help me by guarding the door," she said. "I'll let you know if I need anything more."

Niall's nostrils flared, and his jaw jutted out, but he stepped away from the bed. Lexi didn't breathe easy until he left the room. She hurried after him and stood in the bedroom doorway as he made his way across the sitting room, opened the door to the hall, and paused there.

He looked over his shoulder at her. "I'm not leaving this hall."

"Good. Don't let anyone in here."

Although, if the palace didn't want anyone in this room, they wouldn't get in unless they battered down the door or set it on fire. But she would take all the extra help she could get to protect Cole, even if it was from the other side of the door.

When he closed the door, Lexi ran across the room and clicked the locks into place. Knowing it wasn't enough, she retrieved a chair from the corner and wedged it under the door handle before rushing back to Cole's room.

He lay on his side with the sword blade still sticking out of his chest. It took everything she had not to rip the weapon out of him, but she couldn't do that without some supplies first.

And then there was the other wound, the one through the side of his chest. She didn't have the time to examine it more closely, but it had to be tended and would require help to heal.

He'd survived when almost all other fae would have already perished, but that injury, on top of his copious blood loss, could still be the end of him. She had to get her hands on some healing potions, but to do so, she would have to leave him here, alone and unprotected.

She stepped back to recheck the chair and door. Neither had moved.

If she went fast enough, she could be back here in mere minutes. But what if she couldn't find anything to help?

That was a chance she had to take. She ran over to the bed, and with tender care, she removed his father's sword from his back. Smoothing his hair from his forehead, she kissed him tenderly.

"I'll be back soon. I love you."

Lexi couldn't look back at him as she ran to the portal he'd left open; if she did, she wouldn't leave. And if she didn't go, he would probably die.

Though her heart screamed at her to turn around and go back, Lexi kept moving. She plunged into the portal that would take her home.

When she burst out the other side, she half expected Orin to be still hanging out, stirring a pot of spaghetti sauce, but the kitchen was empty. She was grateful for that; the last thing she needed was to deal with him right now too.

Lexi flew across the kitchen toward the cabinets where Sahira kept her potions.

"Orin?"

Orin turned away from the closed, metal door when his brother, Varo, spoke. Sometimes, Orin forgot what his brother looked like now, and it would shock him to see Varo again. This was one of those times.

Varo had always been slender, but since the war, he'd lost more weight. His high cheekbones stood out starkly against his pale skin, and the dark circles under his eyes made his white-blue eyes vividly stand out. The war hadn't been kind to his half light fae sibling, and the aftermath was less so.

"Varo," he greeted with a smile.

Varo's eyes shifted to the cell, and a line appeared across his forehead. "What are you doing here?"

Orin jerked his head toward the cell. "I have some questions for our inmate."

"What could you possibly have to ask Del?"

"There are some things I'm interested in learning about his daughter."

"You know his daughter?"

"Yes. She's Cole's mate."

Varo's black eyebrows rose into his hairline. "Cole has a mate?"

At the same time, Del asked from behind him. "What did you say?"

Orin ignored the vampire as Varo glided closer.

"Cole has a mate?" Varo asked again.

"Yes. Apparently, that lycan part of him is stronger than we believed."

"How is he?"

"He's Cole. Stubborn, single-minded, and judgmental. He's also king of the dark fae."

Varo stopped walking. During one of his visits back to this realm, he'd told Varo about their father's death and that Cole would face the trials, but the revelation Cole had survived them was new to Varo.

"He survived," Varo whispered and closed his eyes. "That is good."

"Yes, it's all freaking fantastic, but we've moved on from that. We have more important things to discuss now."

Varo opened his eyes. "What have you done, Orin?"

"Me?" Orin feigned offense as he rested his hand over his heart. "I haven't done anything."

Varo wasn't at all swayed by his protest of innocence. Orin rolled his eyes and turned back to the door. Del's eyes remained a vivid shade of red as he glowered at him.

"It's *his* daughter who's done something." Orin pointed a finger at Del. "So, we're going to have a little discussion, aren't we, Del?"

The vampire's face remained stony. This wasn't going to be easy.

Orin flashed his best smile at the vamp, who didn't react at all, which wasn't surprising as it usually worked best on women. However, he was a charmer, and he didn't like it when those charms didn't melt others as they should.

Orin continued to smile as he approached the door. "Your daughter is a very interesting young woman, Del. It's been a pleasure getting to know her better."

And pulling on her heart strings to manipulate her into doing what I wanted, but he kept that to himself.

Del didn't reply.

"She has my brother twisted around her lovely, little finger. It's quite an interesting thing to see. I never expected anything like it from Cole. But then, I'm sure you always thought the same about him as you know him well. Did you ever think he'd fall for an immortal who is half human and half vampire or for *any* woman?"

Nothing.

Orin decided to give him a little nudge, even if it was just to piss Del off and more for his amusement. "Did you ever think the man who led you through the war would fuck your daughter?"

The tiniest tic of a muscle in his cheek was the only reaction Del had to those words.

"I mean, you fought with him in the war," Orin continued. "You were one of his most trusted generals. From all accounts, the two of you were close, and he pays you back by crawling into bed with your *daughter*."

"What are you trying to do?" Varo inquired.

"Nothing. I like pushing his buttons."

Del's eyes narrowed. "You're nowhere near the man your brother is."

"Ouch!" Orin cried as he slapped his hands over his heart. "That stings. Oh, wait, no, it doesn't."

He was well aware that when it came to Cole and him, most found him lacking. His older brother was bigger, stronger, more powerful, and far

more reliable. He was also *far* more boring, so Orin was happy with being considered "inferior."

Besides, he'd proven most of them wrong during the war. He'd hated standing against his father and brothers, but he made a name for himself on those fields. His side lost, but he'd become such a thorn in the Lord's side that the twisted prick was still trying to hunt him down.

He took great pride in that.

"But you sure don't like hearing about your friend, someone you trusted, screwing your daughter or that a dark fae is banging her," Orin continued. "A dark fae with a *lot* of previous sexual partners, as all dark fae have. I bet you saw Cole go through a *vast* number of women during the war. And now our brother is going through your daughter, or should I say"—he made a circle with his left index finger and thumb before shoving his right index finger through it a few times—"*into* her."

"That's enough," Del snarled, and his fangs flashed in the dim light of the nearby torches.

Orin's smile widened. "Does that bother you, vamp?"

"Orin," Varo cautioned.

His little brother never had the stomach for this sort of thing, but mind games were where he excelled.

"He's mated her too," Orin continued. "The lycan part of him has claimed her. I've seen the bite, but then, those lycans always like to mark their territory."

Orin studied the vampire's face for the tiniest reaction.

"The Lord had our father killed because he wanted Cole to assume the throne, and he has," Orin said. "Unfortunately, he had to return to the Gloaming to fight a rebellion there; your daughter went with him."

Nothing.

"But not before the Lord had her brought to Dragonia."

It was like talking to a wall as Del kept his face impassive while he stared at a spot over Orin's shoulder.

"Now that he knows about her, the Lord intends to use her to keep Cole in line. After all, she's his mate, and we all know a lycan will do anything for their mate. The Lord is going to keep a close eye on her. If Cole steps out of line, he's going to let his men rape her."

A small muscle twitched at the corner of Del's eye.

"That's if he doesn't let his dragons eat her like he commanded one to do to our father. Not to mention, I'm sure the Lord will spend some time with her too. She is beautiful, and many men would be happy to take her to bed... willing or not. But, if there was some way to bring the Lord down, some secret only a few knew about, then we could all work together to keep her safe."

Orin paused to let his words sink into the stubborn vamp's head before continuing.

"I saw a silver marking on your daughter's hand, Delano, so I stuck it in some fire."

Del's eyes burned a little hotter.

"Do you know what happened?" Orin inquired.

And *there* it was! The tiniest flicker in his eyes and a small shift in Del's posture was a subtle enough change to let Orin know he held the vamp's full attention. He'd also stopped breathing as he waited to hear Orin's reply.

Del wouldn't have this reaction if there weren't something to react to, no matter how small it was.

"Do you know, Del?" Orin pressed.

Del didn't respond.

"Well, I'll tell you, it burned her," Orin said.

"Of course it did," Varo muttered.

"No, *not* of course," Orin said as he stepped closer to the door. If the metal weren't separating them, he would be standing toe to toe with Del. "Because she's not what she claims, is she, Del?"

Del didn't respond.

"If the Lord has his way, then she's going to be around him and his dragons more often. He's going to rape her eventually; there is no avoiding it, and we all know it, including her. Can you imagine how terrified she must be of that knowledge?"

Del's upper lip curled into a sneer as he finally met Orin's eyes again. Orin suppressed a smile as his needling finally started to chip away at the stubborn vamp's resolve.

"You're a prick," Del spat.

"I'm aware."

They stared at each other for a while before Orin continued.

"Cole can do *everything* that psychopath asks of him and do it all perfectly, but it will *never* be enough, and the Lord will take it out on her. But if she's something else, something we can use—"

"No one is using my daughter for anything," Del growled.

Orin didn't agree, but he wasn't going to say so. "Are you ready to talk to me about her?"

"I'm not talking to you."

"To Varo?"

Del didn't speak again.

"Would you trust Cole enough to talk to him?"

The silence stretched on for so long that Orin didn't think Del would respond. And then, he gave a barely perceptible nod.

Orin rocked back on his heels as he contemplated what to do. If Del wasn't hiding anything from them about Lexi, then he was opening himself up to a whole lot of anger from Cole, Lexi, Brokk, and Sahira for nothing.

But if he kept the vamp here, he wouldn't talk. Well... he would *eventually* speak, but it could be a while before his concern for Lexi finally broke him down enough to reveal all to Orin.

And he didn't have that much time; none of them did. They had to do something about the Lord sooner rather than later. Del and Lexi might be the key to bringing him down.

Or he could be completely wrong, and he was handing one of his prisoners over for no reason. She may be exactly what she claimed, but Orin didn't think so.

And after seeing Del's reaction, he believed he was about to be proven right.

Brokk struggled to hide his shock as he gazed at the young women standing outside their lodges. Best described as tepees, the structures had thick, wood beams sticking out the top of the roomy canvas structures. Different symbols and runes were painted on all of them.

Some of the dwellings had their flaps pulled back to let fresh air into the shadowed interior. He glimpsed bedding stored inside as well as empty and full bottles of potions tucked neatly within.

The assorted ingredients for potions were also stored inside and outside the structure. All of the lodges had fires burning outside their doors. Heavy, black cauldrons hung over the flames.

Many of the lodges were tucked beneath the canopies of beautiful green, red, and orange trees. The sun shining through their leaves cast shadows over the ground and illuminated their dazzling array of colors.

The beautiful, haunting melodies of the pixies floated on the air until the songs intermingled in such a way they all came together as one. The different tunes didn't grate on the nerves but soothed them.

He'd never been to a witch's realm before, but that was because he was part vampire, and they would probably set his ass on fire if he tried to enter their realm alone. He enjoyed not having toasted buns and liked sitting, but this was different. This was a land for crones and not the witches' kingdom.

He supposed it was still technically a witches' land since the crones resided here, even if he had yet to see one. He kept searching for the old women, but they were all young. Some were beautiful, others weren't so blessed, and others were intriguing or pretty, but none of them were stooped over and old.

Mixed in with the women and the landscape were other immortals. Pixies giggled as they flitted past. Each of them was a different color, and their translucent wings left a trail of multicolored dust in the air. The dust settled across the ground to create a rainbow pathway he and Sahira followed until a small breeze blew it away.

Mermaids basked on the rocks of the lake they passed. On the shore, their tails had taken on the hue of the sun and shone gold beneath its rays.

Once back in the water, those tails would become blue or green as they became the color of the water. Neither the men nor women wore tops.

Unicorns also moved through the lodges. Their hooves were noiseless on the thick, vibrant green grass. Some of them were pure white with gold horns, while others were completely black with gold horns. All of them had eyes the color of sapphires.

Overhead, pegasusses flapped their wings and soared over the land. Like the unicorns, they were either pure black or pure white, but their eyes were the striking color of a violet.

Phoenixes sat on perches outside some of the lodges. Some preened as they cleaned their beautiful feathers and fluttered their wings. Others were missing large clumps of feathers and sat with their heads down like stooped over old men.

Tiny chicks peeped as they accepted food from the older, more vibrant ones. The phoenixes in their prime possessed red bodies with striking red and orange wings and tail feathers. A golden tuft of hair stood on top of their heads.

As they passed, one of the older ones fell off its perch. Before it hit the ground, it erupted into flames.

Brokk stopped as the last ash fell onto the pile that had accumulated on the ground. He smiled when a small peep sounded from the pile's center and a tiny head poked out. At first, the phoenix's eyes were closed; then they opened to reveal its beautiful, amber eyes.

When it released another peep, he almost said *aww* as his heart melted a little. Then he recalled where he was and stifled his amusement. Any sign of weakness in this place might get him killed.

He threw his shoulders back a little and glanced at Sahira, who was staring at him with amusement.

He pretended not to notice as he glanced around. "What kind of an outer realm is this? All the ones I've been to have been barren chunks of rock with little or no life on them."

"This is the land of crones. Witches love to grow things, and the crones have been making this their home for hundreds of years."

"Where are all the crones?"

She frowned at him. "We've passed a bunch of them."

"We have?"

He looked behind him, but he didn't see any crones there. When he turned back to Sahira, she wore that amused expression again. At first, he found it cute; now, it was becoming annoying.

"I know the term crone brings to mind ugly, stooped, old women with warts on their faces, but witches are immortal too. They're not about to cast spells over themselves to make them age, even after they come here to retire," Sahira said.

Brokk chose to ignore her grin as he started walking again. He refused to acknowledge he'd been so focused on his image of a crone that he hadn't stopped to think they were immortal and would therefore look young.

He didn't look at Sahira as he took in more of the realm. On the other side of the lake, a family of sasquatch emerged from the thick foliage of the woods.

The father had to be at least nine feet tall, while the mother was a little smaller. Their two children barely came up to their waists but were probably five feet tall.

The parents sat and drew the kids toward them; they settled their young in their laps before plopping their enormous feet in the water. The children munched on tree branches while their parents worked the mats from their thick, brown fur.

"How did all of these magical creatures end up here?" he asked Sahira.

"Most of them are outcasts from their realms, or they left for some other reason. They all possess things commonly used in witches' spells, so the crones invited them to live here where it is private and safe. It's a win-win for all involved."

"Interesting," Brokk murmured.

They snaked their way through more of the lodges until they came across one at least three times the size of the others. The white canvas stretched taut over the poles sticking out from the top was painted with different sun and moon symbols. Streaks of color, runes, and other witch symbols also marked the canvas.

"Here we are," Sahira murmured.

Five phoenixes sat on a perch outside the open flap. The fire beneath the cauldron had died out, but whatever was inside still bubbled as they passed it. A pixie landed on the planter beside the entrance.

Herbs overflowed the container. The pixie giggled as her wings fluttered, and she smiled coyly at Brokk before settling her wings into place. A trail of orange dust fell at her tiny feet. Most pixies were only three to six inches tall; she was no exception as she stood about four inches tall.

"Hi, cutie," she said in her tiny voice and blew a kiss at him.

Brokk held out his index finger to her, and she clasped it in her minuscule hands. She gave it a small shake.

"Pleasure to meet you," he said.

She giggled again and rested her cheek against her shoulder as she batted her lashes at him. Her orange eyes shone with merriment, and her apricot hair fell to her shoulders in tight ringlets.

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