

LIONEL HART



THE CHANGELING PROPHECY

CHRONICLES OF THE VEIL

BOOK ONE

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LIONEL HART

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PROLOGUE

“I knew you would come.”

Jerah took a nervous step back across the threshold of the hag’s hut and into the swamp as the rasping voice cut through the darkness.

“Though I am surprised you made it this far.” The almost-mocking tone of the sourceless words gave him courage, and he stepped fully back inside.

“I do not come alone,” he shot back, peering into the darkness. A fruitless endeavor, but even a glimpse of the creature might slow his racing heart. “I brought the others with me, the leaders of the last shifter clans. As you asked.”

“Yes, I know.” A loud creak came from the corner, and Jerah could almost see a shape stir. He felt its eyes trained on his every move, but still he could not discern the visage of the hag. “Please, have them join you. I have a gift for you all.”

Instinct told him not to look away, that the danger was right in front of him, ready to strike and devour in a moment. But reason told him that the hag had invited them here, that she had no reason to wish them harm.

Whatever magic the hag possessed made all outside her home deaf to her words. He took a breath and looked back to his three companions, who met his glance with questioning eyes. Then Kallik, leader of the wolves, stepped forward.

“Is everything all right?” he asked, brows furrowed in concern.

“She says to come inside,” he answered, trying to shake himself and the others into action. He hoped his voice did not sound as nervous as he felt. “All of you.”

Kallik did not hesitate to step forward. Torsten and Tetsuo shared an uncertain glance, waiting to see which would be the first to defect and flee; but when neither seemed willing to do so, they followed begrudgingly. The disdain was plain on each man’s face.

“We’re all here,” Jerah said as the four stepped inside. They were huddled uncomfortably close in the darkness, unable to discern anything further in. The light from the open door did not seem to chase

away the shadows inside the hut, ending suddenly where they stood.

“Please, sit,” the same grating voice answered.

In an instant the door shut, and dim light illuminated the interior. Four chairs scraped along the floor, pushed toward them with an unseen force. More magic, Jerah knew, but he was glad of it. Now he could finally make out the appearance of this sitting-room: a low table stood in front of the four chairs; shelves on each wall towered high above them; crammed upon them were a dizzying assortment of books, trinkets, jars of alchemical ingredients, and strange plants in pots big and small. The mess grew along the floor as well, giving way to the open hearth that crackled alive with fire. The hearth itself was adorned with some small paintings and jewelry—almost cozy in appearance, a strange contrast to the rest of the hag’s den.

And for all the oddity of the scene, as if she had always been there, enthroned opposite them in a huge, cushioned armchair, was the hag. She was far taller than any humanoid the four had ever seen. A long curtain of greasy, dark hair half-hid her face, and her limbs spread out like great branches—long and immense, even for her size. An amused grin broke across her face as they regarded her, and she reached toward the table to present them with a teakettle and five cups.

“My guests,” she said, her voice clearer now though still with the same unsettling tone, as if she were speaking for the first time after many years of silence. “I offer you refreshments.”

“Thank you,” Jerah croaked. He sat stiffly on the very edge of the chair with his back straight, ready to jump up and flee at the first sign of trouble. The three men had followed, and watched, and slowly sat down as well. The hag set about pouring tea into each of the five cups with a satisfied smile, then waved a lazy hand toward them.

“Please, choose whichever you’d like,” she said. Jerah could all but feel the other three frown in suspicion. He did his best to return her smile though he could feel his face twitch in surprise as well. What was she trying to accomplish?

But he knew he had to play along. For all his host’s eccentricities, whether benign or malicious, it was known in every corner of the Veil that hag magic was the closest to the old magic, both in its power and its corrupting influence. Whatever she knew, however she knew it—he needed her information. She would not have asked him to come if he had not needed it.

The five teacups in front of him all looked the same: a creamy off-white with blue floral accents, though the pattern was slightly different with each one. He did not know what any of it meant. What he did know was that the others would not act before he did, so he simply grabbed the cup closest to him. Jerah could feel his companion’s eyes on him as he slowly lifted the cup to his lips and took a

hesitant sip. His eyes locked on the hag, and she watched him with the same unblinking, unmoving smile.

The tea was hot and tasted perfectly mundane. Typically, he took his tea with a small spoonful of sugar, but it seemed to him that, for now, it would be best to simply drink what he was offered and get on with it. He took another long sip before placing the teacup back down on the table. Only then did the others follow suit.

Jerah watched as, true to form, Kallik lifted the cup to his mouth, following his lead without question. It was comforting to have at least one ally in this wretched place. The other two seemed to hesitate as always. Torsten glared openly at the hag, and Tetsuo peered into the cup as if to discern its contents by sight alone. Finally, after a tense moment of silence, they too drank. Her smile widened at that, and her eyes brightened. This close, Jerah could see that they were a vivid purple—lovely in any other face.

“Is it to your liking, all of you?” she asked, glancing in turn between the four of them. “I must admit I have never had four kings in my home all at the same time before. I hope my manners don't offend.”

“No complaints here,” Jerah replied with a strained smile, as she took the last cup and lifted it to her lips. He tried not to stare at the odd angle of her elbows as her arms unfolded to grasp the cup from the table and bring it to her lips. “We would hate to impose, madam, so I will get right to it, though I assume you already know why we are here.”

“Oh, yes,” she said, nodding. “You heard the call of one of my little birds. I had hoped at least one would reach you. Without this knowledge, a door will be closed to you.”

Before he could reply, her eyes darted down to the cup in her hands, then she brought it up again and began to drink deeply. The four men waited in silence as she gulped audibly three, then four times, and at last set the empty cup down on the table in front of them.

“I bring you a gift, king of the fae,” she said in a voice loud and clear as a bell. Once again, the hag gestured toward the teacup, and Jerah looked to see a small smear of tea leaves at the bottom of it. “And this is my offering.”

He frowned, for a moment certain he had been made a fool of, but then the tea leaves began to glow with a light of the same purple hue as the hag's eyes. The glow spread to her hand that still held the teacup, then snaked up her long arm before flashing in her eyes. When she spoke again, the four men heard not her voice alone, but a cacophony of voices.

“I give you this knowledge, King of the Winter Court,” she said, her glowing eyes trained on a spot far beyond them. “It is from your line that the scourge of light will finally emerge. A Changeling

prince may bind your four kingdoms in unity, with a crown of darkness to bring an end to the Nova Blight that corrupts our Veil. If he heeds the call of the Golden Arrows, our world may yet be saved.”

The pounding in his heart felt like thunder now. The glow in her eyes began to fade, and the room fell silent. Only then did Jerah feel the howling wind that had burst through the room at her utterance, rustling through her books and the leaves of her plants in a shower of white noise. The other three had their hands on their weapons, though thankfully none had drawn them. Torsten and Tetsuo had locked eyes with the hag; Kallik watched him closely, ready to follow his lead. Jerah steeled himself, knowing there was no going back. What had he come all this way for?

“What does that mean?” he demanded, turning back to meet her gaze now that the glow of her magic had subsided.

“That is the extent of the gift I can give you,” she replied with a sigh, waving her hand dismissively. “I have no more control over the strands of possibility that I pluck from the Veil than the course of a leaf in the breeze.”

“I don't understand,” he said, more to himself than to her as he glanced down at his feet, frustration welling in his chest. “There have been no Changelings in hundreds of years. And the Golden Arrows? What does that mean, their call?”

“Could that mean a shifter, like us?” Kallik asked, the first of the three to break their silence since entering the hut. He could understand the connection, but Jerah shook his head.

“No, Changelings are... something else,” he answered, glancing between him and the hag. “They're fae, but they can change their appearance into anything, not just one creature. They're like shifters, but... more. Without the limitations. But there are none, not anymore.”

From behind his shoulder, Jerah could hear Torsten snort dismissively, but he ignored it. Though the hag had asked him to bring all three, the leaders of the kraken and dragon shifters still filled him with irritation. Their single-mindedness in protecting their own kingdoms from the Blight had vexed him for years, and he had long ago given up the hope of having a strong alliance between them the way he did with the wolf kingdom.

“Is that really all you can give? We've come so far,” Jerah said, turning his attention once more to the hag, but already she seemed disinterested in the whole affair, rising from her plush armchair.

“That's all I have for you,” she said, waving them away yet again. “Though, perhaps you can send this Changeling prince on to me when he arrives. I would like to speak with him.”

Jerah wanted to shout that there *were* no Changelings, there would never be any more Changelings, but he bit his tongue. Perhaps the hag was playing him for the fool after all, but he would act with

dignity all the same.

“Oh,” she said, and he perked up. “I do have a parting gift for each of you, to ease your way home.” She turned away to rifle through one of the many boxes and trays of trinkets surrounding them, finally emerging with four amulets of some gleaming purple gemstone, so dark it looked black as ink in the dim light. She presented each of them with one in turn; Jerah did not see if the others took them, instead turning the stone over and over in his hand. It thrummed with a magic he recognized, similar to his own shroud against the Blight.

“Now your journey will be safer,” she said, gesturing to the amulets. “These act as a shroud against the Blight. Though it doesn’t last forever, so I would still hurry home if I were you.”

It may as well have been useless. He could already create a shroud, though it would certainly make it easier for the shifter kings to leave without him—exactly what he didn’t want.

“Thank you for your help,” he said, barely above a whisper. He jumped to his feet, as did the others, though the hag did not turn to look at them again.

“Goodbye, then,” she said as casually as if they were leaving a common shop.

Without wasting another moment Jerah turned around and headed the way they had come, stepping beyond the threshold and feeling the magic shimmer away as he exited. For a moment the world was new again, and the four companions stood alone in the swamp: a small pocket of half-corrupted life amidst the burning, infinite daylight that had claimed so much of the Veil.

“What the hell was that?” Torsten grumbled. Jerah turned to face him just in time to watch the door to the hag’s hut vanish into the great tree—the doorknob that had once protruded from the trunk was now only a cluster of sickly green mushrooms.

“Is this what you were hoping for, Jerah?” Tetsuo asked, speaking for the first time. His sallow face sneered openly as he spoke

“I wasn't expecting this, no,” he muttered, pressing a hand to his face. It had to mean *something*. “Just give me a moment to think about it.”

“I didn't come here for a fucking puzzle,” Torsten spat, and he turned to go, pulling the dark purple amulet over his head.

“Wait!” Kallik exclaimed, taking a single step to follow him. “You can't just leave now.”

“Like hell I can't,” the surly shifter growled, and with a few more steps he was knee-deep in the dirty water of the marsh. “I'm going home. This was a waste of my time. Unlike the rest of you fools, I intend to actually protect my clan and our kingdom.”

Jerah frowned, but remained silent. He should not be surprised that Torsten was just as hostile toward him as ever, but still it stung how quickly he abandoned their tenuous alliance.

The shifter's body glowed with magic, his shape morphing as he got further into the water, until finally he vanished in a splashing surge of tentacles. When the last ripples on the surface of the water faded away, and it was once more still and silent, Tetsuo took a cautious step away from them as well.

“I must agree with Torsten in this case,” he said primly, glancing up at the sky. “Jerah, I wish you luck in your endeavors, but I don't think I can offer the help you seek.”

“Wait,” he said in exasperation, but it was no use. Tetsuo's body morphed and shifted before his eyes as well, glowing with a greenish hue as it elongated into a massive, snake-like form. He leapt into the air, lashing back and forth in a serpentine movement as he flew.

Jerah and Kallik stood in silence for a long moment, Jerah scowling down at the ground. Finally, the last remaining shifter offered, “We're still with you, Jerah. Our pack has always been loyal to the fae kingdom. That won't change.”

“I know,” he sighed. “Thank you.”

He glanced away to hide the frustration and disappointment that must have been apparent in his face. It had taken so much effort to persuade the other kings to help him, and the moment they didn't need his help, they were gone. He shouldn't have been surprised. “Let's go. I have much to consider.”

CHAPTER ONE

The weather was changing. Florian shivered and pulled his hoodie closer to his body, zipping it up so the wind couldn't cut through him. He had woken to an overcast day and the sky a pleasant grey, though it looked now like it might start to rain.

“What do you think?” Nadia asked, pulling him from his thoughts as he looked toward the horizon. “Should we head in?”

“Not yet,” he said, shaking his head. “I want to get a few more shells first. Those pendants were selling really well.” When he looked over at his friend, she gave him a wide grin, the wind blowing her dark hair across her face.

“Feeling daring, huh?” she commented, pulling her hair back into a low ponytail that she secured with a scrunchie. “Well, I'll stay out if you will.”

“When has a little rain ever scared you?” Florian laughed. She chuckled in return, shrugging. “Oh, look at this one.”

He bent down, picking up a smooth stone half-buried in the sand. Mostly a dark gray, it had some streaks of a more iridescent hue, almost like the inside of a shell. “That would be pretty if I wrapped it in wire, don't you think?”

“Yeah, I like it,” Nadia agreed with a nod. They walked along the beach at a leisurely pace despite the chilly breeze, their eyes scanning the ground for similar rocks and shells. After a moment of comfortable silence, Nadia spoke again. “So... how did your talk with your uncle go? About moving?”

Florian grimaced, shaking his head. “Not very well. He told me to wait, and not make any rash decisions. Which, I mean, I get that, but... I don't know. It felt like he just wanted me to stay so he has someone to make stuff for the shop.”

A dry laugh escaped him as he spoke. It was easier to make light of it than admit how much the conversation still frustrated him; how his uncle had been so unexpectedly adamant that he stay in Coral Shore; and worse, how much his uncle's request had stung. The older he got the more he longed

to leave the little beach town where he had lived for as far back as he could remember. Not that he didn't love Coral Shore, or his uncle, or their kitschy little souvenir shop, but every time he thought of spending the rest of his life there his heart ached with wanderlust, with a bone-deep knowledge that he was meant for something better than a gift shop—no matter how many tourists bought his shell necklaces and beachy trinkets. But even though Nadia was his best friend, saying something like *that* out loud was just too embarrassing.

“You know, you don't *have* to listen to him,” she said with a shrug. “I mean, I know he's like your dad or whatever, but still. Anyway, plenty of people move out by the time they're twenty-three.” Florian shrugged, unsure of how to respond. After a moment, she continued, “And he should be understanding. He's got to know how weird it must be to still live so close to Cameron after everything that happened.”

Florian winced at that. His breakup with Cameron had been over three months ago now, but his heart still stung a little bit every time he thought of it. They had been together since high school—how could he get over it in just three months? The fact that they lived only a few blocks apart certainly didn't help, and he'd seen Cameron out and about far too often for his comfort.

“Here's a compromise,” Nadia said quickly before Florian could respond. “Why don't we go on a road trip? That way we get out of town for a bit, come back all refreshed, and good old Uncle August only has to approve some time off instead of losing his best employee.”

“I'll run it by him,” Florian replied with a snort. “That sounds fun, though. Where would we go?”

“Have you ever been to Yosemite? Or maybe Yellowstone? I think a hiking trip could be fun. Or, ooh, we could go up to San Francisco!” Nadia exclaimed, and from her wide smile Florian could tell she was already three steps ahead of him. “I have a friend who lives up there and I'm *sure* she'd let us crash with her, so we wouldn't even have to worry about a hotel! And think of all the guys you could meet! I'm telling you, Florian, a couple good hookups and Cameron's gonna be a distant, distant memory.”

“You lost me,” Florian teased, and they both laughed. “No, really, that does sound fun. We *should* plan something. Maybe next month? Just so Uncle August knows ahead of time.”

“Yeah, I'd have to request time off too,” Nadia agreed. “Aww, Flor! I can't believe we've never been on a road trip together! This is gonna be so fun.”

Florian opened his mouth to respond, but a distant shout interrupted him.

“Florian!”

They both stopped and looked in the direction of the call—across the street, Florian's uncle August was waving at them. When they looked, the wave turned into a beckoning gesture, and Florian raised an eyebrow, glancing back over at Nadia who shrugged in response.

“What's up?” he called back, and August beckoned him again.

“I need you to come home,” the older man shouted, and Florian frowned. “Come on. I'll explain on the way.”

“What's wrong?” Nadia asked, nudging him in the ribs. Florian shook his head, just as bewildered.

“No idea,” he said as he stepped toward the street with a sigh. “I'll call you later, okay?”

“Sure,” she said, waving. “See you later.”

“See you,” he replied, and jogged across the street to where his uncle was waiting. The man had always looked exactly how a stereotypical beach bum running a gift shop two blocks away from the ocean might—with his long brown hair; loose flowy shirts; linen pants when it was chilly like today, and board shorts when it wasn't; and at least one necklace per outfit—it was only the lingering youth still in his sun-tanned face that kept him from looking entirely like an aging hippie. He had always looked younger than he was, and all that made people assume he was amiable, maybe even a pushover. Florian knew better: his uncle August was soft-spoken, reserved, and friendly to a point but not overly so, especially with strangers. To be shouting in the street was definitely unlike him.

“What's wrong?” Florian asked as he approached, but August was already turning to lead him back to the shop. “Uncle August, what's the hurry? You knew I was off today.”

“That's not it,” his uncle replied, sighing and glancing back over at Florian. He slowed his pace enough that they could walk side by side. Florian had never seen his uncle looking so worried before, which sent his heart leaping into his throat. Something bad must have happened. Maybe another break in? It had been years since the last one, but—

“Listen,” August continued, shaking Florian from his thoughts. “I know how this is going to sound. But try and keep an open mind, okay?”

“What?” Florian asked, the words confusing him even more. August winced, and his mouth moved silently a few times as if he were struggling to speak.

“It's your dad,” he finally said, looking away. “He's here. He wants to see you.”

Florian stopped dead in his tracks. August stumbled to a stop a few steps ahead of him and looked back, eyebrows knit together with worry. His whole body had become cold, and it took a long moment before he could move any of his muscles. When he could, he realized he was trembling all over.

“My—my dad?” he repeated incredulously, shaking his head. “You’re kidding. He’s not—why would he be here? Why would you...?” He trailed off, unable to form the words. The last time he had seen his father, he’d been a small child. In his memory, the sky was grey as well, his uncle looked much the same, and the other man had a shadowy face and a far away voice. And that was all; his father had never visited. So why now? After twenty years, what could the man possibly want from him now?

“I know,” August said, taking a step closer to him. “I know, Florian, I understand, really. But I think you should hear him out. Give him a chance to explain. Family is... Family’s important.”

“Family’s important? He *abandoned* me,” Florian protested. August put a hand on his shoulder in what was meant to be a comforting gesture, but Florian jerked back, pulling away from the touch. “No. No way. I don’t want to see him! Why would you think I want to see him?”

“Florian, please,” August repeated, and there was a tenor to his voice that Florian had never heard before, some strange mix of desperation and understanding; immediately Florian was certain that August knew something he didn’t. “He wants to see you, to talk to you. He wants to explain everything. Don’t you think you deserve that, to know why everything happened the way it did?”

He looked away at that, tears suddenly burning at his eyes. It felt like a low blow, because he *did* want to know—had always wanted to know what could have possessed his father to bring him to Coral Shore to stay with his uncle and never return. August wasn’t even his own brother, but Florian’s maternal uncle. He had never understood why any of it had happened, had given up on ever knowing a long time ago.

“You don’t have to do anything except listen,” August said softly, gingerly reaching for him again, and this time Florian didn’t pull away. “I promise, Flor. All you have to do is hear him out. And if you don’t ever want to hear from him again after that, then that’s your choice. But I think you owe it to yourself to give him a chance. Not to him, but to yourself.”

“Fine,” Florian muttered, before he could change his mind. Part of him balked at the thought, but the quiet ache in his heart that had never really gone away—that was born the moment he was old enough to understand what had happened that day—far overpowered any resistance left in him.

August managed a slight smile. “Come on. It’ll be alright.” His uncle started again for the shop now in sight on the corner of the opposite street, and after a moment, Florian followed.

CHAPTER TWO

Together August and Florian tramped up the stairs to their apartment on the second floor of the store, but at the top of the landing Florian paused, watching with uncertainty as August fumbled with his keys to unlock the door. The staircase was narrow and dark, but even so he could just make out the same unsettled expression on August's face. His uncle glanced back, to meet his nervous gaze, and managed a slight smile that Florian thought was meant to be reassuring, but was far too strained to offer any comfort.

“Come in,” August said, gesturing for Florian to enter as he pushed the door open. “You’re gonna be okay.”

Florian nodded, but still it took a moment before he could force his feet to lift from the ground and step inside. His heart hammered painfully in his chest, and every instinct in him cried out in protest, yearning to turn and run the other way. But then he was through the door, and August followed, closing it behind him.

As he entered Florian could hear a hushed voice that quieted the moment the door closed. From the entryway the kitchen was not quite visible, but he could see light from the dining room where his father must have been waiting.

“Go on,” August murmured behind him. “I’m right here with you.”

Florian steeled his resolve and took a few stiff, heavy steps through the entryway and into the light of the dining room. Two figures came into view as he turned the corner into the room, and he paused, startled. He had not been expecting two.

One was a tall man who looked about his age with tan skin and dark hair in a short, practical sort of style. He had a serious, almost stern expression on his face as he stood leaning against the kitchen counter, muscled arms folded across his chest. Florian did not recognize him, but his gaze lingered on the stranger's handsome features for a moment, before flicking over to the man who sat at the table.

Florian had no memory of his father's face, but the moment he met the man's eyes from where he sat looking up at him, he knew immediately that it was him. Though he was visibly older, his father had a

youthful look to his face—the way August did, despite being unrelated. His hair had the same dark brown, almost-black hue as Florian's, but the older man had sprinkles of grey throughout; their eyes were the same shade of warm amber brown. His neat, short beard kept Florian from fully studying his features, but the shape of his nose, cheekbones, and eyes were all uncomfortably familiar—too much like his own. A nervous, hesitant smile was on the older man's face, but all else seemed frozen in time, as their eyes remained locked together in silence.

“I found him, Jerah,” August said from behind Florian, snapping him back into the moment. “Here he is.”

“Florian,” his father said, slowly standing up. There was a strange familiarity to his voice too: all at once a voice he had never heard, and one he had always known. “I... My son.” His mouth worked silently for a moment. His hand clenched into a fist, and he pressed it to his mouth, shaking his head. “You know, I... I've thought a lot about what I would say to you, but now I can't remember any of it.”

Florian licked his lips, his mouth suddenly painfully dry. “Why?” he asked hoarsely, and cleared his throat. “Why are you here?”

He felt more than heard August sigh softly behind him, and his father seemed to deflate at his words.

“It's a long story. A very long story,” the man sighed, unable to meet Florian's gaze again. “I... Let me start with this, Florian, that I am so, so sorry. Everything I did, I did out of concern for you, but there wasn't a day that went by that I didn't worry I made the wrong choice.”

Irritation flashed hot and prickly in his face, but he couldn't bring himself to reply. Instead, with a stilted hand he pulled out the chair opposite his father—his name was Jerah, he reminded himself—and silently gestured for him to continue, before looking down at the worn wooden table. Usually August would keep a small vase of flowers in the center—or mail and groceries, or some half-finished project for the shop, would be strewn across its surface—but now it was completely bare.

Across from him he heard Jerah sigh and sit back down, but still he didn't look back up. “This is all going to sound crazy,” his voice came, low and anxious. “So I'm just going to start with the worst of it. You weren't born in this world, Florian. We aren't humans.”

Florian blinked, then jerked his head up to meet Jerah's gaze. The older man's expression was completely sincere, so he whirled around in his seat to glare at August who still stood nervously behind him.

“What the fuck is he on?” he snapped, feeling more angry now than anything. Had August not vetted him at all?

“Just listen to him, Florian,” August repeated, looking down at his shoes, and the similar sincerity in his voice made the rage in his chest grow cold all at once. What the hell was going on?

“What we are—” Jerah persevered, even as Florian's bewildered gaze lingered on August. “—are fae. Not like pixies or fairies in the stories, although there are kernels of truth to many of those tales. No, our main distinguishing feature from humans is the magic we can use, and the world we come from.”

“This is insane,” Florian muttered, more to himself than to any of them now. “You can't be serious. You finally come back now, and this is what you want to say to me?”

“I know how it sounds,” Jerah replied with an urgency in his voice now. “But you have to believe me. I can prove it to you if you'll give me the chance. But haven't you ever felt like you didn't belong here, Florian? Like you didn't fit in, or you were meant for something more?”

“Of course I've felt that,” he scoffed, shaking his head. “I'm gay. I'm *trans*. Of course I didn't... didn't fit in.” He trailed off. The words felt uncomfortably close to his own thoughts only moments earlier, during his conversation with Nadia.

“But more than that, right?” his father said. “Because you've never belonged here, Florian. Your home is our world, the Veil. It's sort of like a... a mirror, in a way, to this world, to Earth. And there are places where the worlds touch, the barriers between them are weakened, and you can pass through. That's how we're able to travel here. There is no magic on Earth, but in the Veil...” He paused, then chuckled, shaking his head. “Well, in the Veil, I'm the king of the Winter Court, so that makes you a prince.”

Florian didn't have the strength to reply. His head was swimming, his whole body suddenly as cold as if he'd been launched into the early morning ocean. Without thinking, he propped his elbows on the table and pressed his forehead into his shaking hands, squeezing his eyes shut. There couldn't possibly be any truth to anything Jerah was saying, but his face was so earnest, and there was still so much familiarity in his voice.

“The reason I brought you here is because you weren't safe in the Veil,” Jerah continued. His voice seemed distant and far away now, but Florian couldn't bring himself to look up. “The Veil is... Well, much of it became dangerous and uninhabitable long ago. Our kingdom is one of only a few safe places left, at least those large enough for our people to survive. But, before you were born... Before you were born, I received word that a powerful... witch, I suppose would be the closest term. A witch wanted to speak to me. When I found her, she gave me a prophecy. She told me a Changeling prince

would come from my family line to heal the Veil. There hadn't been any Changelings in, well, centuries, so I don't know if I really believed her then. But when you were little, you..."

He paused, taking in a shaking breath. "You told me you were a boy, and... transformed, right in front of me. That's not something fae can normally do. Only Changelings can do that. But there are a lot of myths and stories about Changelings, and I knew it wouldn't be safe for you if others found out, regardless of the prophecy. There would be people who would want to steal your hair, and your blood, and try to take you for their own gain. So I... I brought you here. To keep you away from prying eyes, from anyone who might do you harm."

Everything he said was sounding more and more insane. Florian glanced back at Uncle August in desperation, but the serious expression on his face told him that the man believed every word his father was saying.

"A lot of fae left the Veil for Earth to avoid the Blight," August said softly, meeting Florian's eyes. "I was one of them. I had already been pretty established here by then, so... That's why your dad brought you to me."

"I waited until I knew bringing you back could be safe," Jerah said quickly. "I've spent all this time learning everything I can, researching all there is to know about the Nova Blight and how to get rid of it, why it failed the first time, where to find—" He stopped, but Florian still couldn't bring himself to look in his direction. "Well. There will be plenty of time to explain in more detail later. For now, I think this is enough. I'm... Well, I'm hoping you'll agree to let me show you the Veil, to prove everything to you."

Florian shook away the thoughts crowding his head, finally turning back to look toward his father. Still standing behind him, the unnamed stranger looked as stoic as ever, but his eyes met Florian's briefly before glancing over to Jerah. His father's face was earnest, a tiny hint of a hopeful smile on his lips, but somehow that only made his anger burn even hotter.

"This is—this is insane," he stammered, shaking his head. "You're expecting me to come with you? You never came to see me even once but now you're just going to, what, take me away to your stupid magic kingdom? This can't be real."

"I know how this all must sound," Jerah said softly, a pained expression crossing his face. "Please, Florian, I'm just asking for one chance to prove myself to you."

"Why? Why should I give you *anything*?" Florian exclaimed, pushing himself away from the table and stumbling to his feet. His eyes were burning, his voice thick with emotion, but the last thing he wanted was to cry in front of strangers. "You don't—You don't know anything about me. Even if all

this shit *was* true, you still could have—could have visited, or wrote, or—or anything. But you didn't. You didn't! I don't know who the fuck you are, but I don't have a father. So fuck you, and—” He turned around, unable to stop himself from glaring at August who withered under his gaze. “—and fuck *you* for making me do this.”

He could hear a clamoring of voices as he left, but his feet were carrying him away, and his hand was slamming the front door behind him before any of their words registered. Taking the stairs two at a time back down onto the street, he followed the sidewalk blindly, blood pounding in his ears and drowning out the noise of the downtown dinner rush around him.

What the hell was going on? Part of him wondered if he had hallucinated the whole meeting. Just thinking back on it made the whole thing sound even more absurd. Another world? Magic, fae, Changelings? None of it meant anything to him. It was all fairy tales and make-believe. They couldn't be serious, could they?

It would almost be better if it were some kind of cruel prank. But Jerah had sounded so damn sincere, and Uncle August didn't seem at all surprised about anything he had said—no, he couldn't believe it was a prank.

But he didn't know what to believe. He shoved his hand into his pocket and pulled out his phone, calling Nadia before he could think better of it. The line rang a few times before she answered.

“Hey, what's up?” Nadia's voice was familiar in his ear, and he realized that he had been holding his breath. It came out as half a sob, and he pressed his fingers to his mouth to keep from losing it. If Florian knew anything, he knew she was someone he could rely on, someone that was real and true.

“H-Hey,” he said, his voice shaking as he spoke. “Um, sorry about earlier.”

“Are you alright?” she asked. Her concern was plain even over the phone. “What happened?”

“Um,” Florian stammered, unsure of even where to begin. “Well, it's... It's my dad.”

Silence answered him, so he stammered on, “He's here. I mean, he was there. At home. He wanted to, um... He wanted to talk to me.”

“Oh my god,” Nadia finally said. “That's... Florian, that's crazy.”

“I know,” Florian said, and he gave a bitter laugh despite himself. “Yeah, it was, uh, it was crazy. I don't know, Nadia, it was all just a bunch of bullshit. He tried to explain everything, but... I don't know. I don't even know why my uncle let him in.” He couldn't bring himself to say any of the stuff about magic—somehow that would make it feel too real, and part of him still couldn't believe that the conversation had even happened.

“I’m sorry, Flor,” Nadia’s voice came softly after a moment of hesitation. “I... I don’t really know what to say. But that sounds awful.”

“Yeah,” he sighed, kicking up sand absentmindedly. He hadn’t even realized that he’d crossed the street and wandered onto the beach. “You know, I used to always wish he would come back for me, but now I just wish he would have left me alone. It was better not knowing.” He stopped, his throat suddenly feeling tight again. It felt so silly, to cry over a man he barely knew, but he couldn’t stop himself from sniffing and wiping the tears away angrily even though Nadia couldn’t see him.

“That makes sense,” she said, either ignoring his tears or not hearing them—he was thankful either way. “Listen, Florian, you don’t owe this guy anything. If he really wanted to be in your life he could have been part of it a lot sooner. So... You know, no one could hold it against you if you don’t want to have a relationship with him. So if you decide you don’t want to, you don’t have to.”

“I know,” Florian agreed, nodding to himself. He did know it, but it was comforting to hear from someone else. “I don’t want anything to do with him. If he’s still there when I get back I’ll ask Uncle August to make him leave. But... I don’t know, it almost seemed like they were getting along. If things go... not so good, could I come stay over at your place?”

“Yeah, of course!” she exclaimed. “Even if he does leave, if you want to come hang out, you can. You know that.”

“Thanks, Nadia,” he murmured, a slight smile crossing his face. “I’ll let you know how it goes.”

“Yeah, keep me updated.”

“I’ll text you. Bye.”

Florian hung up and put his phone back in his pocket with a long, drawn-out sigh. Nadia always knew what to say.

Wearily, he took the long way back toward the shop, steeling himself with every step. The faint echo of familiarity in the back of his head that made him wonder about everything Jerah had said was easy to drown out. He wouldn’t have anything to do with any of it. All he had to do was go home and tell him to leave.

CHAPTER THREE

On Florian's way back to the apartment, it finally started to drizzle, and before long his hair was sticking to his face. It was silent as he unlocked the door and stepped inside, pausing in the entryway to take off his damp hoodie and wondering if his father and Uncle August had left—but he could see that the light was still on in the kitchen.

“Hello?” he called out nervously as he closed the door and peered forward. He heard something, like shuffling footsteps, but no voice answered him. Frowning, he took a few nervous steps into the room until he spotted a figure, sitting at the table looking in his direction—only to have his heart leap into his throat as he met the eyes of the handsome stranger who had stood behind his father during their whole strange conversation. He had entirely forgotten about his existence.

“Uh, hi,” Florian stammered, brows furrowing. Who was this guy? Why was he still here? “Are, uh... are they still here?”

“No,” the man answered, his voice deep yet surprisingly soft. Even in the dim, artificial light of the kitchen, his brown eyes were gleaming with curiosity as he met Florian's gaze. “Jerah and your uncle left.”

“Oh,” Florian replied. They stood in awkward silence for a moment until he blurted, “I don't think I caught your name?”

The other man didn't react except to blink, and Florian thought he saw the tiniest tilt of his head.

“I'm Kade,” he said at last.

“I'm Florian,” he replied automatically, and for the first time a hint of a smile played at the other man's lips.

“I know,” Kade said. Florian looked away, flushing with embarrassment.

“Yeah, I guess you do,” he muttered with a step into the hallway toward his room before pausing, uncertain. “Are they coming back?”

“Yes,” Kade said, nodding. “They asked me to stay and wait to see if you came home safely.”

He couldn't stop himself from rolling his eyes. "Okay. Well, I'm fine." He glanced back over to see Kade was still meeting his gaze intently. It would have been disconcerting from a less handsome face, but as it was, his intensity was strangely alluring. "So, uh... How do you know him? Uh, Jerah?"

The man leaned back a bit in his chair at the question. He finally broke their gaze to glance toward the entryway, as if wishing Jerah would return.

"My family has always been allied with the fae," he replied slowly, still looking toward the door. "When my father became too ill to serve him, I took his place."

Florian frowned—that didn't really explain anything. Kade seemed to sense his confusion and glanced back over at him.

"Jerah is a good man," he said unprompted, and heat flushed across Florian's cheeks in irritation. "One of the best I've ever known. You should give him another chance."

"Maybe you haven't known many good men, then," he muttered, turning his back and trudging to his room without waiting for a reply.

When he was alone in his room, the door firmly closed behind him, he flopped down onto his bed with a groan and kicked his shoes off before pulling a blanket over himself. The soft, familiar plaid and the darkness that enveloped him was comforting. After a few long, slow breaths, everything felt a bit less chaotic.

He pulled his phone from his pocket again to text Nadia, telling her that he was home, and that they had left. He thought of packing to stay the night at her apartment, but now that he was in the safety of his own room, going back out into the rain sounded far less appealing. Hopefully, he thought, Uncle August would come back alone, and both his father and Kade would never return. Well—maybe just his father would never return.

He flushed, feeling embarrassed with himself. Kade was cute, but seemed to work for his father, so no point in pursuing anything. And there was no telling if he was gay, or even open to someone like him.

The thought made him flush again, this time more with shame. Despite all the positive self-talk and affirming mantras that he'd repeated to himself since even before the breakup, Cameron's words still echoed in his head every time he thought of dating again, or even just hooking up with someone—*no gay guy is ever going to want you*. He had told himself over and over it wasn't true, but he couldn't stop the words from creeping in all the same.

With a frustrated groan he rolled over, wrapping himself more tightly in his blanket. As if his life wasn't already complicated enough without prophecies and magic worlds and Changelings, whatever

the hell that meant.

He frowned as he mulled over the conversation. If he really *was* a Changeling, and if he really *had* changed his body when he was little, then why had he gone through all the trouble of hormones and surgery now? It didn't hold up. Had Jerah really thought he'd buy something so far-fetched?

But... there was a certain appeal to the idea. Of course there was. After all, who wouldn't want to hear that they were some kind of chosen one in a magical prophecy? And being able to change his appearance at will would be pretty much the ideal superpower, as far as he was concerned. But if he really could do that, he definitely would have figured it out by now.

He distracted himself from the uncertain thoughts by texting Nadia for a bit and playing a game on his phone, still half-listening for the telltale sound of the front door being unlocked, waiting to hear if there would be only one voice returning, or two. The sun had long since gone down, and it had been nearly two hours when he finally heard the rattle of the key in the lock.

Florian quickly muted his phone, pushing his head up and out of his blanket to hear better, straining to listen for voices, or footsteps, or anything that might hint at how many were present as the door creaked open. Voices came, muffled and muted, from the hall—it sounded like August at first, then a barely-audible response from Kade—then his heart sank as Jerah's voice came, quiet but clear. He couldn't tell what they were saying, but August spoke again. Then there was the sound of a chair scraping along the floor of the dining room, and at the same time footsteps echoed down the hallway, coming closer.

Four soft knocks came from the door, followed by his uncle's voice. "Florian, can I come in?"

He groaned—the temptation to pull the blanket back over his head and ignore him was strong—but he was already in a better mood than before and felt somewhat guilty for having been so angry at August. Begrudgingly he sat up and called out, "Yeah, okay."

August stepped inside, pushing the door closed behind him, but stopped just inside the door frame with a conflicted expression on his face. He stood there for a long moment, worrying his lower lip between his teeth, until finally he said,

"Look, I know that this was a lot. It's a lot. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I never told you, and that you had to find out this way. But I promise, we only did this because we wanted you to be safe." He paused before letting out a deep sigh, still not quite meeting Florian's eyes. "Will you come to the kitchen and sit with us for a bit longer? Jerah was still hoping to talk to you."

Florian frowned, and looked down at the floor.

"I don't know," he muttered. "I don't... I don't know if I want to hear what he has to say."

“We brought home ice cream,” August offered. “We got you chocolate chip cookie dough.”

Florian let out a sharp breath of a laugh despite himself. When he looked back up, August had a nervous but hopeful grin on his face, and Florian couldn't stop himself from smirking in return.

“All right,” he relented, standing up off his bed. “Just for the ice cream.”

August led him down the hall. Back in the dining room, Kade was sitting in the same spot, but Jerah had taken a different seat directly across from him and was unloading a paper bag with a few covered bowls of ice cream. Florian recognized the logo as belonging to one of his favorite shops, a little ice cream parlor a few blocks away. Hesitating for only a moment, Florian sat down between Jerah and Kade, and pulled the cup of cookie dough ice cream toward himself. Jerah opened what looked like mint chip, pushing a cookies-and-cream scoop toward Kade as August sat down across from Florian and took a cup of coffee ice cream for himself.

The dining room table was small and especially cramped with all four of them sitting around it. Florian started to eat in silence, keeping his eyes down on the ice cream in front of him. For a long moment, no one else spoke. August and Jerah also ate bite after bite in silence, though Kade seemed mostly disinterested in the ice cream offered to him.

“So,” Florian said, breaking the silence. He kept his gaze down on his ice cream, though he could feel Jerah's eyes land on him. “If what you said is true, and I *am* a... a Changeling, or whatever. Why couldn't I have just changed how I looked here instead of going through all the trouble of—” He paused, suddenly and intensely aware of Kade's presence to his left, but he supposed he had already said it. “—of, um, hormones and surgery and everything? It would have been a lot easier if I had known all that before.”

“Well,” Jerah cleared his throat, and to Florian's surprise his voice sounded a bit rougher and more gravelly with emotion than it had the first time they'd spoken; he wondered briefly where he and August had gone, what they had discussed. “Unfortunately, our magic doesn't work on Earth. It's the same for all citizens of the Veil. Mine, Kade's, August's... yours. It only works when you're on the other side.”

“That's inconvenient,” Florian muttered, still not meeting his gaze.

“Well, that's true—that's why we don't come to Earth often,” Jerah answered. “Many Veilians never come to Earth at all. Those that do often only do so to travel. Traveling is... safer, on this side. I know I mentioned the Nova Blight briefly, but if you'll let me explain further, that might make more sense.”

Florian finally glanced up, meeting August's gaze across from him first. His uncle had that same nervous, earnest expression on his face, but he managed a shaky, encouraging smile when their eyes

met. Sighing, Florian sat up straighter to look Jerah in the eye. He was already here, so he might as well.

“Alright,” he said, gesturing for him to continue. The tense look on Jerah's face eased a bit at that.

“The Nova Blight has consumed the vast majority of the Veil,” he began, locking eyes with Florian. It struck him once again that his eyes were the same shape and color of his own. “It's like... a magically burning light. As if the sun never sets, only far more intense, and for over two hundred years straight now. Where the Nova Blight touches, no darkness can survive. It's largely uninhabitable except in a few small, sheltered pockets... or by creatures that have been blighted—transformed to survive such harsh conditions.”

“Two hundred years,” Florian echoed, raising his eyebrows. “Yeah, that sounds pretty miserable. A two hundred year long summer day.”

Jerah grinned wryly at that. “It's funny you say that. The Nova Blight began first in the Summer Court, another home of the fae. It consumed their city first, but for a while it was contained within its walls—about fifty years. Then someone tried to destroy the Blight by destroying its source, the Summer Queen Soleil, but failed. And when they did, it broke her control of the Blight, and it spread almost exponentially. Only the most far-flung places were able to avoid the Blight, or those magically protected.”

Florian frowned, thinking. “Did she do it on purpose?”

Jerah paused, seeming to mull the question over. He had brightened up once Florian had started engaging in the conversation—but this question seemed to perturb him.

“We don't know,” he finally said, sighing. “It all happened very quickly, and most of the summer fae near her who might have known perished almost immediately. There was some damage to the castle, according to those who have tried to get into the city, but it's uncertain if that happened when the Blight first occurred, or after. So there is some speculation, but we don't know why. We don't even really know what caused it. But... Well, I never knew Soleil, the Summer Queen, but my father did. He always spoke kindly of her whenever the topic came up. He said summer fae like her were passionate, but straightforward and honest. He seemed quite convinced that whatever caused the Nova Blight, it was... accidental.”

“And you believed him?” Florian asked. He didn't exactly believe *any* of it, but if he could imagine they were talking about a story or a movie, it became easier to listen. There was some strange satisfaction in hearing about this supposed place he had come from, where his father had been all this time, so that he almost wanted to hear more. Almost.

“I think so,” Jerah replied. His spoon had hovered over the mint chip as he spoke, but now he set it down to run a hand through his beard in thought. “I haven't had much more to go off of. I mean, I've done as much research as I possibly could and found out a bit more than is common knowledge, but... I think I'd agree with him. The circumstances around the Nova Blight seem unintentional. Fae magic is powerful, of course, but something of that magnitude? I don't know that Soleil could have done something like that, even if she tried. No, it seems much more like the old magic to me.”

“Old magic?” he asked. He could feel Kade shift uncomfortably next to him, but Florian kept his eyes firmly on Jerah—he was curious now, plus Kade's presence still made him feel embarrassed and awkward. “What does that mean?”

“Ah, well—it's pretty much what it sounds like,” Jerah chuckled. “Do you remember I mentioned a hag earlier? She was a practitioner of the old magic. A type of magic not like that used by fae, more... primal, I suppose. No one really uses it anymore besides witches like her, and there are precious few of them left. It's tricky, and difficult to learn, but huge, powerful things like the Blight... Only old magic can do that. Like the prophecy the witch gave me. Fae magic, our magic, we have power in our words, but it's limited to...” He grimaced, pausing as if trying to consider how to explain. “Well, it's also constrained by words. There has to be someone to hear them, something to perceive them. Something like the Nova Blight, that just *is*... That's not fae magic, not even for the Summer Queen. As the king of my court, I think I would know.” He laughed dryly at that.

“It's dangerous,” Kade said, speaking for the first time. Everyone's heads swung over to him in surprise, and he hesitated at the sudden scrutiny, clearing his throat before continuing, “Old magic. It's dangerous. It's powerful, but there are limits and rules to what you can and can't do with it that you won't find out until you've broken them... That's why so few try to use it any more. If it was old magic that made the Nova Blight, it was probably the result of the Summer Queen breaking one of its rules.”

“That's been my theory, too,” Jerah agreed. Kade nodded, looking relieved to have the attention off of him. “From all my research, I think she was trying to do something with old magic that backfired. But I still have many questions as to *what*.” He sighed, and glanced over at Florian again. “That's where you come in, Florian. You're supposed to be the one who can finally end the Nova Blight. If you come to the Veil, speak to the hag who gave me this prophecy... I think maybe there is more she could tell you that she can't tell anyone else. Divination is tricky like that.”

Finally Florian looked away, back down at his ice cream with furrowed brows. It all still sounded crazy, but... The more he was being told about the Veil, this prophecy, the more his heart ached to know more. It seemed ridiculous, but he couldn't stop the nostalgic, almost homesick feeling that

welled up within him at all the talk of the Veil and old magic and fae. He didn't want to think about what that meant.

"I don't... I don't know," he stammered, shaking his head. "I don't know what to think about all this."

Jerah leaned back in his chair, letting out a long, slow sigh. He sounded a little more dejected when he spoke again. "I can't make you do anything you don't want to, of course. I want you to come with me, to see your home. But I can't force you there."

"Did my mom know?" Florian asked, forcing himself to meet his father's gaze. Jerah made a pained expression at the question, but did not flinch. "About the prophecy and all that?"

"I told her about the prophecy, yes," he replied softly. "She died before I knew it was you, though. She died before you chose your new name or... anything."

"I know," Florian sighed, leaning back. She had died when he was still a toddler. He had always known that. August had told him a little about her, fleeting bits and pieces of his sister that Florian now knew must have been purposely vague. He had always thought maybe the memory of her was too painful for August to discuss, but now he wondered if he didn't know what to say without saying too much. But still he felt like he knew next to nothing about her, not even enough to form an image of her face in his mind. "Do you have a picture of her?"

"Not with me," Jerah replied, a tiny, sad smile at the corners of his lips and the edges of his eyes. "But there are some portraits of her back home, in the Veil."

Was he really about to agree to all this? Florian bit his lip, suddenly feeling more foolish than he could ever recall feeling in his life. There was no way any of this could be true. But he couldn't deny the yearning in his heart, crying out that he had always known that he was an outsider—that he was meant for something bigger, greater. And he could see a picture of his mother, could finally know what she looked like... Even that would be enough. Everything else might be a cruel trick, but if he could see a picture of his mother, then maybe that would be enough.

"Okay," he said hoarsely, before clearing his throat. "I'll... I'll go with you." He held up a hand quickly before Jerah could say anything, his father already perking up next to him with bright eyes and a wide grin. "But only to check it out. I'm not... I'm not agreeing to going on this quest or talking to a witch or anything, alright? I just want to... see it. I want to see my mom."

"Thank you," Jerah said breathlessly, the earnestness in his voice taking Florian by surprise. "You don't know how much that means to me, Florian. From the bottom of my heart, thank you." He moved his hands toward Florian slightly, then paused. "God, I just—I really want to hug you right now. Could I give you a hug?"

Florian felt his face redden with heat, and he turned away. Part of him wanted to say no, but it *was* his father. “Okay,” he muttered, barely audible, as he leaned a bit closer to Jerah.

One arm came around his shoulders, tugging him closer to the older man. Florian kept his arms stiffly at his sides, pointedly looking anywhere but toward Jerah or the other two men. But even at the awkward angle of his one-armed side hug, there was a strange familiarity in Jerah’s warm frame that made Florian’s pounding heart slow a bit, if just for a moment. Jerah pressed his lips to the top of Florian’s head—not quite a kiss, but a soft gesture of affection that lasted only an instant, before Jerah released him from his grasp and settled back into his own chair. When Florian nervously glanced back at him, the older man’s eyes were watery with emotion.

“Thank you,” Jerah said again, picking his ice cream back up and shoving another spoonful into his mouth.

Across from him, August seemed to visibly relax into his seat for the first time, sighing softly. Florian raised an eyebrow at him, but it took a long moment before the other man replied, visibly gathering his thoughts.

“I’m glad you’re going,” August finally said, his voice surprisingly tremulous. “It’s... It’s important for you to see where you’re from. Your homeland. You deserve to know it.”

“I still don’t know if I believe any of this,” Florian muttered, shaking his head. Next to him, Jerah chuckled. “But if this all turns out to really be true, Uncle August, I’m going to be pissed you kept such a big secret from me for so long.”

A chagrined smile spread across his uncle’s face, and to Florian’s own surprise he felt relieved. August had been so tense and nervous, so unlike his usual self, that the hint of his normal, easygoing-if-awkward demeanor was a welcome reprieve.

“I know how all this must sound, Florian, but I assure you it is all perfectly real,” Jerah said next to him, most of his ice cream now gone. “We’ll head out tomorrow. Let’s plan to leave first thing in the morning, it’s a bit of a drive.”

“A drive?” Florian repeated. “How do we get there?”

“As unbelievable as it might seem,” Jerah said, grinning over at him. “The nearest safe curtain into the Veil is at the peak of a mountain on Catalina Island.”

CHAPTER FOUR

They left early the next morning, or at least early for Florian—his day usually didn't start until closer to ten, but they were on the road well before nine. Jerah and Kade had slept in the living room; Jerah on the couch and Kade on the floor. Jerah told him to pack some clothes and to wear something he could hike in, so he had shoved some clothes and toiletries into a backpack then tried to sleep, largely without success. The strange revelations of the day kept playing over and over in his head, and when he did finally sleep, his dreams were strange—filled with witches and fae and a blinding, burning light.

August shoved a sealed to-go cup full of fresh coffee into his hand as they left, and he gratefully sipped it as they began the two hour car ride to the ferry at Dana Point. But between the early start and his lack of sleep, Florian still ended up dozing through most of the drive. The next thing he knew, Jerah was gently shaking him awake. He realized that they had parked, and after carefully peeling himself away from the passenger door that he had been leaning against, Florian felt more alert.

“Is the car gonna be okay?” he asked, glancing back over at it as they walked out of the parking lot.

“It's a rental,” Jerah replied, waving a hand dismissively as if that was answer enough. Florian had no idea what that meant, but he didn't press the issue.

“So there's no portal that's easier to get to?” he asked instead, only half-complaining, as he followed the two figures toward the ferry.

“Not anymore,” Kade said flatly, but Jerah glanced over his shoulder at Florian before elaborating.

“If they were too easy to get to, humans might find them,” he said. “Well, they wouldn't be able to pass through, but their attention would certainly be unwelcome all the same.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Florian said, glancing away. “So humans can't go through at all?”

Jerah gave a pointed look to the small crowd milling about the ferry station. “I'll explain more when we're there.”

Of course, it only made sense that he wouldn't want to talk about it here, around other humans. It was still strange to think that they weren't human—that *he* wasn't human—if any of what they said was

true, which he would find out soon enough, he supposed.

Jerah bought their tickets, and it was only a short wait before they were boarding the ferry. It would take about an hour to get to the island, and Jerah had told him that they would need to hike to the “curtain,” but he didn't say how long that might take. Either way, it sounded like they would be hiking right around the middle of the day, so he was glad he had brought sunscreen.

There was room to walk around the ferry, but Jerah and Kade both sat down once they were on board, seemingly having no interest in doing anything but waiting. He hesitated, wondering if he should sit down next to them, but they both seemed entirely disinterested in what he did. Jerah pulled a small book out of his pocket, and Kade sat directly behind him with his arms folded across his chest and his eyes closed, as if he were napping. Florian wondered if Kade had fallen asleep in the car too—somehow he doubted it. He looked far too serious all the time to be napping so late in the day, even if he had slept on the floor.

Florian had lived in Coral Shore all his life and never gone far out of town, so this would be his first time to Catalina. He didn't want to waste the opportunity, so he decided that instead of sitting awkwardly next to them, he would go stand on the deck and watch the water rush by as the ferry sailed toward the island.

But he had only a moment to himself, looking out on the horizon, until he caught someone approaching out of the corner of his eye. Kade loomed over him from just a few feet away. Florian flushed as soon as he realized who it was and glanced away quickly.

“Your dad wanted me to keep an eye on you,” the other man said flatly, folding his arms across his chest as he stood next to Florian.

“Great,” he muttered, keeping his eyes firmly on the water. Even hearing the words “*your dad*” made him unsettled. He certainly didn't need a babysitter, but he couldn't bring himself to say as much. Instead, they stood in awkward silence for a few minutes, and he tried to enjoy the scenery, before giving up with a sigh. “I'm gonna go sit back down.”

Kade followed him without a word, as he meandered back to the middle of the boat. Florian sat down two seats from Jerah, not quite comfortable enough to sit right next to him; Kade once more took a spot directly behind him. Jerah still had the same small book in his hand, but Florian could feel his father's eyes watching him for a long moment before returning his attention to his book.

In his pocket, his phone buzzed. Florian pulled it out quickly, thankful for the distraction, but his heart sank all over again when he saw it was Nadia calling him.

“Shit,” he muttered under his breath. What would he tell her? What *could* he tell her? He hesitated for a moment, then answered. “Hello?”

“Hey!” her voice came, cheerful but with an underlying concern that he could discern even through the phone. “I hadn't heard from you, everything okay?”

“Um, yeah,” he said quickly, shooting a nervous glance over at Jerah. It didn't look like the man was watching him, but his sunglasses made it hard to tell. His attention seemed to be with his book for now, at least. “Yeah, I'm, um, I'm actually gonna be out of town for a few days.”

“What? Really?” she asked, surprised. “Where are you headed?”

“Jeez, how do I explain this?” he muttered to himself before continuing, “Um, this is gonna sound crazy, but I was talking with my, uh, my dad and we're going on, like, a little day trip to Catalina.”

“Oh,” Nadia said, and for a long moment they were both silent as she seemed to absorb the information. “Wow. Well, that's... good, right? I'm glad you could work stuff out after all.” She hesitated, and he could tell from her tone that she wanted to say more. “Are, um, are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Florian replied, unable to stop himself from chuckling at the blatant shock in her voice. “Yeah, things took kind of a weird turn, I guess. And it's sort of last minute. But... I don't know. I guess I just freaked out at first. But I'm feeling better about everything now, I guess.”

“Well, good,” Nadia said, though he could tell from her tone she still wasn't entirely convinced. It wasn't like her to press an issue, though, and true to form she paused before continuing in a chirpy tone, “Well, I hope you have fun on your trip. I actually haven't been to Catalina before.”

“Me neither,” Florian laughed. “I'll tell you how it is. I don't think I'll have very good cell service, but I'll try.”

“No worries. Let me know once you're back,” she said. “Anyway, I'm about to leave for work, so I'll talk to you later.”

“Later,” Florian agreed. He put his phone away and saw that Jerah was definitely looking at him now.

“Girlfriend?” he asked with a bemused grin, and Florian scowled.

“No, I'm gay,” he said dryly, and Jerah's grin dropped. “I said that already. Nadia's my friend.”

“Right,” Jerah replied, glancing away. He opened his mouth wordlessly a few times, as if trying to find the words before speaking. “I, um, I do remember you saying that now. I apologize. That's, um, that's fine—there's no, uh...” He gestured helplessly for a moment. “That is to say, where we come from, there's no, ah, prejudice on that sort of basis the way there can be on Earth.”

“Great,” Florian said with more bluntness than he had intended, the awkward tension between them palpable in the air. He sighed and studied his father, who was looking pointedly back down at his book, but was clearly not reading. “Really, that's good to hear, I guess. I'm... Looking forward to seeing it for myself.”

Jerah managed to give a small smile in response. “I'm excited for you to see it, too. It's a lovely place, at least the places that are left.”

Florian wasn't sure how to respond. All this talk about a Nova Blight, and how only some parts of the world were habitable... He was unsure what any of it meant, or of what to expect once they arrived. But asking about it seemed just as difficult. He supposed he would find out soon enough.

The rest of the boat ride was uneventful. Jerah continued to read, though Florian couldn't make out any details on the cover—if anything, it looked like a plain, black leather notebook. Kade sat silently behind them, but Florian was sure he was keeping careful watch and listening close. Even in the short time he had known these two, it had become apparent that Kade was wholly committed to protecting Jerah—from what, or who, though, was a different question entirely. Another question he wanted to ask, but couldn't find the words. Maybe that too would become more apparent in time.

Eventually, when he looked through the viewing windows that surrounded the sitting area on all sides, he could see the island in the distance. He stood back up to watch as the island grew larger and larger, though he didn't go back outside again, keenly aware of Kade's eyes on him as he moved. Better to stay where they could keep an eye on him than somewhere he'd have to follow. The ferry slowed as they approached the dock; people were starting to mill about, getting ready to disembark, so he went back to where he had been sitting to grab his backpack.

“Know where we're going once we're off?” he asked, and Jerah smirked.

“Of course,” he replied, standing. “Kade, ready to go?”

“Yes,” Kade replied, appearing at Jerah's side, as if he'd been there all along. Their eyes met briefly, and Florian looked away, feeling his face flush with heat. Why did he always look so *intense*?

“Lead the way,” Florian stammered, gesturing for Jerah to go ahead. The man had a bemused grin on his face, peeking over his sunglasses at the two of them; but he strode forward without remark, and Florian followed him closely to avoid having to be behind Kade.

They filed off the boat, squeezing through the crowd until they were on land once more. The sun was high in the sky with barely any clouds in sight, the ocean just as bright a blue around them. A few

different paths led away from the ferry terminal, but Jerah walked on with confidence, as surefooted as if he had made the same trip a hundred times before. Maybe he had, Florian thought.

“How often do you make this trip?” he asked, quickening his pace to better match Jerah's longer strides.

“Hmm,” he said, pursing his lips. “Well, it's much safer to travel this way than to try and travel through the Blight. I don't have to travel much, but I'd say, oh... two or three times a year? I try to keep in close contact with Kade's family. We have a strong alliance. The other clans, not so much, but occasionally I'll go to them. They aren't as keen on traveling to me.”

Jerah hesitated, and Florian thought that he was considering whether to say more. “Things will be easier to explain once we're there. Don't want to say too much in front of eavesdroppers who may not understand, you know.” He gave Florian a knowing glance, but he could only guess as to what Jerah meant. He had already said humans couldn't travel into the Veil, so what did it matter if someone overheard? They would think that they had misheard, or that it was something unfamiliar, or that they were all nuts. But Jerah seemed concerned, so he didn't press.

“How far is it?” Florian asked, taking in his surroundings. They were on a concrete walkway with the hills of Catalina all around them and a few buildings in the distance—he knew there was a hotel somewhere around here—but wherever they were going didn't seem readily apparent.

“Well, I've got to get us our hiking permits,” Jerah chuckled, shaking his head. “Then we'll hike up the hill. It's hard to describe, but I know exactly where it is.”

Florian shrugged. That seemed as good an answer as any. They walked in silence for a little while longer, Florian's pace slowing a bit so he fell evenly between Jerah ahead and Kade behind him. He didn't quite feel nervous, exactly, but there was an underlying uneasiness that came with being around either of them—though for very different reasons.

Jerah came to a stop in front of a small building that looked like a tourist center. He turned back to face them and said, “I'll get our hiking permits. You two wait out here.”

“Why?” Florian asked, frowning, but Jerah had already turned to walk into the building. Kade had stopped next to him, waiting obediently. With a sigh, he took an awkward step away from Kade, scuffing his boot on the dirt path as they waited.

“Florian,” Kade said, grabbing his attention. He had not expected to be addressed so directly.

“Y-yeah?” Florian asked, trying not to look away under the intensity of his gaze. Kade was silent for a moment, as if considering his words before continuing.

“Thank you for coming with us,” he finally said. “I know Jerah said it already, but this means a lot to him. To all of us.”

“Well, like I said,” Florian replied nervously, wilting under the heavy words. “I just wanted to see. All this stuff about a prophecy or whatever... I don't know about any of that.”

Kade's head tilted slightly, not at all unlike a dog's, but he remained silent for a long moment. “The Veil is a beautiful place,” he finally said, a bit softer now. “Even just in the Winter Court, there's a lot to see. Maybe if you stay for a little while, I can show you some of the best spots.”

Florian's face was well and truly burning now, and he looked down at his feet in embarrassment. He didn't *want* to like this guy, but every glimpse behind the stoic and silent face he'd kept up was endearing. His handsome face didn't help, either.

“That sounds nice,” he heard himself blurt out, barely audible over the pounding of blood in his ears. When he glanced back up, Kade's eyes were fixed on the horizon, but his lips had twitched into a tiny, amused grin. He seemed... pleased with himself?

Florian didn't have long to dwell on whatever *that* meant, as just then Jerah emerged from the automatic door of the visitor center with three squares of paper in his hand.

“We're all set,” he said with a grin. “Let's head up the mountain.”

“I thought you said it was a hill,” Florian groaned, all but jogging to keep pace with his father, who had started up the dirt path without waiting for them.

“Hill, mountain,” Jerah said, waving his hand. “Not much of a difference here, is there?”

“I think there's a difference,” he protested.

“It's like a big hill. A small mountain,” Jerah said, and pointed to one of the peaks in the distance. As he said, it was not an especially *tall* mountain, but it was a far cry from what Florian considered a hill. “Near the top of that. Not the very top, of course. I promise it's not a difficult hike.” With a laugh, he gestured at himself. “After all, do I look like an athlete? Especially compared to Kade. I'm not nearly as young or fit anymore, but it shouldn't take more than an hour to get there, I think.”

Florian cast a dubious glance at him, but Jerah *was* on the scrawny side for his height: the same as Florian. And it did look like there was a path up the mountain, or hill, or whatever it was. Hiking wasn't exactly his favorite activity, but it seemed he had no other choice, so there was no point in complaining. With a deep breath he adjusted his backpack on his shoulders and followed his father resolutely, Kade's heavy footsteps crunching behind him.

True to his word, the way up the hill wasn't too difficult. It made a winding, gentle path upward with only a handful of steep sections. They passed a few other people as they walked, but Jerah

seemed completely unbothered by their presence.

It was about the middle of the day now, and although the sun made Florian sweat with every step, the cool breeze that moved through the hills was pleasant. There was a beautiful view if nothing else: he could see the verdant island slope this way and that, and at some angles he could still see the ocean sparkling blue in the midday sun.

As they were nearing the top of the hill, Jerah paused at the corner of a switchback, glancing surreptitiously up and down the path.

“I don't see anyone,” Kade offered, also looking around. Jerah nodded before leading them off the path and into the brush. Florian frowned, but Kade moved to follow him, so begrudgingly he picked his way through the foliage. The slope became steeper as they moved off the path, and the dense underbrush meant it was much slower, harder going. Still he managed to keep Jerah in his sights until finally they emerged in a tiny clearing.

Florian wasn't sure what he had expected, but he had expected *something*—but the clearing was totally empty. Yet Jerah stood with his hands on his hips, looking carefully through the empty air.

“Is this it?” Florian asked uncertainly. Next to him, Kade nodded, but his eyes were also on Jerah.

“Ah, here we are,” the older man said, seeming to find what he was looking for. He moved his hand toward nothing, then there was a slight shimmer in the air. Florian was unsure of how to track it with his eyes, but it seemed as though Jerah's fingers were pulling back an invisible curtain—his hands disappearing in its folds, and a soft light emitting from the nothingness.

“What the fuck?” he heard himself mutter. Kade chuckled once next to him.

“Now, listen, Florian,” Jerah said, and the sudden seriousness in his tone swept away his thoughts of Kade's laughter. “When we pass through, we're going to look a little different on the other side. Magic and all that. So don't be alarmed.”

“How different?” he replied suspiciously, and this time Jerah tittered at him.

“A little more other-wordly, you might say. But still recognizably us. Don't worry,” he said. “Kade, why don't you go first? Then Florian, and then I'll be right behind you.”

Kade glanced over at him, and he nodded. Florian hadn't been nervous before, but now whatever was happening was real—so much more real than it had been even a moment ago. Some small part of him still thought that maybe this was all fake, even on the boat and during the hike; but now he had seen Jerah make some kind of light appear where there had been nothing before, and that small part of him was silenced.

Kade hesitated. His eyes lingered on Florian for a moment, as if he could see the apprehension on his face; but then his gaze slid away, nodding at Jerah and obediently stepping toward the light. He glanced back at Florian once more, then as smoothly as if he had walked around a corner, he was gone.

“Go on,” Jerah said, his voice soft. “I promise it's not frightening. You don't feel a thing. You'll just walk along like normal.”

Florian swallowed hard, nodding tersely, and with some effort he forced his feet to move, stepping toward the glimmering light that descended from Jerah's outstretched, half-hidden hand. The light filled his vision, and he took another step—and suddenly it was much darker, as if clouds had filled the sky, blocking out all but a few tiny rays of the sun's light.

He blinked hard a few times, his vision adjusting to the sudden change, but already he could hear harsh footsteps and Jerah's voice behind him.

“See? Nothing to it,” he was saying, then stopped short. Florian glanced back at him, realizing with a start he *did* look different—his eyes were gleaming a bright amber despite the dim light, and his features were recognizable yet somehow more angular. Then his face twisted in concern.

“Oh. Florian, now—don't panic, but you, ah, also look different, perhaps not in the way you had hoped...”

As soon as he said it, Florian could *feel* the difference in his body, the shift of weight—without thinking his hands flew up, one to his face, the other to his chest. The scratchiness of his slight stubble, meager as it was, was entirely gone, and his chest—

“Oh, fuck no,” he heard himself whimpering, his whole body hunching over instinctually in fear, trying in vain to press his chest flatter against his ribs. “This isn't—this can't be happening, I—”

“Florian, listen to me,” Jerah said again, and something about his tone as he spoke was utterly *commanding*. Florian's head snapped up to look back up at him, despite the hot, embarrassed tears threatening to spill from his eyes. “You need to stay calm. You're a Changeling. You've done this before. Close your eyes and focus on what you look like. You can do it.”

“How?” he asked, his voice breaking. Jerah shook his head, his lips tightening into a thin line.

“I don't know,” he said. “But I know you can do it. I've seen you do it. Close your eyes and focus.”

Florian squeezed his eyes shut. He tried to think of anything but the soft fleshy swell under his hands—focusing on the summers he'd spent saving money, the scars he so carefully kept out of the sun, the slick scent of his shaving cream, and the glide of the razor down his face. *That* was his body, not this.

And somehow, like stretching a muscle, he felt the flesh under his hands shift and morph until his fingers were pressed flush against his ribs. He could feel the muscles of his face shifting too, far more subtle: filling out his jaw, thinning near his eyes, and his scalp prickling with the tiny shift of his hairline. The bones of his hips narrowed, and his shoulders pushed themselves apart with a sharp burst of discomfort. It felt somehow entirely alien, yet came to him almost without thought. He could not say how he did it, only that he *did*; and when he nervously opened his eyes again, Jerah was grinning down at him.

“There you are,” he said, reaching a hand out to lightly touch Florian's shoulder. “My son. I knew you could do it. Do you see now? You're a Changeling. You could look like anyone, anything, just the same way you did now.”

“Why did—why did that happen?” he croaked, realizing his body was trembling all over. The panic of the situation had faded, leaving only the remnants of adrenaline pounding in his ears. Jerah's grin faltered as a more thoughtful expression overtook his face—here, he seemed more expressive somehow, more animated.

“I'm not sure,” he admitted. “The last time you were here, in the Veil, you were, well—only a child, not the man you are today. So maybe your form hadn't, ah, updated, for lack of a better term. That would be my guess. Or...” He trailed off with a laugh. “Or somehow the old magic knew you'd need to prove to yourself that you were a Changeling after all. Fae magic can be tricky, but the old magic is more so.”

“Well, fuck that,” Florian grumbled, absently running his hands up his torso and his arms. Everything felt familiar once more, but he didn't want to pull his hands away from his skin for fear that he would come apart again. “There must have been nicer ways to go about it.”

He took in a long breath to steady himself, then finally straightened up to look back at Jerah. “How... How did you do that? When you told me to listen, it was like... like I couldn't *not* look at you.”

“Ah,” Jerah said, and grimaced. “My apologies. It's generally considered quite rude to use our magic on others without reason, but, well, it seemed necessary. Fae magic is...” He paused, clearly considering what to say. “There are Earth myths about fae being unable to lie. This is not true, but it stems from the fact that our magic comes from our words. We can... speak things into existence, if you will. So when you're using your magic, the words you use are of the utmost importance.”

His expression softened now, even though Florian stared at him with a quizzically raised eyebrow. “I'll be sure to teach you, of course.”

Behind him, Kade cleared his throat, and Florian's heart plummeted to the very bottom of his stomach. He had entirely forgotten that Kade was still there, and he must have seen him like—like *that*. Shame burned anew in his face, even as he glanced over his shoulder. His breath hitched at the sight of him, somehow more ridiculously handsome than he had been on earth, with eyes that glowed brightly in a yellowish-orange tangerine color very much like a dog's. No, a wolf's, Florian thought—his whole face seemed somehow more lupine in a way he couldn't place, and he hated how attractive it made him.

But Kade looked embarrassed as well, and he kept his eyes steadily on Jerah, avoiding Florian entirely. “Maybe we can walk and talk.”

“Of course, of course,” Jerah said, stepping toward Kade. When Florian looked back the way they had come from, there was nothing. He took a moment to study it: the longer he looked, there did seem to be a slight glimmer in the air reminiscent of the shimmer of light that Jerah had pulled out of the nothingness back on Earth. *That* thought took him by surprise: back on Earth. He wasn't on Earth anymore, impossible as it seemed.

Then he realized with a start that they were not, in fact, standing on a mountain either. It looked as if they were standing in the middle of a dark blue ocean: wet black stone beneath their feet with dark water on all sides.

“Where—where are we?” he stammered, looking around nervously. Jerah glanced back at him with a grin, and Florian realized with a start that the same dark stone rose up from the water to meet the older man's steps.

“It's a bit of a walk to the castle,” he said, chuckling. “Not as far as we hiked, of course, but a little ways. Don't worry, it's perfectly safe. Just don't wander too far from me.”

Nervously Florian leapt closer to Jerah, jogging to keep up with his stride that was somehow longer than before. He almost couldn't bring himself to look down, but when he did, he watched in fascination as the dark black stone rose up to meet his feet as well, sinking back into the water when he walked away. Though they were certainly in some kind of ocean, the water was quite calm: light was reflecting off a few small, choppy waves, but the water barely kissed their ankles as they walked.

“Is it night time right now?” Florian asked, struck again by the darkness that spread as far as he could see. It was dim, as if the sun were blocked out with thick clouds; but when he looked up, the sky looked clear. There were no stars, but the moon hung bright and heavy on the horizon.

“Yes,” Jerah said with a nod. “It often is. The Winter Court is... well, we do have daytime, but it's different from the cycles that happen on Earth. It's more like the long nights nearer the poles of the planet.”

“Interesting,” Florian said, though he frowned a bit as he spoke. It sounded like a far cry from the balmy beach weather he was used to. Although now that he was thinking about it, he didn't exactly feel cold, despite the dim light and surrounding water. “Is it... supposed to be cold?”

“Ha!” Jerah laughed at that, whirling around to look at him with a wide grin. “Not to us. No, I can assure you that you'll always be quite comfortable here. Although it might be a little less pleasant for Kade.”

Behind him, Kade made a soft noise of dissent. “Not as cold as the wolf kingdom,” he answered. Florian nodded, but he kept his back firmly turned away from the other man, still embarrassed and unsure of how to act around him now.

“Kade's homeland is far, far to the north,” Jerah said, his eyes flickering between the two as he seemed to sense Florian's discomfort. “The nearest curtain to them is in Canada and quite remote, so traveling between the two is tricky even on Earth. But I'm sure we'll make our way up there before too much longer.”

“I never said I was staying,” Florian interrupted, shaking his head. “I just want to see and then go back home.”

Jerah's grin faltered slightly at that, but he nodded. “Of course. As I said, Florian, I can't force you to do anything you don't want to do, even with magic. I assure you, the moment you'd like to return, we'll bring you back. But...” He sighed, looking away before continuing. “But it is my hope you'll change your mind. I want to show you the Winter Court, and whatever is left of the Veil beyond. I'd like to spend more time with you, now, to make up for the time we lost.”

Florian turned away, flustered. He certainly had no intention of staying longer than a day or two, but saying that to Jerah proved difficult. Now that his anger had largely subsided from the day before, some primal part of him did want to spend time with his father, and to know where he came from. His mother was gone, but if he could rekindle a relationship with his father, shouldn't he?

But even as he thought it, Florian knew that the more he gave in to the impulse of staying for his father, the more likely it was that he would end up staying for everything else, too. If he truly did not want to be involved in any of this, then he should turn and go home now. He knew it—could feel the weight of it on his shoulders—but his curiosity was too strong to ignore. He didn't want to be involved, but he wanted to *know* where he came from even more.

The conflict must have been apparent on his face, but luckily Jerah had turned away and was a few paces ahead of him now, and Kade stayed dutifully behind Florian. He smoothed away the tension in his brow, keeping his face carefully neutral, even as the unsettled, conflicting thoughts rattled around in his head. At the very least, he didn't need to make a decision now, he told himself. He had agreed to come to the Veil to see the Winter Court, and to see a picture of his mother, so until that happened he would stay.

“Look,” Jerah said softly, snapping Florian from his thoughts. “You can see it now, on the cliff.”

Jerah pointed toward the horizon, and Florian's gaze followed for only a moment, when he stopped dead in his tracks. A cliffside had risen in the distance as they walked, and built along its peak Florian could see a castle made of some dark material that shone like a polished gem in the moonlight. Its tall spires broke the skyline, and even from this distance, he could make out trees dotted with flowers like tiny stars surrounding its walls. It was beautiful, and somehow achingly familiar in his chest.

Kade hesitated behind him, and Jerah turned, noticing that he'd stopped. “Everything all right?” he asked, but Florian couldn't tear his gaze away from the castle.

“It's... I think I remember it, somehow,” he said softly, his voice thick with emotion. Distantly, he had the thought that he'd been on the verge of tears far too often already today, but still the castle with the starlit forest commanded his focus. “It's beautiful. It's really beautiful.”

He didn't realize that Jerah had come up next to him, until he felt the soft, now-familiar weight of his hand on his shoulder. “It is,” his father agreed, a similar soft, affectionate tone in his voice. “I've never set eyes on a more beautiful place. And that's our home. I knew you would love it.”

Absently, Florian nodded, his eyes still tracing the lines and shapes of the castle. They stood for a moment longer, then Jerah gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

“It's even lovelier up close,” he teased, stepping forward once more with an amused grin. “Come, we're almost there.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Before much longer they reached the shore, and the black stone that had risen from the water to form their path gave way to soft, wet sand under their feet. The beach was small, and the cliffside rose less than fifty feet from the water's edge, where Jerah now pointed to a set of narrow stone steps amidst the plants that grew on the steep face.

“Almost there,” he said, though he didn't sound particularly eager to make the ascent. Florian's eyes followed the narrow stairway up the cliff and noted that while the stairs were not terribly steep, there were more than a few switchbacks.

“More hiking,” he sighed, but followed Jerah across the beach and toward the stairs. Kade was silent behind him, but he could hear the soft thud of his footsteps on the stone steps not too far away.

He kept his focus on his feet as they ascended, but could not ignore the breath burning in his lungs. He wasn't exactly out of shape, but today had been a lot; his muscles quickly began to protest after the first handful of steps. But Florian hadn't come all this way for nothing, so he kept his head down and focused on one step at a time.

“All right back there?” Jerah called over his shoulder at one point, and Florian nodded without looking up.

“Yeah,” he panted.

“Not much longer,” Jerah said, and he was almost relieved to hear that he, too, sounded winded.

Eventually, he heard Jerah groan in relief ahead of him, and looked up as they reached the top of the stairs. Before them was a gate that led to some sort of garden; it was enclosed by tall trees and dark green hedges that were dotted with pale pink and white flowers. Jerah pushed open the iron gate into the courtyard, revealing a stone path that led in twists and turns toward the castle. Along the path, statues and benches were interspersed with some smaller potted plants, as well as more hedges and trees that trailed with ivy.

“We made it,” Jerah said triumphantly, grinning back at Florian with a relieved smile. He crossed the threshold past the gate into the garden, and Kade's footsteps trailed behind him. “I don't know

about you two, but I would love a good meal and a hot shower right about now."

"Yes, please," Florian laughed. That *did* sound appealing.

"That can be arranged," an unfamiliar voice came, and both his and Jerah's heads swiveled back up the path. Standing there was a tall woman with long, jet black hair tied back in a low, loose ponytail and reddish-brown eyes that had the same ethereal glow as the others. The friendly smile on her face only grew wider as they approached her. "Welcome home, Jerah, Kade. And Florian."

"Ah, Tatiana, I'm glad to see you!" Jerah exclaimed, rushing toward her. Florian followed curiously with Kade still behind him; but he hesitated as Jerah took the woman in his arms, and they embraced. After a moment, he released her and looked back at Florian with a start.

"Ah, my apologies, Florian, this is my sister, your aunt, Tatiana. She's kind enough to keep everything running while I'm away, and when I'm here, perhaps more often than I'd like to admit. And, Tatiana, this is..." He paused, taking in a deep breath as a pleased grin spread across his face. "This is Florian. He's finally come home to us."

A sense of relief washed over him at the words. The last thing he wanted to deal with was an unexpected fairy stepmother. "Hello," he said, sounding awkward to his own ears; but he still managed a slight smile and a wave.

"Hello, Florian," she replied, her gaze softening as she spoke. Her expression was inscrutable: some strange mixture of nostalgic and sad and joyful all at once. "I'm sure you don't remember me, but it's so wonderful to see you again."

"Oh—I don't, sorry," he stammered. "But it's, uh, nice to meet you. Nice to see you."

"That's all right. We have so much to catch up on," she said, and her gaze flickered behind him. "And it's good to see you, too, Kade. Thank you for keeping Jerah out of trouble."

"Trouble? Trouble?" Jerah spluttered with an indignant laugh. "Don't go giving Florian the wrong idea, Tatiana. I certainly don't get into trouble Earthside. Or here, for that matter."

Kade stepped past Florian, finally leaving his spot as the rear guard. He could only catch a flicker before Kade was walking past him, but Florian swore that there was a slight grin on his lips.

"No trouble, Tatiana," he said. "Any word from my family?"

"No news, which is good news as far as I'm concerned," she said, and he nodded in agreement. "Now, you said you were hungry?"

"Oh, yes," Jerah said, nodding quickly and extending a hand to Florian. "Come on, Florian, it's been a long afternoon. Let's have lunch. Or dinner. I think it's closer to dinnertime here, now."

He felt inexplicably nervous for a moment despite the friendly faces of his father and Tatiana. Jerah had offered him dinner as casually as if he'd just swung by his house, and the easy familiarity somehow spooked him. He hesitated, standing still for a moment, then Kade paused and glanced back at him. Their eyes met, and Florian's face burned as he all but jumped forward.

“Okay,” he agreed, catching up to them quickly. Kade led the pack now, but Florian had seen a hint of red on the other man's face when they had locked eyes for a moment. He wasn't sure if it made him feel better or worse.

He followed the group along the winding stone path through what turned out to be a rather large garden. The path split in different directions a few times, but Tatiana and the others seemed to know where they were going. Florian followed without protest, occasionally glancing curiously down the separate paths, but doing his best not to fall too far behind. They kept on the wide main path with its trees and statues, but some of the splintering paths seemed to lead into smaller gardens—one was certainly a rose garden, but he didn't get a good enough look at the others to know for sure. Regardless, the moonlight glinting off the pale marble statues and illuminating the dark green foliage of the garden, made everything look truly enchanted—it very well may have been, Florian thought.

“Is the garden magic at all?” he decided to just ask, and though he was looking toward Jerah when he spoke, it was Kade who glanced back at him. He nearly tripped over himself when their eyes met, but thankfully kept his footing despite his surprise.

“Some of the plants have magical properties,” Kade answered. “I don't think any parts of the garden are inherently magical, though.”

“Not these parts, no,” Jerah agreed. “The section with poisonous plants is warded, and there's an observatory set up further in, which has an enchantment to prevent cloud cover around the area, but otherwise it's just a regular old garden.” He grinned at Florian. “I mean, it's certainly meant to be a nice garden, to preserve as many plants as we can from the Blight, but it's mostly mundane.”

“I understand,” he replied, his gaze flickering nervously between Jerah and Kade, who had turned away once more.

They walked in silence for a little while longer, and as they rounded a corner the castle suddenly came into view through the hedges and trees that had surrounded them until now. Up close, it was somehow even more ethereal: the black stone reflected the vivid moonlight, giving the castle a soft glow similar to the marble statues in the garden, but with a more iridescent hue. Florian could see that the stone path led to one of the spires attached to the corner of the castle, where a stone door stood slightly ajar.

Tatiana led them in that direction, and both Jerah and Kade stepped through the open door. Florian hesitated, and Tatiana gave him an encouraging smile.

“I’ve never been in a castle before,” he blurted out, looking up with apprehension at the towering spires. Her smile became amused, but she continued to hold the door open for him.

“It’s your home,” she said. He was sure it was meant to sound reassuring, but somehow it made him feel more unsettled. “No need to worry. We’ll make sure you know where everything is and that you have everything you need.”

“Thanks,” he replied, unconvinced, but he stepped inside anyway.

Inside, the castle was warmly illuminated, and he blinked a few times in surprise as his eyes adjusted to the light. When Florian could see clearly once more, he and Tatiana were in some kind of foyer—or maybe something like a mud room—that led directly to a hallway on the opposite end of the small space. A few plants were set up here as well; the warm light came from some flickering lamps, but also from what looked like baseball-sized globules of light that floated up near the ceiling. Florian stared at them for a long moment as they made a slow, lazy rotation around the room.

“Much of the castle is lit this way,” Tatiana said, placing a soft hand on his shoulder and startling him from his thoughts. “I’m glad you find them interesting. It’s all just part of the castle to us, so it’s... refreshing, to see an outside perspective.”

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Florian said, feeling silly the moment the words left his mouth. Of course he’d never seen anything like it—up until yesterday he hadn’t known any of this existed at all. But the fond smile on her face didn’t waver as she led him out of the room and down the hallway. Just as she had said, floating lights were on the ceiling of the hallway too, as well as a few candles set up on a side table further down the hall. As they walked, Florian thought the hallway felt strangely empty with only a few decorations on the wall and a long rug on the floor. For a castle, it didn’t look very lived in—though, he supposed, he had never been in a castle before, so maybe it was meant to be that way.

“Here, I can have your things taken up to your room for you,” Tatiana said as they reached a junction in the hallway. “I’ll show you to the dining hall, and once you’ve eaten, someone will show you to your room.”

“Oh, sure,” he said, nodding in agreement. She snapped her fingers, and Florian nearly leapt out of his skin when a faint spectral form appeared next to her.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she exclaimed, stifling a laugh behind her hand. “The servants. I didn’t even think about it. They’re, ah, spectral shapes. Not like a ghost or anything, more just magical force given

shape.”

“I—I see,” he stammered, still looking at the strange humanoid shape that had appeared at her side. It looked like a shadow given substance and dimension, and he jumped again as it moved closer to him.

“Take his belongings up to the prepared guest room, please,” Tatiana said, and the arms of the specter reached toward him expectantly. She gestured at Florian. “Go ahead, give it your things.”

Warily, he took off his backpack and placed it over the specter's waiting arms. He still half-expected the bag to fall to the ground, but it settled onto the shadowy shape and moved with it as it drifted away down the hallway and around a corner.

“That's...” Florian started, unable to find the words. If magic was real, it only made sense that things like ghost servants might exist; but as long as he stayed in this world, he was sure he would be taken by surprise more often than not. “That's, um. Useful?”

“Oh, very,” Tatiana agreed, laughing as she continued to lead him down the hallway. “Jerah will have to show you how to summon them. Though I'm sure he has plenty of plans for you, while you're here.”

Florian frowned at that. Clearly she expected him to be staying long-term, but he still wasn't convinced that he would stay longer than a few days. Jerah could be the one to tell her that, though, so he only nodded silently in agreement.

She led him through a few more corridors and down a flight of stairs, until they finally emerged into what must have been the dining room. A long table took up the bulk of the narrow room, and though every chair had its own place settings, Jerah and Kade sat alone at the far end. Food was set all down the center of the table, an assortment of dishes that Florian didn't recognize.

“There you are!” Jerah said, waving for them to join. “Come, sit, eat! It's been a long journey.”

“What is all this?” Florian asked, slowly walking over to sit across from Jerah. Kade was a few seats down, and Tatiana went and politely sat across from him.

“Most of this is quite similar to human food,” Jerah said, gesturing. “This is very much like beef, and these are carrots, onions, potatoes, more or less... Some of the vegetables and fruits are a bit different, but for the most part things are fairly analogous, if not exactly the same. See? Regular old bread.”

Florian chuckled at that. “That's good to hear. Though, I'm not really a picky eater,” he said, starting to put a bit of everything on his plate, only to stop suddenly as a thought occurred to him. “Are, um... Are the stories about fae making people eat their food to trap them true?”

Jerah and Tatiana both stared at him for a long moment, eyes wide, until finally Jerah laughed aloud, shaking his head.

“No, that one isn't true!” he exclaimed. “I promise.”

“Okay...” Florian replied, eyeing his food suspiciously. But the other three had already started to eat, so he took a cautious bite and didn't feel any different afterward.

He stayed mostly silent during their meal, Jerah chattering animatedly enough for the rest of them, and Tatiana offering the occasional comment. Kade was just as quiet as usual, and the few glances in his direction that Florian risked went unnoticed. His eyes still gleamed a brilliant yellow-orange, even though they were no longer in the moonlight.

Just as Jerah had said, most of the food tasted recognizable, if not exactly what he expected. Some of the vegetables had a more earthy profile, the meat a little more gamey—but for the most part, nothing was so different as to be off-putting; the few things that he didn't recognize were perfectly palatable. Despite the sometimes awkward silence, it was overall a pleasant meal.

“Well, I'm certainly feeling better,” Jerah said, stretching in his chair. “Florian, how about I show you around the castle? Get you your bearings?”

“Oh,” Florian said, surprised. “Um, sure.”

“Call if you need me,” Tatiana said, standing up from her seat and exiting through the opposite door with a polite nod. Kade hesitated, then silently nodded at Jerah as well and followed Tatiana out the door. And then they were alone—the first time he had been alone with his father. But Jerah remained seated, looking at him with an expression that was entirely unreadable—helped in no small part by the way his eyes shone in the light as if they were glowing. That was going to take some getting used to.

“Um,” Florian started with uncertainty. “Should we go?”

Jerah gave a slight jump and scrambled to his feet, laughing nervously. “Of course, of course,” he said, gesturing for Florian to follow. “You, um. You wanted to see a picture of your mother, right?”

Florian blinked. That had been his whole reasoning for coming, but somehow he had not expected Jerah to present him with it so soon. With how badly his father seemed to want him to stay, he had almost expected the man to draw it out and make him wait.

“Yeah, I do,” he replied softly, and Jerah gave him a nod.

“Follow me,” he said, stepping toward the door without looking to see whether or not Florian followed. He had to jog to keep up with his long stride as they made their way through the corridors and up a flight of narrow stairs. They emerged at a spacious landing with a set of double doors on the

far end. Jerah stepped up to the doors, paused, then glanced back at Florian for the first time since they'd left the dining hall.

“These are my private quarters,” he said, sounding more nervous than Florian had expected. “There are a few other pictures in my study, but... We'll start here.”

“Okay,” Florian agreed, nodding. Jerah seemed to steel himself before opening the door and stepping inside. Florian followed.

The room was quite spacious, and it had clearly been kept clean and tidy in his absence, though Florian was unsure of how long he had been away. The door opened into a sitting area with a plush chair and a writing table of some sort. A large four-poster bed lay against the far wall under tall, airy windows that made the room feel well-lit, despite the dark stone and lack of direct sunlight. In the opposite corner was another door, closed. It looked comfortable, and not at all as ostentatious as Florian might have imagined; and he wondered what it meant that Jerah was a king, yet lived so simply.

“It's here on my desk,” Jerah said, his tone soft as he brushed past Florian to stand at the writing table. There were a few papers there, but he pushed past them to pick up a small picture frame, looking down at it for a moment, before he passed it to Florian.

The picture must have been of their wedding day. On the right side of the frame was a man Florian easily recognized as a younger Jerah, who was dressed in a dark formal outfit with golden accents and a deep red cravat tied loosely under the high, open collar of his shirt. Pressed to his smiling lips was the hand of the woman next to him. She was the same height as Jerah, with black curly hair framing her face and spilling loosely over her shoulders, and red roses braided into something of a flower crown atop her head. The dress she wore had a plunging neckline underneath black lace that covered her shoulders and arms. Her lips, a dark red, were pulled into a pleased smile. But while Jerah's warm amber eyes stared at her with obvious adoration, her eyes were a deep, intense blue that looked out of the frame and straight at him.

Florian had no memory of his mother's face, yet here she seemed somehow intimately familiar, as if he had always known the woman in the photo. Her smile was the same he had seen looking back at him in the mirror, he realized. His eyes were suddenly brimming with tears; he lifted his free hand to wipe them away, but couldn't bring himself to look away from the picture.

“I want you to keep this,” Jerah said softly, squeezing his shoulder. “It's... It's a shame to not have any pictures of her. So that's for you.”

“I couldn't,” Florian protested, but even as he said it, he knew he wouldn't be able to give it back.

“Please. I want you to have it,” Jerah insisted, and slowly Florian nodded. The taller man let out a long, slow sigh before speaking again.

“Florian, I... Inessa died only a few months before I sent you to live with August. I was grieving, and I was so afraid I was going to lose you, too. I completely understand that you may hold it against me forever, and I don't want to try and change how you feel, but please just know that I agonized over it and made what I truly thought was the best choice. I still don't know if I made the right choice in the end, but I have to live with it forever. I only wanted to protect you. More than anything.”

Inessa. He had only ever heard her name a few times before from August. Her name was Inessa.

“I know,” Florian said, barely above a whisper. When he finally allowed himself to pull his eyes away from the picture and look back up at his father, Jerah's face was stained with tears. When he noticed Florian looking at him, he pressed a hand to his eyes and wiped them away.

“Sorry,” he said, his voice breaking with a nervous laugh. “Sorry. This is... This is harder than I thought it was going to be.” He turned away and took a few anxious paces across the room, before stopping next to Florian once more. “Like I said, that one is for you to keep. But there are a few more in my study if you want to see them.”

“Yeah, that sounds good,” Florian said, nodding. He kept the picture frame cradled in his hands as Jerah led him back out of the room.

This time the trip was not so long, as Jerah led him across the landing and down another hallway, pushing another door open at the end of the hall. He had said it was his study, but it looked more like a library to Florian. It was larger than his bedroom with shelves along every wall that reached from floor to ceiling, stuffed with books and trinkets. A few other bookshelves were set up throughout the room with several different chairs and tables alongside them.

“Here we are,” Jerah said briskly, stepping past him to walk further into the room. “I think there are two more in here.”

“Do you take pictures with a regular camera?” Florian asked, the thought suddenly occurring to him, as he looked down at the picture frame in his hands once again. Jerah chuckled, looking back at him.

“The execution is a little different, but the basic mechanism is the same,” he replied, nodding. “Here, this was a painting we had commissioned when you were small.”

Florian stepped closer to him, looking at where he was pointing. Propped near the top of one of the bookshelves on the far side of the room was an oil painting on canvas depicting three figures. Jerah was instantly recognizable to him, sitting opposite Inessa. Her hair was shorter than in the photo he

held, and their clothes were less formal; but their smiles were just as wide as they looked out from the canvas. Between them was a child, a little girl of no more than three with dark wavy hair that barely hit her shoulders, wearing an uncertain, toothy smile. Florian laughed when he saw it; he had so few pictures of himself as a child that to see himself as a baby girl was more strangely amusing than anything else.

“This was before everything happened, of course,” Jerah said quickly.

“It doesn't bother me,” Florian replied, shaking his head.

“I'm glad,” Jerah said, sounding relieved. “She loved you very much. She would still love you so much. Everything we did was to keep you safe, to make the world safer for you to grow up in.”

Florian hesitated at that. “I know,” he said softly, but he didn't really know. He could only trust that Jerah was right.

“Here,” Jerah said, gesturing toward a portrait on the opposite wall. “This is the last one.”

This one was of Inessa alone. Here, she was wearing what appeared to be armor that gleamed in bright light: a silvery metal wrought with dark accents and curling, almost floral designs. Like the other pictures, she was smiling, but there was a sense of pride in her eyes that was notably different. Her arms were folded across her chest in a similarly confident pose, and coming up from her shoulder was the hilt of a sword that must have been strapped to her back.

“She was a fighter?” Florian asked, uncertain, as he looked up at it. “A warrior?”

“She was,” Jerah agreed. “She was fearless. Maybe to a fault. It was a Blight monster that got her in the end, while she was on an excursion... She did a lot of the heavy lifting so I could research. I hated going into the Blight, but she never complained. Sometimes I think she even enjoyed the danger.”

A small, bitter laugh escaped him, though his gaze remained firmly up at the portrait. “Sometimes I think maybe I could have protected her if I was there, but... She was always the better fighter between us. It wasn't even close. More likely, she'd just have to protect me.” Finally, he sighed and glanced back at Florian. “I still have her sword. If you wanted to learn to use it, I'm sure Kade would be happy to train you.”

“Kade?” Florian blurted, shooting him a startled look. “He's staying here?”

“Of course,” Jerah said, blinking in surprise. “Kade is... Well, Kade is partly my ward from the wolf clan, but he's partly my assistant and protector as well. He's lived here for close to five years now, ever since his father became too sick to come to the Winter Court.”

“So his family is like an ally of yours? Ours?” he asked. He was still unsure of the connection—for all he knew, Kade could very well be a cousin or some other relative, which would certainly be a bucket of cold water on the heat that he felt whenever he looked at the other man.

“Yes. The wolf clan has been sworn to the Winter Court since even before the days of the Nova Blight,” Jerah said, nodding. “They have been our greatest allies, even when the other clans fell away and focused on themselves.”

“How many clans are there?” Florian asked. At that, Jerah sighed, frowning.

“Three that I know for sure still exist,” he said, the despair in his voice obvious as he said it. “Wolves in the north, dragons and krakens in the east. There are rumors that the lion clan has survived by moving entirely underground, but I don't know how true that is. I wouldn't be surprised if a few clans managed to preserve at least some of their line in such a way, but if they have, they haven't been able to contact anyone outside of their clans since then, so...” He sighed heavily once more. Hearing the sadness in his voice, Florian wasn't sure if he wanted to know how many clans there had been in the first place.

“So the animals are like... a logo? A symbol?” Florian asked instead, frowning. Jerah paused, shooting him a strange look.

“Well, they're shifters,” he said, as if that explained it. Florian waited, but he didn't seem to offer any other explanation.

“What does that mean?” he asked more pointedly, and Jerah laughed aloud.

“You don't—? Sorry, I didn't realize you didn't know. No, they become the creature. That's how their magic works.”

“What?” Florian exclaimed. “Like... a werewolf?”

Jerah laughed again. “Sort of, yes. But they can control it and transform at will, not just during a full moon.”

“So Kade can turn into a wolf,” he said flatly, still unsure if he believed it.

“That's right.”

“And the other clans? They can turn into dragons? And... And *krakens*?”

“Right again. To be honest, seeing a kraken transform is just as unsightly as it sounds. Far too many limbs. The dragons are a little more graceful, but they're still rather... *long*.”

Florian burst out laughing at that, the absurdity of the whole situation catching up to him all at once. These mythical creatures were somehow real, they were in a magic world, and he could change his appearance seemingly at will. Just yesterday he had been walking on the beach with Nadia, talking

about taking a trip up to San Francisco, and wondering why his uncle was so reticent to let him move out. It may as well have been a lifetime ago.

“You alright?” Jerah asked, eyeing him nervously as he laughed. He must have looked like he'd finally lost it.

“Yeah, yeah,” Florian stammered, stifling his laughter. “Sorry. I just... This is all so crazy.”

“I'm sure it must be,” Jerah agreed, although he still looked unsure. “Why don't we wrap it up for the day, then? I'll take you to your room, and you can get some rest, have a bath... We can reconvene tomorrow and I can show you around the rest of the castle. How does that sound?”

“Yeah, I think that sounds good,” Florian agreed. Some time to process everything could only help. Jerah nodded wordlessly and led him back out of the study, carefully closing the door behind them. He followed his father down the stairs and through a few more hallways, giving no mind to the new passageways and various curiosities of the castle. His focus was on the picture still held between his hands; his eyes lingering on the face of his mother, unknown and familiar at the same time.

Jerah stopped in front of a wooden door that looked much like the rest, though this one stood alone in the short hallway where they'd arrived.

“Here we are,” he said, opening the door. “You should have everything you need, but if you end up needing anything else, feel free to call one of the servants.”

“How do I do that?”

“Ah,” he paused, considering the question. “Snap your fingers and channel a bit of magic into it, and that should do the trick.”

“Channel a bit of magic...?” Florian started, trailing off. “Well, I'll figure it out.”

“Or just come find me, or Tatiana. Or Kade, he's just around the corner from you to the right. We'd all be happy to help,” Jerah said, and Florian nodded, glancing away nervously.

“Alright,” he said, eager to be alone. “Goodnight.”

Jerah's expression softened as he smiled down at Florian. “Goodnight. I'll see you tomorrow.”

Florian nodded, and Jerah turned to go, his footsteps echoing loudly down the stone hallway.

The door closing behind him, Florian glanced around the room. It was as light and airy as Jerah's room had been, though the linens were plain, and there were no decorations on the wall—only a potted plant with trailing vines that draped down from the windowsill. His backpack had been carefully propped at the foot of the bed, and the second door on the opposite wall was slightly ajar, revealing a bathroom within. He carefully set the picture frame on the small writing desk next to the

bed, then unpacked his clothes from his backpack and hung them in the wardrobe that pushed up against the opposite wall. They were a bit wrinkled, but he supposed it couldn't be helped.

A bath sounded nice, but the exhaustion of the day had crept up on him all at once, and weariness weighed heavily on his eyes. He meant to lay down just for a bit before washing off the dirt and grime of the day; but by the time his head hit the pillow, he was asleep.

CHAPTER SIX

Florian woke with a start in the same darkness in which he had fallen asleep. At first he thought a sound had woken him, but the room was perfectly silent. He lay still and quiet, listening for a long moment. He had no idea what time it was—when the sun was supposed to rise, or if it would ever even be visible at all. It felt like he'd been asleep for a while, but he couldn't tell exactly how long it had been. More out of habit than a true belief it would work, he picked up his phone. The battery had long since died, not that it would have had any service here, of course. With a quick peek into the hallway, he could see that only one soft globule floated near the ceiling to bathe the corridor in a dim light.

It must have still been nighttime. Did they sleep at night? What were their sleeping schedules like in such frequent darkness? Already he could tell his internal circadian rhythm was thrown off, and he resigned himself to feeling something like jet lag for the next few days.

Despite his suspicion that it was probably quite early in the morning, he felt fully awake, so he decided to try and figure out the bathroom and wash up if he could. Luckily, it didn't seem too foreign—he could recognize the sink, toilet, and tub without issue. The faucet handles were a bit different, and there was what looked like a lever to switch between hot water and cold. Or maybe the lever was to turn it on and off, and the handle was for temperature? It took some fiddling, but finally he figured it out and set the tub to fill with warm water as he undressed.

Florian caught sight of himself in the mirror and froze, startled. He hadn't seen himself yet, but like the others, his eyes were almost glowing in the faint moonlight that came through the window. The same warm amber as his father's eyes gleamed back at him from the mirror—and as he looked closer, he could see his face was different too: a little more angular in the same way Jerah's had become when they crossed over into the Veil. Had he looked like this the whole time? Neither Jerah nor Kade had said anything, but he supposed it probably seemed normal to them.

He spent a long while inspecting his face in the mirror over the sink, and when he finally pulled away to turn off the water, he was met with another surprise. His chest, though still flat, had no scars.

When he had... transformed, when they first arrived, his scars must have gone with the shifting skin. He blinked in surprise at the smooth surface, feeling at first startled, then pleased, then conflicted all in quick succession. He had never been embarrassed about his scars, though he didn't exactly miss them either. It was a strange feeling, almost bittersweet somehow.

Mostly, he thought, he barely looked like himself. It was unsettling, so he furrowed his brows in concentration and watched in fascination as the tissue seemed to ripple and shift. Two thin scars spread across his chest, and his face shifted to look more familiar, a subtle softening of his nose and chin that made him feel more himself. Nothing could be done about the gleaming eyes, it seemed, but that seemed like a fun, harmless effect so far.

Hesitating, he glanced down between his legs. That had never really bothered him either, yet now he could change it at will... But *that* seemed like a lot to process first thing in the morning, so he decided to bathe first and see what he could do later.

"One step at a time," he muttered to himself, as he got into the tub and immediately forgot about anything other than the comforting warm water that washed away the previous day. The tub was deep, and long enough for him to stretch his legs and submerge himself nearly to his shoulders. He laid luxuriating in it until he had nearly fallen back asleep, and the water grew tepid.

Once it became uncomfortably cool, Florian roused enough to let the water drain, while running the warm tap again to quickly rinse his hair and scrub his body. A few different jars and bottles had been set up along the edge of the tub, and though he could not quite figure out what some of them were, the bar of soap seemed straightforward enough.

Finally, wrapped in a thick, fluffy towel, he returned to the bed and laid back down, feeling sleepy once again.

He didn't quite fall back asleep, dozing on and off for a little while, until a sharp knock at the door startled him to his feet.

"Coming!" he exclaimed, pulling the towel up and around his waist, as he reached for the doorknob with the other hand.

It hadn't occurred to him that it might be Kade knocking on his door; if it had, he wouldn't have opened it in only a towel. But it *was* Kade standing in the doorway, and he had to stop himself from immediately slamming it closed in his face out of panic.

"Uh, hi," he stammered, feeling his face burn, but doing his best to ignore it. Reflexively his hand tightened around the towel, pressing it more firmly against his skin. To his credit, Kade hesitated for only a split second, his eyes politely locked on a point over Florian's shoulder.

“Jerah just wanted me to tell you breakfast is in thirty minutes,” he said coolly, pausing for a moment before adding, “Sorry... I didn't realize you were bathing.”

“Um, that's okay,” he said, looking away. Kade turned to go when he blurted out, “I, um, I'm not sure how to get to the dining hall from here. Could you...” He trailed off as Kade glanced over his shoulder at him, meeting his eyes.

“Sure,” Kade replied after a beat of consideration. “I'll come get you.”

“Thanks,” Florian muttered, and before he could say anything else, he closed the door with a bit more force than might have been warranted. He stood there for a long moment and waited for the burning in his face to recede, before hearing the sound of Kade's footsteps echoing down the stone hallway.

When he finally felt like he could move again, he dressed quickly, fussing over his messy hair in front of the mirror for a long while. He hadn't thought to bring anything like gel or pomade with him, and nothing in the bathroom seemed like the equivalent. Although, he thought, could he change his hair that easily too? He glared at his hair in the mirror, willing it to lay the way he styled it. He watched as the texture changed slightly; his subtle waves became a bit more pronounced, still pointing in every direction instead of being pushed neatly to one side. With a sigh, he wet his hands and raked them through to manage the worst of it, but eventually resigned himself to having messy hair until he could find something to help tame it.

Somehow, he thought, his plain t-shirt and skinny jeans probably weren't exactly the height of fashion in the Veil. He had been distracted, but thinking back to when Kade had been at the door, he had seemed to be wearing something more tunic-like—loose and long-sleeved in a light, muted green. Florian wondered briefly if he could get some clothes that might fit in better, then he reminded himself in frustration that he wouldn't be staying long enough for it to matter. Though maybe he might like to come back to visit sometime.

He must have spent more time worrying over his hair than he thought because another knock was at the door now: three sharp knocks, the same as before. This time he took a steadying breath—*not like he's the only hot guy you've ever had to be around, Florian, chill out*—and opened the door. Kade was standing there exactly as before, his expression as politely disinterested as it always was.

“This way,” he said, gesturing for Florian to follow as he closed the door behind him. They walked in silence through a few corridors and down a staircase, emerging in the same dining hall where Jerah and Tatiana were already sitting.

“Good morning!” Jerah chirped as he caught sight of them, echoed more quietly by Tatiana sitting across from him. “Hope you slept well.”

“I think so,” Florian said, nodding. “I think I woke up really early, but... My phone stopped working so I wasn't sure what time it was.”

“It can be a little disorienting,” Jerah said, nodding. “I'll make sure someone brings up a clock for you if there wasn't one already in your room. Ready to check out the rest of the castle today?”

“Sure,” Florian replied, sitting down next to him. Kade sat down on the opposite side of the table across from Tatiana, and Florian let his eyes linger for only a moment before turning his attention to the food set out in front of them. As they ate, Jerah chattered on about the different parts of the castle that they would visit, though Florian didn't retain much of what was said. While the food was mostly unfamiliar, it wasn't bad; and to his immense relief they did seem to have coffee, which he gladly drank.

“Ready?” Jerah asked the moment he was done eating, looking eagerly at Florian. “You can bring the coffee with you. Let's go!”

“Ah, sure,” Florian replied, standing up. On the other side of Jerah, Tatiana gave an indulgent laugh and waved them away.

“Have fun,” she said. To Florian's dismay, Kade also moved like he was about to stand.

“No need, Kade, no need,” Jerah said quickly, gesturing for him to sit back down. Kade paused, then nodded and sat back down to finish his meal.

They left the dining hall through a different door that led to the castle grounds. It was still dark out, though there was a slight streak of what might have been light from the rising sun on the horizon.

Jerah first led him through a different garden, explaining the differences between the front garden and the back garden that they had walked through before. Once they had completed the winding circuit, he led them back through the large main entrance, which opened into a spacious foyer with multiple corridors and hallways that lead in many different directions.

“I'll just show you the interesting parts,” Jerah said with a laugh, noticing Florian eyeing the many different routes.

“Sounds good to me,” Florian chuckled, following as Jerah led him up another staircase.

Again, Florian noted that overall the castle was on the minimalist side, contrary to his expectation. Still, it had a certain austere beauty that spoke to its status as the home of the fae king.

Jerah showed him a full library, much larger than his study, and a ballroom with huge stained glass windows on every wall. There were protective covers over some large instrument and various pieces

of furniture, and Florian thought that it must have been a long time since the space had seen any use. Then he realized: they hadn't seen anyone else the entire time they'd been walking.

“Doesn't anyone else live here?” he blurted, and Jerah looked over his shoulder at him with a grimace.

“Well, not right now,” he confessed, looking uncomfortable at the question. “There are a few people who work here, of course—mainly in the kitchens and the grounds, since the spectral servants can't do anything quite so intensive. They live on the grounds or down the hill in town, where the rest of the fae live. Maybe I can give you a tour of that next time.” There was a lilting tone of hope as he said *next time*.

“Maybe,” Florian replied, though even as he said it he thought that he would certainly like to return. Eventually.

Jerah showed him around a few more rooms of the castle, before they ended up back on the floor with his study and personal quarters.

“Well, you've seen all this,” Jerah said. “But since we're here, I wanted to tell you a bit more about, well, everything that's happened. Is that alright? We can sit in the study, and I can have some refreshments brought up.”

“Sure,” Florian replied nervously, unsure what had brought on the conversation. But he followed Jerah back into the study, and they sat down across from each other in plush lounge chairs with a low coffee table between them. Jerah snapped, and a shadowy presence appeared next to him.

“Bring us some tea and snacks, please,” he said, and the shape drifted away to complete its assigned task.

As they sat across from each other, for the first time that day Jerah seemed at a loss for words; he went through a strange array of sighing and shifting uncomfortably in his seat before he spoke once more.

“I know you said you didn't want to stay,” he started. “And I completely respect that. But I did want to tell you more about the Veil, so you can understand why I sent you away, and why I came back for you now.”

That seemed tame enough. Florian nodded and gestured for him to continue.

“The Nova Blight came about because of Queen Soleil,” Jerah said, echoing what he had told Florian two days before. “But there are some things that I've been able to find out that aren't as well-known. The first being that Soleil created a way to end the Nova Blight. A failsafe, of sorts.”

Florian blinked, the admission taking a long moment to register.

“What?” he finally stammered, furrowing his brows. “She made a way to end it? But then why is it still here?”

“She made a way, and there was one person or perhaps a group that used it,” Jerah said, looking down at his hands folded firmly in his lap. “But they didn't understand how to use it, and something went wrong, and they failed. That's what caused the Blight to expand the way it did. So there's a specific way to use it, but it's unclear how.”

At that moment the door swung open, a silver tray floating in the air. Florian jumped, then realized the spectral servant had returned, its outline barely visible as it floated toward them and set the tray down on the table. Jerah chuckled but took a cup from the tray, bringing it to his lips and gesturing for Florian to help himself.

“Well, what is it? What stops it?” Florian asked, as the spectral servant faded away. The explanation seemed somehow more confusing than what Jerah had already told him.

“The seven Golden Arrows of Soleil,” Jerah said. “Powerful magical artifacts that are intended to pierce the heart of Soleil herself, if I'm understanding them right. They were scattered when the first group failed, but I've been searching for many years now, and I think I have a solid idea of where each of them are. I have a map I can show you, if you'd like.”

“And you need all seven?” Florian asked. Jerah nodded, taking a long moment to consider his words before speaking again.

“All I've been able to find out is that it's meant to pierce the heart of Soleil. That the arrows are supposed to have an inscription saying just that—*pierce the heart of summer*. I know that sounds straightforward, but there must be more to it, since her first rescuers failed so spectacularly. But I haven't been able to find any other information on it, so I don't know what I'm missing.”

Florian considered it for a long moment. If it had failed in the first place, then there must have been more to the puzzle that hadn't been considered; but it seemed that Soleil hadn't exactly made a user manual for her arrows.

“So they got scattered? But they're supposed to be used together?” he asked, probing.

“That's correct,” Jerah said. “I've narrowed down locations for all of them. I wanted to... I hoped to make things as easy as possible for you when you returned—if you returned.” He corrected himself quickly, but there was still the same irritating hope in his voice.

“And what's the second thing?” Florian asked, still mulling over the conundrum.

“The second,” Jerah said, then sighed. “The second is quite scandalous, actually. Queen Soleil had a lover, a human man, who she'd brought into the Veil and kept hidden for years. I don't know how

long exactly, but a long time.”

Florian blinked. Distantly, he thought he should be surprised, but for some reason the admission felt... familiar? He couldn't place it. His voice felt faraway as he said, “I thought you said humans can't come to the Veil?”

“They can't,” Jerah agreed. “At least, they aren't supposed to be able to. But somehow she had brought him through. From my understanding, it was something of an open secret within the Summer Court. And in the first years after the Blight took over the court, the general consensus was that Soleil had tried to make him a fae, but failed, and—”

“And he died,” Florian finished. He had no idea where the words were coming from, but somehow he *knew*—knew exactly how the story ended. Somehow he knew it was a tragedy. Jerah's head snapped up at the admission; his eyes first wide, then narrowing in a frown.

“He did,” he replied slowly. “Florian, how did you know that?”

“I don't know,” Florian confessed, and amidst the confusion that his own words had elicited in him, his whole chest was suddenly flooded with grief. He gasped—the bone-deep sorrow making his eyes burn with tears—and across from him Jerah stood up abruptly. “W-What's happening? What's happening to me?” His voice broke as he said it, beginning to weep in earnest.

“I don't know,” Jerah said under his breath, before murmuring something Florian couldn't make out. He reached out to touch Florian's shoulder, his fingers suddenly sparkling with a soft purplish light, but he could barely focus on it. All he could think of was the ache in his heart, the tears suddenly pouring from his eyes like a broken dam. And the *longing* to go back—go back where? He had never been here, much less the Summer Court. How could he so desperately miss somewhere he had never been, someone he had never known?

Heat bloomed from his shoulder where Jerah touched him. It wasn't painful, though the heat spread quickly from his shoulder through his chest like tiny searching tendrils. The warmth was soothing somehow. He focused on that, on calming his breathing, until he could stop the tears from coming and look up at Jerah clearly. Across from him, his father's brow was furrowed in confusion; although the warmth dissipated, he kept his hand on Florian's shoulder as he spoke softly once more.

“Did you see anything?” he asked, meeting Florian's eyes. “Or just feel it?”

“No, I—I only felt it,” Florian stammered, shaking his head and wiping his eyes. Now that the tears had stopped, he was only confused. “I don't know where that came from. I don't know what... When you started talking about Soleil, all of a sudden it was like... Like I missed her. But how could I miss her? Even you never knew her.”

“I don't know,” Jerah repeated, shaking his head as he finally broke the contact to sit back down. His eyes lingered on Florian in concern. “I would guess it might be related to this... *prophecy* about you, your connection to her and whatever happened in the Summer Court. But I don't know. That's why I had hoped we could have you go see the witch, to see if she can tell you anything else that she couldn't tell me.”

Florian finally looked away at that. Did he really still want to go home? There was clearly something going on here: something that involved him. At first he had scoffed at the idea of a prophecy having any kind of sway over him or what he did, but now... He didn't know what any of it meant. He could only think of the longing he had just felt, smothering him like an ocean wave.

Something in his heart yearned to stay, to *know*. And much as he was loath to admit it, his own curiosity was getting the better of him now. Only two days ago he had been talking with Nadia about what a shame it was that he had never been very far from Coral Shore, and now he was in an entirely new world that seemed to have been holding its breath—waiting for him to discover it.

“Could we go there?” Florian asked, barely above a whisper. He couldn't bring himself to look at Jerah as he said it. “Go talk to her, the witch?”

The question hung heavy between them in the silence that followed, as Jerah seemed to consider it.

“Not anytime soon,” he finally answered, his voice soft. “It's far, and dangerous. But I could help you, train you. Teach you to control your own magic, and Kade can show you how to fight, so we could all go there together.”

“How long would that take?” Florian asked, looking down at his feet.

“I'm not sure. I'd give it a few weeks at least, maybe a month. It would depend on how fast of a learner you are. If we were heading out to the witch, I think we could go get one of the Arrows, too. There's one not terribly far from here, in the direction we'd have to go anyway. The hag's home is in the Blight. We couldn't get there from Earth, so you would need to know how to defend yourself.”

Florian nodded slowly. “Okay... Okay.” Though Jerah remained silent, waiting for him to continue, he could practically feel the question radiating off of him. *Do you want to stay?*

He hadn't thought he would. But now that he was here, and he could *feel* his connection to this place—what would he do if he went back to Earth? Keep working at his uncle's souvenir shop until... Until what? How could he go back now?

“I want to stay,” he said quietly, feeling embarrassed even as he said it. But it was the truth now: he wanted to stay. He wanted to *know*.

Jerah let out a soft sigh, a breath he must have been holding. When Florian finally looked back up at him, his expression was one of cautious joy, but mostly relief.

“I'm glad to hear you say that,” he answered, reaching out to lightly squeeze Florian's hand. “I'm.. I'm happy to have the chance to spend more time with you. Maybe that's selfish of me, but I had hoped you would change your mind.”

Florian shook his head, but was unsure of what else to say. He didn't know how to explain his thoughts.

“It's not selfish,” he muttered. “You're my dad. I'm, uh, I'm glad you want to spend time with me.”

Jerah laughed at that, finally easing some of the tension between them.

“I've wanted nothing more for a long time, Florian,” he said fondly, and he stood once more. “Are you alright? Can you stand?”

Shakily, Florian got to his feet. He felt fine despite the conflict of emotions still roiling in his chest. The strange despair that had seized him was gone now, but he still felt nervous, confused, and worried about what all this meant, and what would happen next.

“I'm okay,” he said, nodding. “Did you have more you were going to tell me?”

“Maybe tomorrow. I don't want to push it in case something else surfaces,” Jerah said, sending another spike of worry through Florian's chest. He seemed to sense his uncertainty and added, “Instead, why don't I give you a bit of a magic lesson?”

“Sure,” Florian agreed with a grateful nod, following him back out of the study.

CHAPTER SEVEN

They spent most of the afternoon in the front courtyard of the castle's main entrance, as Jerah explained the rules of fae magic and guided Florian through a few simple exercises. It came easily to him—part of him felt like he shouldn't be surprised—and the pride in Jerah's face rivaled his own awe as he summoned in his hand a glowing orb of light, just like the orbs that lit the castle interior.

“See? All you have to do is speak it into existence,” Jerah said, grinning at him. “Just remember there has to be a target, even if it's yourself. If there's no one there to hear it, to be affected by it, then the words aren't of any use.”

“Right,” Florian said with a nod, though his attention was still on the glowing light in his hand. Though the orbs in the castle seemed to last indefinitely, it felt as though the light might flicker out and vanish the moment he lost focus.

“We can keep having lessons like this,” Jerah continued. “I'll have Kade let August know you'll be staying here, but I can have him start sparring lessons with you tomorrow. He should show you how to shift, too.”

“Shift?” Florian repeated incredulously, the light vanishing from his hand as he looked up at Jerah with no small amount of trepidation. “Like turn into a wolf?”

“Of course,” Jerah said flatly, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. “You're a Changeling, after all. You should be able to shift just like him, like any shifter, once you've seen them do it.”

“I don't know,” he said, shaking his head. It had already been hard enough to wrap his head around being able to change his appearance whenever and however he wanted. Turning into something else entirely seemed far more impossible. “I mean, I guess I can try, but...”

“That's all I ask,” Jerah said with a nod.

As they'd been practicing, Florian had seen a few other fae for the first time: workers that gave them a wide berth as they tidied the courtyard and the gardens, and a few heading into the castle with polite waves to Jerah and curious glances toward him. He wasn't sure whether or not they had any

idea who he was. Though their eyes all gleamed in the faint daylight that itself seemed more like the pale light of dawn, they otherwise looked perfectly normal.

Lost in thought, Florian didn't notice that the person approaching them from the castle was not another fae, but Kade.

"You wanted to see me?" he asked, coming to stand in front of Jerah.

"I did," Jerah said, nodding. "Can you send a message back to August for me? Let him know Florian is going to be staying for a while longer, so he doesn't need to worry that he's not back yet."

Kade's eyes flickered over to Florian as he said it, but looked back to Jerah after only a brief moment of consideration, his expression unchanging.

"Of course," he replied with a nod. "I'll go now." He turned and walked away, just as abruptly as he'd arrived.

"Does he have to go all the way back to the portal?" Florian asked incredulously, watching him leave.

"Unfortunately," Jerah said, leaning back with a sigh. "There's no way to make contact between worlds, so he'll have to pass through the curtain, give August a call, then return. It's a bit of a walk, but he's quite capable."

"A... call?" Florian repeated, brow furrowed.

"Of course. I mean, cell phones aren't a thing here, but it's convenient to have for when we're Earthside."

That was somehow unexpected. Of all the strange things that he'd learned in the past few days, this hardly topped the list, but for some reason this in particular seemed to tickle him. Imagining his father, who had just been showing him how to conjure magic, carrying around a cell phone—or serious, apparently-werewolf *Kade*—seemed comical.

"Sorry, I don't mean to laugh," he stammered, realizing he'd been chuckling at the thought. "I just... Didn't expect that to be the way you'd contact him."

"Well, magic doesn't work on Earth," Jerah protested, though he was grinning as he said it. "We don't need to use them often, but it'd be worse to have no way of reaching anyone on the other side."

"Of course," Florian agreed, though he'd broken out into a full-on laugh now. "Of course."

"Well, I think that's all we'll do for today," Jerah chuckled, waving his hand. "I have some of my own business to attend to, so why don't you go explore and relax until dinner, then we'll regroup to plan for tomorrow?"

“Sure,” he said. Jerah led him back inside the castle, heading down one of the side corridors, while Florian headed up the main steps.

So much of the castle was the same, however fantastic; and before he knew it, Florian felt his mind begin to wander over the day’s lessons. The magic had come to him easily enough. So far, it seemed as simple as paying particular attention to his words, and focusing as he said them, then the power flowed from those words with no extra effort on his part. His magic was not as effortless as his father’s, but he hoped that would come with time and practice.

Then all at once, Florian realized that he was lost. He wandered for a few moments longer, trying and failing to get his bearings. “I need one of those servants to help me,” he muttered, focusing on the summons as he spoke. And with a familiar faint pop, one of the shadowy, barely-visible figures appeared at his side.

“Will you show me back to my room?” Florian asked. One of its faint arms came up and gestured for Florian to follow, then it began to drift down the corridor, matching his speed as he followed.

The servant led him back the way he came, turning to the left at a junction where Florian must have taken the wrong turn. From there things started looking more familiar, and when they went up another staircase, Florian knew where he was. But he let the servant lead him all the same, until it stopped in front of his door, gestured once more, then vanished.

The early start to his day was catching up to him, so he laid down on the bed that had been made in his absence, closing his eyes and ruminating over the day’s events. Just this morning he had anticipated that he might spend one more day here before heading home. And now... Now, this would be his home for the foreseeable future. He would really have to ask about more clothes now, smiling to himself as he fell asleep.

When he opened his eyes again, Florian noticed that a clock had indeed been brought to the room for him, sitting on the small writing table that had remained bare so far. It was just past four in the afternoon now, or so the clock told him; but he was glad at least that they measured time here in much the same way. Jerah had called the Veil a “mirror” of the Earth, so he supposed something as basic as time might be the same, but who could say for sure?

Jerah had told him that dinner would be at six, so he had over an hour to kill until then. He ended up in front of the floor-length mirror in his room, looking at himself again, and consciously altering his face a little bit at a time. He watched the skin shift with some trepidation as his face became unfamiliar, then back again until he recognized himself.

He thought of making himself taller, focusing on the way he'd changed his face and pushing the sensation toward his legs. The ache in his bones was immediate and made him gasp: the sensation of growing pains instantly familiar, though it had been years since he'd felt it. When he opened his eyes after wincing in pain, he had gained well over an inch of height, and he could see a sliver of his ankles peeking out through the hem of his pants. He laughed at the sight—it wasn't a problem he had ever had before. The difference in vantage point was strange and unfamiliar, so with an exhaled breath he let himself shrink back to what felt like his natural height—maybe just a tiny bit taller.

A hard knock rapped on the door once more, familiar to him now as the sharp knocks of Kade's fist. He must have returned from contacting August.

Sure enough, Kade stood outside the door, though he looked less disinterested than he had this morning, meeting Florian's gaze steadily.

“King Jerah told me you're going to be training with me starting tomorrow,” he said. “I thought maybe we could... Well. How much of the castle has Jerah shown you?”

“Oh, uh... Most of it, I think,” Florian replied, unable to get a read on Kade's expression.

“Did you see the Moon Garden?”

“Moon Garden?” he asked blankly, and the tiniest hint of a grin played at Kade's lips.

“It's my favorite place in the castle,” he said, and Florian blinked, surprised to think of Kade having a favorite *anything*. “Come on, I'll show you. That's where we'll practice, too.”

“Sure,” Florian stammered, before he could psych himself out of it. He was sure this was the longest conversation they'd had so far, and now Kade wanted to *spend time* with him? And they'd be alone, for the first time since they'd met—his heart started hammering at the thought.

Luckily, Kade had already turned to head back down the hallway, giving him no time to second-guess his decision as he closed the door behind him and hurried to follow. Kade led him back out of the castle onto the grounds, heading toward the back garden. He took an unfamiliar turn, then led them through an archway that seemed to loop around back toward the castle, following a narrow, pale stone path that twisted and turned between the castle's towers. They walked in silence, Kade never looking back to see if Florian was following.

Soon the path opened into a large circular courtyard, surrounded with deep green foliage and tall marble statues. True to its name, despite the first traces of dusk only just beginning to emerge, Florian looked up and saw clearly the moon shining down from the center of the circular courtyard.

“This is really beautiful,” Florian said softly, looking around. Finally, Kade turned back around to look at him—again with that faint hint of a smile on his face that softened his eyes.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “It has the same enchantment as the observatory, so you can always see the moon. I come here often. But it works well for training and practicing, too. It's pretty private.”

Florian nodded, still looking around. A few flickers of movement caught his eye—at first it looked like the moonlight glinting off of leaves, moving gently in the slight breeze; but as he looked more closely, there were just a small handful of amber lights, dancing like fireflies through the air. When he glanced back at Kade, his eyes were illuminated by the soft glow of the moon as he looked up, golden orange in the flickering, floating light of the garden.

“Jerah said I can transform, like you do,” Florian found himself saying. Kade glanced over at him, their eyes meeting. This time Florian forced himself to keep eye contact, despite the nerves it elicited in him. “But I don't... I don't know how that would work.”

Kade's head tilted almost imperceptibly. “I don't know for sure. But you're a Changeling, so that would make sense. Maybe you need to see it first.”

“That's what I was thinking,” he said, and this time he could hear the nervousness in his own voice, though Kade had no visible reaction to it. “But I didn't know if it was, like... rude to ask or something.”

Kade chuckled at that, a grin crinkling the corners of his eyes for just a moment, as he took a step back.

“Not rude,” he said, and closed his eyes. “Watch.”

Florian nodded and watched. It was subtle and imperceptible at first, but his body began to glow with a golden orange light, the same color as his eyes; as the light grew brighter, the shape of his body began to both shrink and elongate. It was almost blinding, and Florian couldn't make out any details, but when it faded away, a huge, gray-furred wolf stood in Kade's place—its eyes the same gently glowing canine orange. It looked up at Florian quizzically, taking a step towards him.

“Wow,” he said softly, looking the wolf over. Somehow it still sort of looked like Kade, even though it was a picturesque timber wolf—it was his eyes, Florian realized. His stoic eyes were still the same as they had been as a human.

They looked at each other for a moment, then Kade made a bowing sort of gesture with his head.

“Right,” Florian stammered, remembering he was supposed to try transforming as well. He took in a steadying breath and closed his eyes, thinking of the way Kade had shifted: his body glowing and morphing. Though he pushed his magic through his body as he envisioned himself in a new form—in much the same way as when he'd changed his height earlier—he didn't feel anything happening. When he opened his eyes again after a moment, he was clearly still a human—or rather, a fae.

Across from him, Kade tilted his head as if wondering what he was doing.

“It didn't work,” Florian said, looking at his hands for a moment, then looking back over at Kade.

“Any ideas?”

The wolf blinked, then after a moment stepped closer to Florian. He knew it was Kade, but some primal part of him still sent a spike of fear leaping into his throat as the wolf approached. But Kade seemed to sense it, and he paused before taking a slower step forward, his ears pricked up curiously and his tail slowly swishing back and forth, as if to say he came in peace.

“What are you thinking?” he asked nervously, eyeing Kade as the huge wolf stepped closer to him—and to his surprise, the wolf pressed his face into Florian's hands, nudging his fingers through the soft fur on the top of his head and down to the scruff of his neck. “Really? Petting you?”

Kade's head turned, his ears tilting back slightly; his annoyed expression seemed so entirely human in the moment that Florian couldn't stifle the laugh that escaped his mouth. “Okay, sorry, I get it. You think touching you will make it work?”

Kade bobbed his head once in a definite nod.

“You're soft,” Florian said, running his hands through the wolf's fur down the length of his body—then, remembering it was still in fact Kade and not a dog despite his appearance, yanked them away in embarrassment. “S-Sorry. I don't know if that's, like, rude or... I really don't mean to be creepy or anything.”

Kade's eyes softened, his ears pulling back; and somehow Florian knew that he was laughing at him. The wolf tossed his head once as if saying no, then stepped away from Florian, letting the length of his body brush against Florian's legs as he went. Turning to look back at him, he made another bowing sort of gesture, and Florian closed his eyes to try again.

This time, the little spark of magic that he pushed through his body felt like it *caught* on something, and he hissed at the tearing, painful sensation that radiated through him all at once. He tried to pull back, but it was already too late, and he could feel his body shifting and morphing—getting lower to the ground, his center of gravity dropping all at once.

He started to cry out, as if every bone in his body were aching with growing pains all at once; but the noise that escaped him didn't sound like his voice, but like a growl.

And as quickly as the sensation had overtaken him, it was gone. He was lower to the ground, now standing eye-to-eye with Kade. He stepped back nervously, and the strange motion of all four limbs moving to carry him made him jerk to a stop. His ears pressed back flat to his head as worry bubbled up in his chest, but he couldn't speak. He could only look over at Kade nervously for guidance.

Kade stepped up alongside him; Florian realized that he had lowered himself to the ground, and his tail was tucked between his legs. His movements had been entirely instinct, but he couldn't bring himself to stand back up to his full height. Why was he fearful?

And then he could—he could *smell* what Kade was trying to say to him? Somehow that made him more frightened, but the thought came through clearly.

It's all right. Don't be scared.

Kade's ears were pricked up, his tail straight and slightly wagging. His eyes were big and bright, watching him intently. He took a few steps closer to Florian, moving slower this time and slinking lower to the ground. His snout came up and nudged Florian along the side of his face, snuffling into his ear, before moving down the scruff of his neck. They were all comforting gestures that somehow made him feel a bit less nervous.

Maybe he shouldn't have tried this so soon. Changing his appearance had been one thing, but becoming another creature entirely? It still felt alien and difficult: his movements clumsy and unpracticed as he took a few cautious steps and watched Kade circle around him. While he could certainly understand how Kade was communicating with him, he had no idea if his own thoughts were coming through at all.

It's all right. You're safe. Go slow.

He hesitated, feeling his ears still pressed flat along the back of his skull. Straining, he tried to think toward Kade, *Can you understand me?*

Kade sneezed, almost as if he were laughing. *I hear you.*

Finally his pounding heart—the sensation in an entirely different place now—slowed enough that he could take in his surroundings a bit more easily. Colors were dimmer, and his line of vision wasn't as far; but now that he was focusing, he could hear all sorts of noises where in the courtyard there had once been only silence. The rustle of the leaves, the sound of Kade breathing, his own heart hammering—and more distantly, he heard footsteps and the other sounds of life coming from within the castle and echoing through the grounds.

See? he felt from Kade as the wolf stepped up to him. Though the colors of his fur were not as differentiated compared to how he'd seen him as a fae, the brightness of his eyes still came through clearly. *It's different, but good.*

Yeah, he agreed, tossing his head in a nod. He caught a glance of his feet—his paws—and as he did, he began to look over himself, as much as he could with his head now at a different angle to the rest of his body. That would take some getting used to. As he craned his neck, then spun in a circle, he

could see that his fur was jet black all over. He could be a different color if he wanted, Florian thought, but somehow the black felt fitting.

Suits you, Kade answered, before he even realized how obvious his thoughts must have been.

For one frightening moment he wondered if Kade could sense *all* of his thoughts now, and embarrassment flooded him at the possibility—though he did not feel that all too familiar sense of heat rising in his face. But Kade didn't seem to react to *that*, so he decided to just be careful of his thoughts for now, and he would ask when he shifted back.

Follow, he felt more than heard from Kade. When he looked back over, the wolf had taken a few steps out of the courtyard, looking back at him with eager anticipation, so Florian followed. After a few steps, he was already getting the hang of walking with four limbs instead of two.

They trotted along the winding path that had led them to the courtyard, and Florian marveled at the fact that he'd seen more emotion from Kade as a wolf than he'd ever seen on his face or in his voice while he was in human form. Though he was no exuberant golden retriever, there was a certain doglike playfulness to him in this form. Maybe he liked his wolf form better, he wondered—or maybe it was just the novelty of showing it to someone who had never seen it before.

When they reached the end of the stone path and were back in the main garden, Florian felt again from Kade—*Follow!*—but he hardly had time to react before the gray wolf had broken into a run, dashing into the garden. He didn't even have to think. The moment he saw Kade start to run, mouth open and ears pressed back, he too broke into a run and instinctually chased him through the bushes and trees.

Had he ever felt so excited just to run before? It felt as if joy radiated outward from him each time his paws hit the earth, so unbridled that it couldn't be contained within his body. If he could, he would have been full-on belly laughing as he chased Kade around the garden, earthy and floral scents filling his nostrils.

Then as suddenly as he'd started, Kade stopped, whirling to face him and lowering his body in a play bow with his ears straight up.

Play!

Florian scrambled to a stop, his body instinctively lowering to mirror the play bow; and they watched each other motionlessly for a moment until Kade lunged at him. Though his teeth flashed, and a growl escaped Florian's throat as they jumped toward each other, there was no hostility as they wrestled. The only thing he could sense coming from Kade was *fun*.

He could feel a sharp nibble from Kade's front teeth near his ears, and he darted away, turning back to jump and pressing his forelegs into Kade's shoulders. Without thinking, he answered the play bite, his teeth pressing through the thick fur around his neck—

A yelp escaped the other wolf, and Florian leapt away, suddenly frightened.

Stop! was the only thing Florian could make out from the jumble of emotions coming off of Kade, as he slunk a few steps away. *Hurt.*

Before Florian realized what was happening, the wolf was engulfed with light. In an instant, Kade's human form sat in front of him, pressing a hand to the side of his neck with a wince. When he pulled his hand away, it was smeared with blood.

Instantly, Florian felt so ashamed that he thought he would die. His ears pressed flat to the back of his skull, tail firmly tucked between his legs, as he lowered himself to the ground.

"It's alright," Kade said, sitting down next to him with a grimace. "I shouldn't have pushed. It's a lot to get used to. My fault." Hesitantly, he reached over and patted the top of Florian's head twice with his clean hand. "Do you think you can change back?"

All he could focus on was the sharp, coppery scent of blood filling his nostrils, and for a long moment, he couldn't process what Kade had said. The blood overpowered his senses. It must have been apparent on his face, as Kade's voice lowered and he repeated carefully,

"Florian, can you change back now?"

The sound of his name coming from Kade's voice finally snapped him out of it. Hopefully changing back would be the same as shifting in the first place. He focused on the sensation of his magic and pushed it through his body. This time, while there was discomfort, it was not the same pain as when he had first shifted. In a moment, he found himself sprawled on his stomach on the ground.

"I'm sorry," he stammered the moment that he found his voice, scrambling backward away from Kade and struggling to get to his feet. "I'm—I'm really sorry."

Kade held up a placating hand.

"It's all right." He inspected his other hand that had been pressed to his neck. It still came away bloody, but the wound didn't seem to be bleeding any more. "I didn't consider how you'd still have to deal with the first shift, too. It can be... a lot. My fault."

Florian shook his head, unsure of what else to say. To his surprise, a wryly amused sort of look flashed across Kade's face for a moment before he spoke again.

"I won't tell your father if you don't," he said. Florian blinked at him for a long moment—stupefied—then he started to laugh, nervously at first; but when the smallest hint of a grin twitched at Kade's

mouth, the laugh came more out of relief than anything else.

“Definitely,” Florian agreed with a nod. “I won't tell him. I am really sorry, though.”

“Apology accepted. Really, though, it's fine. I've had much worse,” Kade answered, wiping the bloody hand on his pants. The smear of blood barely showed on the dark fabric. “We'll meet in the Moon Garden tomorrow to train. From what I understand, your dad has you for the morning, then you'll come train with me in the afternoon.”

“That's news to me,” Florian replied, but he nodded. “I'll see you then?”

“Of course,” he said, before turning to head out of the garden. Florian smiled to himself, watching how closely Kade followed the path with his usual heavy steps, when only minutes ago they had bounded and crashed through bushes and plants on their way through the garden.

Still, his embarrassment lingered uncomfortably in his stomach. Kade really hadn't seemed bothered, but his face was hard to read. He did seem to be warming up to him, at least to some extent: this had been the longest one-on-one interaction they'd had, and Kade seemed to be a decent conversationalist, despite Florian's awkwardness. And there had been so much energy and exuberance radiating off of him in wolf form—he had no idea what to make of *that*.

Florian shook the thoughts from his head, heat rising in his face. If he really was going to do this and stay here, he needed to stay focused. Getting distracted with a crush would only be detrimental, no matter how handsome he was.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The next morning, Jerah woke him bright and early. For how little sunlight there was, Florian thought bitterly as he freshened up and dressed himself, it seemed everyone here was a morning person. But Jerah's bright chatter over breakfast was contagious, and by the time they had arrived back in his study to start their lessons, Florian had shaken off the last lingering dregs of sleep and was now feeling more eager than he had anticipated.

“What are we starting with?” he asked as Jerah sat down opposite him across a table with a small stack of books atop it.

“History,” Jerah said, and Florian's heart sank a little bit—that sounded much less interesting than the magic he'd so recently learned. Jerah seemed to notice the shift in his expression and laughed. “I know, I know. But there are rules to our magic, and knowing the context of them will help. I think this book is a good starting point.”

With a sigh Florian took the book that Jerah handed to him. While he certainly hadn't been a poor student, he was no scholar either. He liked to read well enough, but it had been a while since he'd purposefully sat down with a book. The prospect of getting through an entire history book was wholly unappealing; but to his surprise, Jerah pulled a second copy of the same book from the small pile in front of them and started flipping through it.

“Here, this chapter,” he said, pointing to a page. “Let's go over it together.”

Florian followed along as Jerah read aloud, standing up to pace in front of the table as he did so. The chapter was about the establishment of the fae courts and their differences, including an explanation of their relationship to the shifter clans. From what he could tell, there was no functional difference between fae of the Winter Court and those of the Summer Court other than geographical—but then Jerah started talking about Spring and Autumn courts, and Florian frowned in confusion.

“Wait, how many courts are there?” he interrupted.

“Well, only one, now,” Jerah answered, lowering the book. A pained expression crossed his eyes briefly as he looked over at Florian. “The Spring and Autumn courts were close enough to the

Summer Court that they did not survive, unfortunately. There were a handful of fae who lived and made it here, but their families are part of the Winter Court now.”

“I see,” Florian said, though he still had more questions than answers. Jerah paused, as if waiting for him to continue; but when a beat of silence had passed, and he hadn't asked any more questions, Jerah started to recite from the book once more.

It was all rather dry in the end. Jerah had said it was going to relate to the rules of magic, but as far as Florian could tell there was no connection: only a list of names of varying individuals who had apparently founded each of the courts, which meant nothing to him. He hoped that maybe his father would explain further, but by the time they had finished the chapter, he set the book down with a sigh.

“I think that's enough reading for today,” he said decisively, standing up to stretch. “Let's practice something a little more fun instead.”

“Sure,” Florian laughed, standing up as well.

“Nothing too crazy, mind you. I don't want to ruin any of my books,” Jerah laughed. “Listen. Like I said, it's usually considered rude to use your magic on another fae without permission, but let's practice some of that. If you do end up needing it, it'll come in handy. For example...” A grin spread across his face. “For example, you can't see me.”

Florian blinked, and Jerah was gone. “W-What?” he stammered, glancing around.

“You can't see me,” Jerah repeated. His voice was coming from the same place where he had been standing, but when Florian tried to look at him, it was as if his eyes were pushed away, unable to focus on the spot where he knew Jerah must still be. “But you can use your magic to change that. Focus.”

“How?” Florian asked, but no answer came. He hesitated, thinking—all it had taken was for Jerah to *say* that he couldn't be seen, so could the solution be just as simple?

He focused his magic, pushing it through his mouth as he spoke. “*I can* see you.”

A flickering image appeared where Jerah had been, as if the magic had sparked a conflict of wills, struggling to overpower each other. But quickly the quivering shape snapped into place, and his father was grinning down at him with a proud gleam in his eye.

“Excellent!” he exclaimed. “Let's keep that up. Here.” He picked up a paperweight from the table, a small stone cat with tiny yellow gems for eyes. “Try and take this from me.”

As Florian reached out quickly, he could hear Jerah murmuring. “You can't touch me.”

His fingers were nearly closed around the stone figurine, when it suddenly felt as if he'd pressed his hands to a window pane, and his fingernails scrabbled uselessly just centimeters away from it.

“I *can* touch you,” Florian said, but Jerah had already tossed the figurine into his other hand and was taking a step further away.

“You can't touch me,” he repeated, and again the invisible force prevented Florian from getting close enough to grab the figurine. He scowled, considering for a moment, as Jerah flashed a goading smile at him from across the table. “Giving up already?”

“No,” Florian snapped, shaking his head. He just had to think. There was too much space between them to try the same words again. Jerah would just cancel it out before he could get close enough. There had to be another way to get it.

Could he just... have it already? Would that work? He almost opened his mouth to ask, but thought better of it. If it wouldn't work, then it wouldn't work, so there was no harm in trying.

“It's already in my hand,” he said slowly, and a cold weight suddenly filled his palm. With a laugh, he held it up, turning the stone figurine in his hand. Its yellow gem eyes glinted slightly in the room's magical light, and across from him he could hear Jerah laugh as well.

“Clever!” he exclaimed, taking a step closer to Florian and patting his shoulder. “Now, just keep in mind something like that will only work with items that aren't magical on their own, or haven't been tethered to a place or a person in some way already. So it's good for maybe finding a lost trinket, but not so much for something that's important or powerful.”

“Like the Arrows,” Florian mused, setting down the figurine.

“Like the Arrows,” Jerah agreed. “You could have also tried something like preventing me from moving, or making me drop it. But just taking it was clever.”

“Thanks,” he said, glancing back over at him. “Should we practice more?”

They played keep-away a few more times, Jerah making it progressively more difficult. He started by making Florian unable to move; then Florian was unable to see the figurine; then Jerah even prevented him from speaking entirely. *That* had been especially difficult to break, and in the end it felt as if he were just brute forcing his way through it, trying to press his magic through a mouth that was clamped shut.

When he finally seemed to break through it, there had been a painful, tearing sensation in his lips, as if they had been stitched together and he had ripped through the threads. Though he pressed his hand to his mouth with a yelp, there was no blood, nor any evidence that he'd been physically harmed.

“You alright?” Jerah asked, raising a quizzical eyebrow. “I'm surprised you broke through that. Sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you.”

“Well, it hurt,” Florian groaned, still checking his mouth to see if he was bleeding. Though his hand came away clean, his lips still tingled uncomfortably. “How else was I supposed to deal with it?”

“Truthfully, I wasn't sure if you'd be able to at all,” Jerah said, and Florian glanced up at him with a glowering look. “No, I'm serious. A silencing hold like that is tricky to break through even for those who are trained in magic. How did you get around it?”

“I don't know,” he said, shaking his head. “It felt like just... strong-arming it, I guess. Just forcing it through until it broke.”

“Interesting,” Jerah said, tapping his chin thoughtfully. “Interesting. Well, I don't want to use up too much of your energy. Kade should be expecting you down in the courtyard soon.”

“Right,” Florian stammered, but truthfully he'd nearly forgotten. “What time is it?”

“You'll have just enough time to grab lunch if you'd like,” Jerah answered, grinning. “But I wouldn't dawdle if I were you.”

Florian hurried down to the dining hall, where a small charcuterie spread with different cheeses, meats, breads, and fruits had been set out. He threw together a little sandwich and ate it as he walked through the castle and out into the courtyard, starting to feel nervous again. He had no idea what to expect from Kade now. Would they fight as wolves? Or would he be using a sword, like the one he'd carried on his back when they were traveling? From the size of it, he wasn't sure if he could even *lift* a sword like that, much less hit Kade with it.

When he arrived in the Moon Garden, Kade was already there, sitting on one of the benches with two wooden poles in his lap. He glanced up as Florian approached and got to his feet before tossing one of the poles at Florian, who barely managed to catch it.

“Right on time,” he said, eyeing Florian. “We're starting with the basics. Do you have any kind of combat training? Martial arts?”

“Not really,” Florian replied nervously, looking down at the pole. Now that it was in his hand, he could see there was a slight curve to it and a sort of handle with a rougher texture than the rest of the wood. Clearly it was meant to be a wooden training sword—there were no sharp edges, but he could tell from the weight that a hit from it would still be quite painful. “I mean, I took a few karate lessons when I was little, but I don't really remember any of it.”

“Any sports?”

Florian laughed at that. “No, I've never been much of an athlete. The closest would have been when I did track in high school.”

“So you know how to run,” Kade said flatly, and Florian laughed again, though he was unsure if he had meant to make a joke or not.

“Run away, maybe,” he agreed, more to himself than to Kade.

“Don't sell yourself short,” Kade said. Florian frowned, flushing slightly with embarrassment. “Stamina is just as important as strength. There's no use trying to hit someone with a sword if you can't swing it more than a few times.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Florian said. Kade looked at him for a moment, his expression unreadable. He had no idea what to expect.

Finally, Kade broke the lingering silence, clearing his throat.

“We'll start with a few basic guards,” he said. “You'll need to know how to defend yourself more than anything else. Jerah and I can handle most of the fighting.”

“I want to be able to fight too,” Florian protested, frowning. Did they really think he wouldn't be able to pick it up?

“You will,” Kade said flatly, nodding. “But you need to know how to protect yourself, first.”

Florian scowled. It felt childish to continue protesting, but somehow he felt like his pride was wounded. “Fine,” he sighed, gripping the wooden sword harder. “What are the guards?”

“I'll show you four different forms,” Kade said, taking a step away from him. “We can practice those for a while, and once you've gotten them down, I'll show you four more. First an upper block. Use both hands.” He demonstrated, lifting the sword above his head so it made a straight horizontal line above him. Both of his hands clenched the handle with an iron grip; looking at them so closely, Florian could see they were calloused and scarred. Florian mirrored him, lifting it above his own head.

“Like this,” Kade started, stepping toward him only to stop with his hands hesitating in the air between them. “Is it alright if I touch you? To correct your form.”

Florian felt his face burn with heat at the question. But it was perfectly innocent, he told himself quickly; and if he didn't learn it right the first time, it would be much harder to fix later down the line.

“Yeah, that's fine,” he stammered, the words coming out in a flood that only made him more embarrassed. But Kade seemed totally unfazed, nodding once before taking a slower step toward him.

From his size and strength, Florian had expected him to be rough—to pull him hard or grip him tightly. But Kade's fingers on him were feather-light, closing around his shoulders and exerting only enough pressure to pull them back, before moving to his elbows and giving them a gentle push to lift

and straighten them slightly. Somehow, Florian thought, the gentleness was *worse*, creating a sense of intimacy that was certainly *not* what Kade intended.

“Better,” Kade said, recapturing his attention. “Now you can move pretty easily from here to a side block. Watch.” He took a few steps back and demonstrated, moving slowly. Florian copied him carefully, doing his best to mirror the movement as he made it.

“Like this?” he asked, but Kade was already stepping closer to him once more, and began adjusting his stance. His hands hovered over him for a moment, then pressed lightly on his hips.

“Shift your center of gravity a bit,” he said, though Florian could barely hear him over the rush of blood now pounding in his ears. “Feel the difference?”

“Y-yeah,” he stammered, and he was sure the tremble in his voice was completely obvious as he spoke.

The rest of the lesson was much the same. Kade modeled each stance for him, gently correcting his posture as he went, and they cycled through each of them over and over until Florian could move between each one without Kade’s assistance.

“We’ll go through them a little longer just to be sure you’ve got the feel for it,” Kade said. “And that will be enough for today, I think.”

“That was easier than I thought it would be,” Florian replied wryly, though he still couldn’t quite meet Kade’s eyes. Nevertheless, he saw Kade return a small smile.

“It’ll only get tougher from here,” he said, sounding almost ominous. “Don’t worry.”

That did little to assuage him, but he went through the motions a few more times, doing his best to ensure that his muscles moved the same way and ended up in the correct positions. Kade watched him, but did not move to touch him again. Part of him was glad, and part of him..

He didn’t want to think about it. He focused on the movement of his muscles until Kade told him he could leave. Though the light hadn’t changed at all in the Moon Garden, when Florian returned to the castle it was well into the evening, and he could smell food being prepared.



The next several days continued with the same routine. Florian started his mornings with Jerah in his study or occasionally in the larger library, essentially taking a crash course in the history and culture of the Veil with some magic lessons interspersed whenever the books became too tedious. Then, he would grab a quick lunch and head out to the courtyard where Kade was always waiting for him.

Once his defensive stances were deemed sufficient, Kade started teaching him more offensive movements—showing him how to position his body and shift his weight to give himself the best leverage with the wooden swords. His guidance continued to be far more gentle than Florian expected, even when he would take defensive stances against Kade's offensive movements, or vice versa. It was hardly sparring—more like a carefully choreographed, very slow dance—but somehow Florian always expected there to be more force behind his strikes than ever came.

So when Kade told him hardly a week later that they'd start sparring for real, he immediately grew even more anxious than he had been on his first day of training.

“Just going through the motions won't prepare you much for a real fight,” Kade said, raising an eyebrow at what must have been the uncertain expression on his face.

“I know,” Florian agreed, glancing away even as he gave a nod. He almost asked Kade to go easy on him, but decided better of it. Instead, he slowly moved into a ready stance. “Okay.”

A small, now familiar smile played at Kade's lips. “Good attitude,” he said. And before Florian could respond, Kade lunged at him and brought the wooden sword crashing down onto his own.

There it was. He knew Kade was strong—knew that he must be an accomplished warrior to act as Jerah's body guard all this time—and he had expected his careful, gentle guidance to fall away at any moment. *This* Kade was entirely different, already darting to strike him again before Florian had the chance to swing in retaliation. Each strike shuddered painfully up his arms, and Florian winced as he tried to keep his footing and still block the sudden onslaught. It took every ounce of effort he had in him just to keep the wooden sword from making direct contact with him.

“Come on,” Kade goaded, pulling away just enough for Florian to breathe. He didn't think too hard about it as he leapt toward Kade, swinging the sword in what he could already tell was a sloppy, hurried offensive stance. Kade knocked the sword away easily and used the momentum to swing back down at Florian. He didn't react fast enough, and the wooden sword came down on his shoulder with a painful thud.

“Fuck!” he hissed, instinctively reaching up to grab his shoulder. Kade paused, eyeing him. “That hurt.”

“It would hurt more if it was a real sword,” he remarked, and for the first time true irritation surged through Florian. He scowled, but Kade's face didn't change. “Come on. If this were a real fight, we wouldn't be taking a breather. I'd have taken the opportunity to hit you again already.”

Florian didn't respond, instead moving as quickly and suddenly as he could manage in the vain hope that the sudden attack would find Kade off his guard. But he dodged easily, and when Florian

swung up with a second strike, Kade's sword was there, already blocking the way. Kade swung at him a few more times in quick succession, again trapping him in defensive stances without the room or time to get in any strikes of his own.

“You can't move!” Florian exclaimed, frustration overtaking him and magic surging from his words. Instantly, Kade's muscles seized. He winced and twitched, but remained motionless. Quickly, Florian swung his wooden sword up once more, and this time it made a painful-sounding thud against Kade's ribs.

Despite the unpleasant sound and Florian's immediate wince of sympathy, a sharp bark of a laugh escaped Kade between clenched teeth.

“Good,” he forced out, relaxing with a gasp as Florian released the hold on him. “I was hoping you'd use that to your advantage.”

“You alright?” Florian asked nervously, and Kade nodded.

“Totally fine,” he said. “You should try and use your magic whenever you can to keep the upper hand. Like now.” Before Florian could even process the lightning-fast movement, Kade had whirled behind Florian, his free hand seizing Florian's wrist and yanking it behind his back.

“Ah!” Florian yelped, more out of surprise than pain. In just a few fluid, rapid moves, Kade had grappled him. His own sword clattered uselessly to the ground as Kade's other arm wrapped around Florian's torso, as the wooden sword pressed up his chest and shoulder to rest against his throat.

“Come on,” Kade said, his voice low and intimate in Florian's ear. “You need to be able to use your magic just as well.”

Between the physical contact and the closeness of his voice, all Florian could focus on was the sudden heat searing between his legs.

“Drop,” he choked out, but he couldn't focus enough on the magic for it to work; Kade's grip remained just as firm on his wrist, his elbow digging into Florian's ribs. “D-Drop!”

This time Kade's sword fell to the ground, and the hand around Florian's wrist opened as well—but the pressure from Kade's arm around his chest was still just as tight. If he struggled enough, he could break out of the weakened grapple, Florian thought, but he couldn't bring himself to move. Kade was panting in his ear now, the exertion catching up with him.

“Not enough,” Kade said, but this time the goading tone was gone from his voice.

“Fuck,” Florian hissed under his breath, though he was sure Kade heard him. Hopefully he thought it was still out of frustration, and not the sudden wave of lust that had sent him spiraling. *Focus!* he told himself, shaking his head. “Let me go.”

Though Kade's muscles tensed, trying to keep the hold, gradually his arms lowered. Florian darted away, snatching up his sword as he went. Panting, he kept his back to Kade as he paced to the far end of the garden in the hope that the taller man wouldn't see his hands tremble where he gripped the sword.

“You alright?” Kade's voice came from the opposite end of the courtyard. Though he sounded concerned, it didn't seem like he'd noticed just how flustered Florian had become.

“Y-yeah,” Florian stammered. His heart beat frantically, almost painful against his chest. “Um, can we take a breather?”

There was a beat of silence as Kade seemed to look him over, then he said, “Why don't we end early today?”

“Oh,” he said, glancing back over his shoulder. “Um, okay.”

From across the courtyard he couldn't quite read Kade's expression, but his voice remained neutral as he turned and said, “I'll see you tomorrow, then.”

“See you,” Florian echoed faintly, and he watched in confusion as Kade walked down the path, until he turned and disappeared between the buildings.

CHAPTER NINE

“Dad?” Florian let slip the next morning, as they sat across from each other in his study once more.

He kicked himself the moment he said it—he had never called Jerah *dad* before. When he glanced up, a wide grin was on Jerah's face as their eyes met, but his voice was perfectly even as he replied, “Yes?”

“Um, I wanted to ask you something,” he stammered. It felt like he had been feeling embarrassed more often than not the past few days.

“Of course,” Jerah replied, gesturing for him to continue. “Ask away.”

“It's about Kade,” he said, looking down at the table. “I was wondering if, um, if he... I mean, I wondered if he was maybe... Um, he's been with you for a long time, right?”

He couldn't bring himself to look up at Jerah, but he could imagine the way his father's grin became conspiratorial in the brief beat of silence that passed before he answered.

“Yes,” Jerah said, his tone just as eager as Florian had feared. “Let's see. He's been my assistant and guard for, oh, about five years now, when he came to the Winter Court after his father got too ill to stay.”

“Did he, like... I don't know. Is everyone in his clan waiting for him to come back?” he asked, still unable to form the words he was searching for.

“Hmm. I wouldn't say that,” Jerah answered, and Florian glanced up to see that his hand was pressed thoughtfully to his lips. “It seems to me that he came with the understanding that the move would be largely permanent, more so than his father's presence had been. He has a few younger siblings, but the wolf clan is very pack-like, so they all take care of each other. I think he may have been casually seeing someone before he came here, but...” His grin widened, and Florian frowned. “But he's been single while he's been here, if that's what you're getting at.”

“N-No!” he exclaimed in protest, quickly looking away again. That *had* been what he was getting at, but what did it matter? Just because Kade was single didn't mean he had any interest in guys. Or in Florian, regardless of the weird tension he'd felt when they had sparred.

“Good luck,” Jerah said with a sigh, leaning back. “To be honest, a marriage between our families would only strengthen our ties, so you have my blessing.”

“It's not like that!” he yelped, shaking his head, but Jerah only laughed.

“Kidding, kidding,” he said, waving his hand. “But only a bit.”

“Anyway, I'm trying to read,” Florian mumbled, leaning over his book. Jerah chuckled, but didn't press the issue again.

The rest of their morning passed without incident, and when Florian went out to the courtyard for training—far more nervous than he'd been the day before—Kade was waiting for him just the same as always.

“Maybe sparring yesterday was a little much,” he said, as he tossed the sword over to Florian. He caught it easily, the motion slowly becoming a reflex. “I'll take a step back today. We'll just go through more of the offensive stances.”

“Oh, sure,” Florian said, though it took him by surprise. Maybe Kade had noticed how uncomfortable he'd been after all, though he'd certainly hidden it well if he did.

They spent the rest of the afternoon practicing the stances again, moving through the familiar cycle over and over. Occasionally Kade would correct his posture, his touches still soft and gentle. It was strange to think of how fierce he had been yesterday in comparison.

“Do you have any plans for tonight?” Kade asked at the end of their lesson. Florian blushed at the question, but answered quickly.

“No, not really.”

“Want to come down to the town with me?” Kade asked, looking down at his sword. “I was going to do some shopping. Have you been down there yet?”

“Oh... No, I haven't been yet,” he echoed. His heart was pounding in his chest. Kade wanted to spend time with him? Was he just being polite? It wasn't a *date*, was it? Definitely not. It definitely wasn't. “But, sure, I'd like to go.”

“I can show you around,” Kade said, glancing back at him. His face was perfectly unreadable, the same as always. “You should see at least some of it before we head out.”

“That makes sense,” he said, the words coming without thinking. “Yeah. Let's go.”

The familiar tiny smile twitched at the corners of his mouth. “All right. Let me put these away, and I'll meet you at the castle gate.”

Florian watched him go, his mind racing. He was just being friendly, right? Kade had already shown him around the castle grounds, inside and out, so it would only make sense that he would

escort him into the adjoining city as well. They were together everyday for training—training so they could go meet the hag, and find the first of the Arrows—so they would be spending a lot of their time together from now on. Kade had served his father for years already, so of course he would want to have a good relationship with Florian, too, as his son.

“Don't read too much into it,” Florian muttered to himself. “He's just being nice. He has to be.”

He thought of going to change his shirt, but their lesson today had been rather low-impact and he'd hardly worked up a sweat at all. He didn't want to keep Kade waiting too long, so he meandered through the grounds and made his way to the castle gate without going inside.

After only a moment of waiting, Kade appeared on the cobblestone path after turning a corner. He nodded as their eyes met, then continued through the gate and down the stone steps, Florian hurrying to follow.

They could see the town from the top of the steps—small enough that the town gates were visible from the same vantage point, just before the smattering of buildings turned into a smattering of trees, which then became a denser forest at the edge of the horizon. The town curved around the edge of the hill on which the castle rested, so he was sure it was larger than it appeared. At least, he hoped it was. If the last remaining home of the fae were no more than a few city blocks... He thought of Jerah's expression of despair each time he'd spoken of the fae's dwindling numbers, and he felt less hopeful.

The stairway down was almost as steep and crooked as the switchbacks that twisted up the opposite side of the cliff from the narrow beach. Florian took the stairs carefully, but Kade made his way down as effortlessly as if he'd climbed the stairs a hundred times before—which was certainly possible. The space between them was steadily increasing.

“You alright?” Kade called over his shoulder, when he seemed to notice Florian was quite a distance behind him.

“Yeah,” he stammered, taking the next few steps two at a time to try and catch up. “Sorry.”

Kade looked up at him wordlessly as he closed the distance between them, his expression as inscrutable as ever. But as they moved on, Kade's pace became slower, so there were only ever three or four steps between them as they walked. Eventually, they made it to the bottom of the stairway, where a single guard sat on the other side of a second castle gate. The guard jumped to her feet as they approached.

“Kade,” the woman said, before her eyes flickered over to Florian. For a moment she looked confused, before snapping back to attention. “You must be Florian. Please, come in, welcome.”

“Thanks,” he replied, glancing nervously between the two of them. But Kade didn't seem perturbed as he opened the gate for Florian to pass through; the woman standing guard didn't say anything else to them as they walked past and followed the cobblestone path into the town.

The first buildings they passed looked residential, and while Florian could hear some signs of life, he did not see anyone out on the street where they were. Some of the buildings looked run-down and abandoned, and he wondered how many were occupied, and how many had been empty for centuries.

“So what are you getting?” Florian asked, coming up alongside Kade now that there was room for them to walk side by side.

“Food,” Kade replied. Though he had invited Florian along, there was a controlled neutrality to his voice that made him wonder if Kade really wanted him there after all. “Snacks, mainly.”

Florian looked away, stifling a chuckle. He wouldn't have taken Kade for the snacking type.

“What kind of snacks do people eat here?” he asked. Next to him Kade seemed to hesitate for a moment before answering.

“Well, I mostly get things that remind me of home. A lot of it is seafood,” he said slowly. “Shrimp chips and that kind of thing. There's this fish soup my mom used to make for us... Sometimes I can find the ingredients for that.”

They lapsed into silence as they walked. It seemed like a personal admission in a way, but Florian was unsure how to respond. Both Kade and Jerah had mentioned the former's father several times, but this was the first he'd heard about his mother. He had no idea what to say—somehow, Florian thought that mentioning something about his own dead mother would be a mood killer.

Around them, the buildings that had been obviously residential slowly became larger, looking more like storefronts and businesses, and even a few restaurants with the telltale scents of warm food and spices wafting from their doors. The main road was mostly empty, though there were a few shopkeepers peering out from within open doors or windows, as well as vendors with carts set up on the street. Most seemed to recognize Kade, and they called out a greeting or would give him a polite wave as they passed; some of them were looking at Florian with curiosity, though others paid him no mind. He was glad for that.

As they approached the center of town, and the streets came alive with activity—at least compared to the sleepy, quiet outskirts—Kade turned around suddenly to face him. Though his expression remained as neutral as ever, he said,

“Want to see something first?”

“Uh,” Florian stammered, taken aback. “Um, sure?”

“You'll have to follow me, then,” Kade said, and before Florian could reply, his body glowed with the now-familiar orange light. In a moment Kade's wolf form stood before him, his ears pricked and his tail slowly sweeping back and forth.

Florian hesitated. He must have been visibly nervous, as Kade tossed his head in a clear *follow me* motion, and started to trot off without waiting to see if Florian would follow. He could only waffle over it for a moment—with a stifled groan of exasperation, he squeezed his eyes shut and started the increasingly familiar shift. There was still some discomfort—he wasn't sure if he would ever get used to the sensation of his bones morphing so significantly—but it wasn't painful, the way the first shift had been.

When he opened his eyes again, he was lower to the ground and it seemed a little darker, a little less colorful; but he could hear Kade breaking into a run ahead of him—could smell his excitement. Every time he'd seen Kade's wolf form, he had been so playful—was this really the same stoic man?

He didn't have time to ruminate on it, though, as he started to trot after the wolf, who eagerly dashed away as he got closer. Florian could barely focus on his surroundings as he chased the other wolf, the world passing by in a blur of grayed-out color. His nostrils filled with the bright tangy scent of fae bodies, as the town residents went about their lives; smoke and spice from food being prepared; and herbal, earthy comfort from the nearby forest. But he pulled his attention toward the blur of movement ahead of him, and the delicate, rapid sound of big wolf paws galloping across the paved stone path and then softer earth.

When Kade's pace finally slowed, Florian nearly ran into him, barely managing to skid to a stop just short of his wagging tail. The rush of the run was still buzzing through him, and his tongue lolled from his mouth as he looked at Kade curiously. Though he had no intention of saying anything, he could smell the *happy!* radiating off his own body, as clearly as if it were steam rising from a kettle set to boil. There was a flash of embarrassment when he noticed it, but Kade was panting and wagging his tail—his scent just as pleased—and that made him feel better.

Where? he thought, tilting his head. Kade nodded, tossing his own head in another clear command to follow. They trotted side by side, slow enough now that Florian realized they were no longer in town, but in the forest itself. The smells of civilization had faded away, replaced by moist earth and living plants with the occasional flash of some other living creature in the distance. It became overwhelming when he focused too heavily on it, so he tried his best to keep his attention on Kade.

They were heading uphill, on a barely-there footpath that very well may have only been a game trail. Florian eyed Kade curiously, but neither his body language nor his scent betrayed whatever he

was planning.

After a few minutes of walking, Florian could see the trees thinning out a little ways ahead, where the path tapered off and the slope flattened out. It looked like a bit of an outcropping, and he thought maybe there was a good view of the town that Kade wanted to show him.

When they emerged in the clearing, it extended a few feet before dropping off quickly: less of a hill like the one they'd come up on, and more like a cliff. When he glanced at Kade, he was sniffing along the earth, but quickly turned to meet Florian's gaze. The wolf's eyes softened, like a smile, and his body started to glow as Kade shifted back to his human body.

“Shift back,” he said as he straightened up. “You can see better this way.”

Florian nodded and shifted back. Going back to his normal body was easier than becoming a wolf, so it took only a second or two for him to stand up alongside Kade, looking out past the outcropping.

As he had suspected, they had a clear vantage point of the town nestled around the castle in the distance. There was a majestic air to its spires rising up atop the steep hill it sat upon and the town curving around its ascent, cradled in the small valley created by the opposite hill.

“It's a good view,” Florian said, though it seemed a little underwhelming for the distance that they'd run.

“Look up,” Kade said, his eyes turned toward the sky. Florian followed his gaze, and the dizzying expanse of stars that spread out far above them left him speechless. It almost didn't look real: the sheer number of tiny glowing pinpoints set in the night sky, hinting at the galactic swirls behind them with not a single cloud blocking the view.

“Holy shit,” he finally managed to get out under his breath. “This is—This is—”

“Amazing, isn't it?” Kade whispered next to him. “Best view anywhere in the Winter Court.”

“Are these the same stars as Earth?” Florian asked incredulously, still unable to tear his gaze away from the sky.

“They are,” Kade answered. His voice was low and soft, sending a tremor up Florian's spine. “The Veil is like a mirror of Earth, so the sky is the same, but flipped. But I know you can't get this kind of view of the stars on Earth.” There was a beat of silence, then Kade sighed. “Only a few places you can see it in the Veil, too, though.”

Hardly aware of what he was doing, Florian staggered back, first dropping to his knees then laying down on his back entirely, so the swath of glimmering stars filled his vision.

“This is amazing,” he breathed, shaking his head. “Thank you for showing me.”

Kade didn't reply, but Florian thought he heard him chuckle slightly under his breath. Then there was a rustling of the leaves and earth next to him, and he realized that Kade had come to lay down beside him. Heat burned through his face, but he kept his eyes firmly on the sky, and his embarrassment was quickly forgotten in the cool night air.

Then—Kade's fingers brushed against his, so feather-light that he almost didn't realize it wasn't a tuft of grass or loose earth at first. He nearly yanked his hand away, but something kept him frozen in place. When he glanced over nervously, trying to move only his eyes, he could see Kade looking just as firmly up at the sky; but when he glanced down, their pinkies and ring fingers were brushed up against each other. It looked almost intentional.

Florian's head was swimming—this time with confusion rather than awe. *Was* it intentional? He'd been so caught up in making sure Kade had no inkling of his attraction to him, no hint of his crush, that the idea of Kade trying to come on to *him* made it completely impossible for him to formulate any thoughts at all.

Feeling suddenly sweaty, he glanced away and looked back up at the sky. The stars were easier to focus on.

But he left his hand where it was, letting the tiny points of contact between their fingers buzz with electricity and promise.



When they met up again to train the next afternoon, Kade's softness had dissipated once more as he told Florian they would try sparring again today.

“You sure?” Florian asked, frowning. “You were just saying yesterday you thought you jumped the gun.”

“I don't know what that means,” Kade said flatly, his eyebrows raising almost imperceptibly. “But I know what I said. That was yesterday.”

“Jumping the gun? It means to, like... Move too fast, I guess.”

Kade's expression didn't change as he simply repeated, “That was yesterday.”

Florian wasn't sure what to make of that, so he silently picked up the wooden practice sword. When he looked back over at Kade, the bigger man had a slight, pleased smile on his face.

“Ready?” he asked, as they slowly circled each other from opposite ends of the courtyard.

“Ready,” Florian answered.

That was all it took for Kade to charge at him, the sword whistling through the air. Florian blocked it just in time, stumbling backwards at the sudden force. Kade was bigger, stronger, faster, and trained

in how to actually fight—if their last sparring match had taught him anything, it was that he had to use magic if he wanted any chance of winning.

“Slow down!” he exclaimed, pushing magic through his words. Kade staggered, stumbling as his pace suddenly slowed but his momentum lurched him forward. Florian took the opportunity to strike, swinging his wooden sword up into Kade's shoulder. Kade tried to react, but too slowly—his wooden sword coming up to block after Florian's had already connected. Kade's movements were smooth now, as he adjusted to the magic that Florian had forced upon him, though he still moved in a strange slow motion.

“Good,” Kade said, nodding as he took a slowed step toward Florian, who darted backward out of his reach. “Stay focused, though.”

“I am,” Florian retorted with a frown, moving to strike him again. But Kade must have anticipated the second hit, his sword already moving up to block, catching the edge of Florian's sword to throw it off-course just enough to miss.

“Are you?” he goaded; and before Florian could reply, Kade had lowered his sword to reach one hand for the hem of his shirt, lifting it to his face to dab at his forehead. Florian *knew* he was being played—knew it was too cold out, and they hadn't moved enough for the other man to have any perspiration on his face—but he couldn't keep his eyes from lingering on the hard abs and tanned skin that had been revealed.

“Y-You—!” Florian stammered, heat burning through his face with embarrassment, but he couldn't get any other words out. Kade was messing with him. Had he been so obvious? Had he seen all the flustered glances and blushes Florian had tried to hide from him?

“Told you to stay focused,” Kade said, a tiny hint of a smirk on his face, as he let his shirt fall back into place. Before Florian could process the words, Kade was moving again—and fast. The distraction had worked, his magic had lost its hold, and now Kade was too quick for Florian to keep up. The practice sword came whistling through the air toward him. He yelped in pain as it collided with the upper part of his shoulder, sending a resounding crack through the courtyard as it struck the point where the skin was thinnest and the bone most pronounced.

Florian's sword clattered to the ground as he grabbed at his shoulder instinctively and winced at the stinging pain that radiated from his neck to his elbow. He felt more than saw Kade hesitate; but he couldn't focus on him, instead falling back to sit on the ground with a groan.

“Stop,” he hissed through gritted teeth, magic coursing through him. “That really hurt.”

He could see Kade freeze as the magic held him in place; but his focus was elsewhere, so the effect faded just as quickly as it had come. Slowly, Kade took a cautious step forward and dropped to his knees across from him.

“Sorry,” he said, his voice low. The confident, teasing tone from before was entirely gone now. “I thought... you'd be able to block it. I'm sorry. Are you alright?”

Nothing felt broken under his hand as he tentatively rotated his arm. It certainly smarted, and would probably bruise, but there was no evidence of any lasting damage.

“I think so,” Florian sighed, finally looking away from his arm to glance at Kade with a frown. But Kade had gotten much closer than he'd thought, and Florian nearly jumped in surprise. Gingerly, Kade pushed Florian's hand away and felt along his arm, his fingers probing along his shoulder. Florian winced at the contact, but it seemed Kade couldn't find anything broken or fractured either.

The pressure relented, but Kade's hand stayed on Florian's arm.

“I'm sorry,” he repeated, his eyes sliding from the spot on Florian's arm up to his eyes. “I really didn't mean to hurt you.”

“It's alright,” Florian stammered, acutely aware of the heat prickling on his skin where Kade had touched. “I don't think my dad would be mad about it, if that's what you're worried about.”

For the first time Florian could recall, obvious color rose in Kade's cheeks, and his yellow-orange eyes flickered away.

“That's not what I'm worried about,” he said, and there was a softness to his voice that Florian couldn't place.

The shirt, the moment they'd shared in the forest last night, and now his voice and this lingering touch... *Was* Kade coming on to him? It seemed ridiculous when he thought about it, but what else was he supposed to think?

For a long moment Florian wondered if he should say anything, part of him wanting to keep quiet for fear he was wrong—worried that if he was picking up on something that wasn't there, being too forward now would only make things unbearably awkward later. But the rest of him couldn't believe that someone would be acting this way around him if they weren't interested.

So, tentatively, slowly enough that Kade could pull away, he lifted his opposite hand and gently placed it over Kade's where it rested on his shoulder.

“I really like spending time with you,” he said slowly, nervously keeping his eyes on the ground. He didn't think he could look at Kade while he said it. “So you don't have to worry about scaring me away, either.”

Kade was silent for a moment, and Florian's heart started to sink, fearing he'd been wrong after all. Then Kade's thumb moved under his hand, rubbing an almost imperceptible but comforting circle over his skin.

"I like spending time with you too," he said, his voice low. He visibly hesitated, his eyes lingering on the stone walls of the castle around them, before adding, "Maybe more than I should."

"Kade," Florian blurted, more forceful now; and Kade's eyes flickered back to him. "Listen, I, um... I really like you. I think you noticed already."

Kade was silent for a moment, then a small smile twitched at the corners of his mouth. "I noticed."

"But... I don't know. This has all been crazy, you know, and everything's happening so fast," Florian stammered, gesturing around with his free hand. "And... Well, I just had a breakup a few months ago. So I don't... I mean, can we just do this slow? Whatever this is?"

Nervously, he made himself meet Kade's eyes despite the heat in his face and the slight tremble to his fingers that Kade must feel on his own hand. But the other man's expression didn't change, and he seemed to think over the words for a long moment before replying.

"Yes," he said, nodding once. "I understand. I need to stay focused on my job, too. Keeping the king safe, and keeping you safe: those are my priorities. Everything else has to come second."

"But I do like this," Florian interjected quickly. Kade's reply had been carefully neutral, maybe *too* neutral. "And I don't... I don't want to stop. I want to keep spending time with you."

The slight smile on Kade's face widened. "Me too," he said, and he carefully pulled his hand out from Florian's grasp and stood up. He helped Florian to his feet as well before continuing, "I don't think we'll get any more sparring done today. Want to go for a walk instead?"

"Um, sure," he answered, mirroring Kade's hesitant smile. "Yeah. That sounds nice."

Kade gathered the practice swords and put them away, before turning back to Florian and offering his hand.

"Ready?" he asked, his voice low and soft, almost vulnerable. Florian took his hand, interlacing their fingers. His heart was pounding so hard that he was certain Kade could feel his pulse; but the way their fingers fit together was more comfortable than he would have expected.

"Let's go," he agreed with a nod, and he let Kade lead him out of the courtyard and out into the gardens.

CHAPTER TEN

“I want to test something,” Jerah said, breaking the silence between them as they sat across from each other in the library. Florian had been reading another book that Jerah had given him, but he looked up with a surprised blink at the declaration.

“Test something?” he repeated nervously, setting the book down. Jerah's often-cheerful face had an unexpectedly serious expression when their eyes met.

“I want to see if we can replicate that reaction you had the other day,” he explained. “When we were talking about the Summer Queen.”

Florian shifted uncomfortably. “Why?” he asked. They still had no idea how or why Florian had known about Soleil's lover, or why remembering had brought him to tears. The moment was strange to say the least, and he wasn't exactly eager to try and get it to happen again.

“Because it could be important,” Jerah said. “If we can figure out what, exactly, caused you to react in such a way, it could give us some kind of insight. Florian, I've spent the last twenty years chasing down every lead and scrap of information I could find on anything having to do with Soleil or the Golden Arrows. If there's something going on here that could help, we need to know.”

Florian sighed. He still didn't want to try, but he knew that nothing he said would dissuade Jerah, so he might as well go along with it.

“Okay,” he relented, setting down his book with a sigh. “How are we gonna do this?”

“Excellent,” Jerah said with a pleased grin. “Well, I was thinking I could just read off my notes about Soleil, and see if you feel anything, or maybe know anything about it, the way you did before. So tell me if you feel anything, or if you think you might know something before I say it.”

Florian gestured for Jerah to continue, and his father pulled a notebook from the stack of books and papers on the side table next to him, flipping through until he seemed to find what he was looking for.

“Here we are,” he continued, then cleared his throat. “All right. Soleil had been Queen of the Summer Court for nearly eighty years at the time the Nova Blight first occurred. Before that she had been princess for around a hundred years, under her parents King Elio and Queen Milena. She was

unmarried, but as you and I know, she did have a human lover, a human man. Whose name..." He paused, glancing up at Florian. "Was...?"

Florian blinked. He had felt *something* distantly at the mention of Soleil's name, a little thrill of emotion he could not quite place; but that very well may have been his own reaction. But the man's name? Had Jerah mentioned a name before? He tried to think of it, but couldn't come up with anything.

"I don't know," he finally admitted. "What was his name?"

Jerah grimaced before confessing, "I don't know either. I wanted to see if maybe you did."

Florian scowled. "You're playing around."

"I thought it might work!" Jerah protested, laughing. "Alright, alright. Here: Soleil ruled for nearly eighty years and was generally considered a fair and just queen, overall well-liked among her people. There were no major conflicts between the courts during her rule. Her main point of criticism is that she was flighty and prone to leaving the court on a whim without telling anyone. She was rarely gone for long, but it happened enough that she was known for it."

"Hmm," Florian sighed, frowning. "That almost makes me feel... Irritated. I don't know why."

"Irritated at Soleil? Or at what I'm saying about her?" Jerah pressed, but Florian could only shrug. The feeling was distant enough that he couldn't tell.

"I don't know," he said, shaking his head. "It's not very strong. The feeling's already gone."

"How about this, then?" Jerah said, looking back down at his notes. "While she was known for being a powerful magician, no major innovations or discoveries were made during her rule. One must wonder if she was undisciplined or simply unlucky, but either way it seems she was marked by a waste of potential. While it seems likely she figured out a way to bring a human into the Veil, her discovery was not shared, and no humans have been brought to the Veil since." He paused, and looked back over at Florian. "Anything?"

He shook his head. "Nope."

"The Seven Golden Arrows of Soleil," Jerah continued, sighing as he read from his notebook. "These are powerful magical items created, presumably, by Soleil herself as a countermeasure against the Nova Blight she unleashed on the Summer Court. After the first attempt at containing the Blight failed, the Arrows were scattered and the Blight radius expanded exponentially. The Arrows have been tracked to many locations around the world, several of which are inaccessible except in certain shifted forms. Many have increased magical phenomena occurring in the area, suggesting an overabundance of power influencing its surroundings."

“That sounds dangerous,” Florian said with a scowl. “You said they're inaccessible unless you're shifted? What does that mean?”

“Worried about it already?” Jerah said with a bemused grin, which only made Florian frown harder. “Yes, some are quite difficult to get to unless you're able to fly or go deep underwater. For those we'll need to enlist the help of other shifter clans, but that's a bridge we'll cross when we get to it, so I wouldn't worry much about those just yet. Many will still be reachable on our own.”

“Do you not want their help? Wouldn't something like this be a group effort? Everyone would benefit from it, after all.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Jerah replied, a bitter laugh escaping him. “The other clan leaders have proven to be... rather single-minded in their focus of keeping their homelands safe. While neither are outright hostile, they aren't exactly eager to help, either. Or, at least, they weren't when I first enlisted their help to get me to the hag, before you were born. They helped only begrudgingly, and weren't impressed with the outcome. Of course, this was twenty-something years ago now, so who's to say if they feel the same way. Either way, there are quite a few that will be easier to get to that I figure we can tackle first.”

Florian nodded thoughtfully, and Jerah's eyes crinkled as a soft smile spread across his face. “You've really given all this a lot of thought, haven't you? You seem invested now.”

“Well, yeah,” Florian stammered, looking away. “I'm here, aren't I? No point in staying around for all this if I wasn't going to commit to it.”

“You sound like your mother,” Jerah chuckled, and Florian's heart ached at that. It was his own reaction, certainly, and not whatever strange residual effect that Jerah had used his notes about Soleil to fish for, so he let himself feel it for a moment, before letting it pass.

“Anything else about Soleil?” he asked, gesturing at the notebook, and Jerah sighed.

“Nothing particularly interesting, unfortunately. I could try insulting her and seeing if that brings up anything.” He laughed as he said it. “Though I don't think that will help us with narrowing down what's happening any more than we already have. I think speaking to the hag is probably going to be our best bet in this regard.”

“You were calling her a witch before,” Florian noted. “Now you're saying hag. Is that the same thing?”

“Ah, my mistake. Yes, the words are essentially interchangeable, though I suppose *hag* has a more negative connotation,” Jerah said, grimacing. “But to be fair, this witch is a rather frightening creature to behold. Using the old magic the way they do... It has a corrupting influence. There are

consequences to bending the rules of magic to their limits. She's exceedingly tall for one, and rather ugly, just like in the human stories about hags: stringy hair and yellow teeth and all that.”

Florian frowned at that. “And we'll have to go talk to her? We can't send her a letter or something?”

Jerah laughed at the prospect of it. “A letter! Well, we could certainly try, though something tells me we wouldn't get a reply. No, if she has something to say to someone, she'll send a little animal messenger; but if we want to speak to her, we'll have to go to her.”

“I see,” Florian replied slowly, though he wasn't entirely sure he understood. “Well, add that to the list of things we'll have to do, then.”

“Here, one last thing to try,” Jerah said, pushing his notebook into Florian's hands. “Why don't you try reading it yourself? Maybe that will do something.”

“More reading,” he sighed, but he nonetheless accepted the notebook and started to read. Jerah's handwriting was careful and neat, so it was easy going.

Queen Soleil of the Summer Court is described as a striking woman, with a deep sepia complexion, golden hair, and pale blue eyes. She was briefly sighted during the failed first attempt at containing the Nova Blight; however, there are no survivors of this incident, so it is unknown if she is still alive, if her appearance has changed, or what control she might exert over the Nova Blight, if any.

Reading the description, as simplistic as it was, conjured a vivid image in Florian's mind. He could see her clearly: a tall, willowy woman, her features as intimidating as they were beautiful with the strange otherworldly look he could never quite place that he'd come to associate with the fae. Her golden hair was quite long and cascaded past her bare, richly tan shoulders in beachy waves, and in stark contrast to her bronzed skin her eyes gleamed a pale, pale blue, almost white with how faint the blue tones came through. Like the foam of waves on the beach. As he thought it, her lips curled into a sly smile, and if he could just focus he might hear her voice—

He blinked, and the image was gone.

“You said you never saw her? You don't know what she looked like?” he asked, his head snapping up to look at Jerah who glanced down at him in surprise.

“No, never,” he said, shaking his head. “It's uncommon to have pictures of anyone not in your own social circle, not the way it is on Earth. So I was never able to find any pictures of her or anything. Just the general description from written records, the accounts of her coronation, gossip newsletters... That sort of thing.”

The fact that the Veil had once had *gossip newsletters* made him want to burst into laughter, but he felt if he turned his attention away from the thread that he'd manage to catch, it might be lost forever.

"I think I saw her," he said, squeezing his eyes shut, trying to hold onto the image that had appeared for only an instant in his mind's eye. "I don't know if this is really what she looked like, but I had a... A flash, a woman I could see for just a second. She was tall, and her hair was sort of wavy and long, and she did have pale blue eyes, but super pale, almost white. She had dark skin and a narrow face and her nose pointed up a little bit at the end. She was beautiful."

He paused. The last part hadn't been his own words. While she had certainly been lovely in the brief vision that he had, Florian had not been thinking of her beauty: only the features he could pick out and describe in the unlikely event that Jerah might somehow be able to confirm whether that truly had been her visage. But beautiful? The thought hadn't crossed his mind until the moment the words had already passed his lips.

"I didn't mean to say that," he added quickly before Jerah could respond; but when he opened his eyes again, his father was already jotting something down in a separate notebook. "That last part. That she was beautiful. I wasn't... I mean, she was, but that's not what I was thinking about."

Jerah frowned, but he continued to write without speaking. With a glance at the clock, presumably to note the time, he made a final few scribbles on the paper, before finally setting down his pen and meeting Florian's eyes.

"Anything else?" he prompted, and Florian shook his head, brows furrowed.

"No," he said slowly. "No, just that... I had that same feeling, like I knew her somehow."

"I have a few theories," Jerah sighed, leaning back in his chair. "But we don't have nearly enough information to know for sure either way."

"What are you thinking?" Florian asked. To his surprise, Jerah's frown deepened at the question.

"Do you really want to know?"

"Of course," he answered quickly; but even as he said it, he started to feel uncertain. He was mostly at a loss, but the few thoughts that he did have were something like being reincarnated, or possessed, or haunted, or something even worse. Part of him almost didn't want to know if Jerah suspected the same thing. "Well... I don't know. You said the hag would know for sure?"

"No, I don't know if she would. But if anyone would, I'd say she'd have the best chance of having answers," he said. One hand lifted to press against his mouth, a few fingers running through his short beard as he seemed to mull the situation over. "Well, here's my leading theory, at least, if you want to hear it."

“Yeah, okay.”

“A soul becoming tethered to something or someone is not unheard of in the Veil,” Jerah said. Florian stared at him, but his father continued to look down at his notes. “It's possible a lingering spirit of the Summer Court has latched onto you, perhaps somehow knowing you're involved in this prophecy. Or perhaps it was already connected for some unknown reason, creating the situation the prophecy would need to come about? But I don't know who, or why, or what this means in regard to the prophecy. Hence my continued thought that the hag could give us more definitive answers.”

“So it's like I'm being haunted?” Florian asked. His heart had sunk when Jerah had started his explanation, but now it was hammering a quick, nervous beat against his ribs. Considering that he had so recently learned that an entire magical world existed alongside his own mundane Earth, he wasn't sure why the thought of ghosts being real was so unsettling to him. It seemed silly, but still he couldn't calm his nerves.

“Haunted? Hmm, not quite, no. Often when this happens, there's no consciousness or intention behind the spirit, only some unfinished business that keeps an echo of its former self on the Veil, and that business acts as a tether. So it may be trapped somewhere that has significance to it, or it may latch on to someone involved somehow.” Jerah paused, then grimaced before adding, “I suppose that does sound a little bit like haunting. I promise, though, there's certainly no malicious intent if it *is* a lingering spirit. While we don't really know for sure, the general consensus is that these fragments have no consciousness of their own. It's more like a remnant of powerful feelings that linger beyond the grave.”

“I guess that doesn't sound so bad,” Florian sighed, and it was mostly true. It certainly could have been *worse*, he thought, though he still would have preferred to not have some old fae spirit connected to him for any reason. It seemed like more of a distraction than anything that could help them at this point.

“Well, as you said, we'll add a visit to the hag to our list of tasks,” Jerah said after a beat of silence, standing up and striding quickly to a different table, where more loose paper with various notes were strewn about. “I think we'll be ready to set out in a week, perhaps two.”

“Already?” Florian heard himself yelp in sudden panic, before he even realized he'd said it. “I mean—you think we'll be ready by then?”

“Oh, yes. Don't sell yourself short, Florian, you're a quick learner.” Jerah glanced back at him, his eyes glinting with pride. “And Kade tells me you're picking up combat training rather well, though that's of lesser importance, to be honest. As long as you know how to defend yourself a bit, Kade and

I can handle most anything else. It's more the magic I was concerned about, and you've taken to it swimmingly.”

“I guess that *has* been the easy part,” he agreed, glancing away with a flush at the mention of Kade.

Since their confession in the Moon Garden a few nights ago—still so recent that the bruise on his upper arm was still a mottled purple—they had done little beyond holding hands while walking through the grounds; but the thought that Jerah might know was supremely embarrassing. He had spent so much of his life without the worry of a parental figure prying into his personal life—August had been so nonchalant about everything that he'd never shied away from discussing such things with his uncle. Of course, he had his secrets, but his uncle had never pressed him for more than what he brought up himself. Now, though, he couldn't fathom ever wanting to talk to Jerah about seeing anyone, especially not Kade. He could already imagine the insufferable, self-satisfied grin that would split Jerah's face if he knew.

“Our first stop will be the Golden Arrow closest to the Winter Court,” Jerah continued, seemingly oblivious to Florian's reaction at the mention of Kade. “Here, I'll find my map so I can show you.”

“We're not going to the hag first?” Florian asked in surprise. That had certainly pulled him from his thoughts. “You think we can already tackle one of the Arrows? Aren't they, like, super strong magic or whatever?”

“Yes, but I've scoped out the area where this one is supposed to be,” Jerah said, not even looking back at him as he pulled a rolled-up parchment from one of the bookcases. “It's pretty easy to get to from here, and the hag's home is quite a bit further and not especially pressing, I think. We'll start with this easier Arrow and go from there.”

Rolling the map out, he pointed to the Winter Court that was marked right along the west coast of the continent. It looked like North America at first glance, but the closer he looked, the more off it seemed: the coastlines didn't quite match, and the mountains seemed flipped in the opposite direction, as if the fault lines were reversed.

“Here's where we are... And here's the location of the first arrow. I've narrowed it down to a cave system in what was once a desert,” Jerah explained, pointing to a spot on the map that Florian guessed would have been somewhere in Arizona, if it were a map of Earth. “And here... This is where the witch lives.” His finger trailed even further inland and slightly north; geography had never been his best subject, but that spot maybe matched somewhere in Utah, or perhaps Colorado.

“That's far,” he balked, frowning. “And we have to travel on foot?”

“Unfortunately, yes, although magic helps. It will still be several days’ travel in the Blight,” Jerah sighed, his hands pulling away from the map. He folded his arms across his chest, a pensive expression overtaking his face. “I think with both of us, we’ll make good time. I can maintain a shroud to protect us from the Blight, and you can make us a bit faster. I’ll show you how.”

“What’s the Blight like?” Florian asked. They had discussed the Nova Blight, but only ever in the abstract. He had almost no idea of what to expect when they left the safety of the Winter Court. Jerah’s expression darkened, and he gave another weary sigh before he found the words.

“Painful,” he finally settled on. “It’s miserable. It’s bright enough that visibility is compromised. It’s extremely hot, and your skin starts to burn within seconds if you’re not protected from the light. And ultimately nothing can survive in it for long, at least not without being changed for the worse. Blight monsters can be... Grotesque.” He shuddered, shaking his head.

“Hmm.” It was all Florian could bring himself to remark. Jerah’s sudden, obvious distaste had him wondering what exactly he had gotten himself into. It was far too late to back out now, though.

“Well, on that note,” Jerah said quickly, a chipper smile returning to his face as effortlessly as it had vanished. “I think that’s enough for today. Don’t want to keep you from your date with Kade.”

Florian spluttered, his face instantly becoming crimson as he rapidly shook his head.

“It’s not—It’s not—” he stammered, but Jerah only laughed, waving a hand for him to go. Rather than try and argue, he silently gathered his things. By the time he was hurrying out of the library, his face had stopped feeling like it might spontaneously combust.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“You're distracted.”

The words weren't an accusation, but Florian winced all the same. Kade was standing next to him, showing him how to draw a bow. This was their first archery lesson, so he was carefully correcting Florian's posture and showing him how to correctly hold and draw the bow.

“Sorry,” Florian muttered, lowering his arms as Kade took a step away from him. Florian was beginning to understand Kade's subtle looks, and he knew that the expression he wore now meant that Kade was curious, but hesitant to pry. “Just... My dad—er, Jerah—we were just talking about a lot of stuff in my magic lesson today. We think...”

He trailed off, unsure of how to bring up the possibility that he was being haunted by an old summer fae spirit—maybe he would hold off on that for now. “Well, he was saying we would be leaving soon to go find the first Arrow. Maybe in like two weeks, and it all just feels really fast.”

Slowly Kade nodded. “And you're nervous.”

“I guess,” Florian sighed, running a hand through his hair. “It sounds silly, but the thought of leaving the castle... Like, I've known all of this was real, of course, but it's making everything feel *more* real. More dangerous.”

Kade blinked, his head tilting just a fraction of a degree—subtle, but it was such a decidedly canine gesture that Florian had to fight a smile every time he saw it.

“It *is* dangerous,” he pointed out. “That's why we've been doing nothing but training for weeks.”

“I *know* that,” Florian insisted with a scowl. “I'm not stupid. I guess I'm just feeling stressed about it.”

He looked away, and Kade was silent for a long moment, before offering quietly, “Sorry. I wasn't trying to say you were foolish or anything. I understand.”

Florian let out a long breath, trying to let go of as much frustration as he could before looking back at Kade. “It's alright. I know you weren't saying that. Sorry.”

“Sounds like you need to blow off some steam,” Kade said, rolling his shoulders, and Florian could feel the heat rising in his face. He knew Kade wasn't going to suggest what *he* was thinking of, but... “Want to go for a run?”

Florian thought of the pure endorphin rush that he had gotten every time they had chased after each other in wolf form. The thought was certainly appealing, especially after the strangely grim lesson that he'd had with Jerah, so he nodded in agreement.

“Is that okay?” he asked, holding up the bow. “I know you wanted to start archery lessons today.”

“It's fine,” Kade said, taking the bow from him and propping it on the wooden weapons rack that also held their two practice swords. “We can just do it tomorrow. Let's go.” He had barely finished his sentence when he began to shift, the orange light surrounding him, so Florian followed quickly. It was easier each time, and now he barely felt the momentary discomfort of his bones and muscles morphing.

Now the familiar timber wolf, Kade stretched his legs for a moment, before trotting along the path that led out of the Moon Garden, Florian bounding eagerly behind him. He already felt a bit better—when he was a wolf, everything felt a bit simpler, somehow. It wasn't that his thoughts or understanding were less complex, only that the experience of his heightened senses of smell and hearing took up so much of his focus that it was hard to dwell on his confusion or fear.

Run? he thought as he followed Kade, who moved through the main gardens at an unhurried pace. Almost instantly he could smell the response from Kade—*Be patient*.

They cut through a part of the gardens that Florian hadn't visited before, eventually coming to a worn stone wall that must have been part of the castle perimeter. They trotted alongside it for a little while, then Kade stopped in front of a spot in the wall where there was a slight gap between two stones. Florian could see that a burrow had been dug out beneath the wall below the gap.

A hole? Florian thought in surprise, but as he inched forward to sniff the earth, he already knew Kade's answer. He could smell him all around it; still, the timber wolf's tongue lolled out in a not-quite-guilty grin.

I made it, Kade answered, and Florian sneezed as he ducked into a play bow, laughing in the only way he could. Without skipping a beat, Kade started to squeeze through the hole, his paws scrabbling for purchase in the dirt until he was able to push himself through and crawl out the other side. Florian followed, the scents of wet earth and old stone filling his nostrils, along with the animalistic scent that he'd started to associate with Kade whenever they were in close contact as wolves.

Run! he felt from Kade the moment he emerged on the other side of the wall; and he obeyed instinctually, catching sight of a gray blur that dashed away as he gave chase. Though their surroundings passed by in a rush, he could tell they were in some sort of field, running down the hill upon which the castle was built—they must have been on the western edge of it, far from the populated areas of the town, and he wondered if the field would lead them right into the forest.

The playful mad dash that Kade had broken into soon slowed slightly to a more relaxed run. As they loped through the tall grass, Florian followed Kade along a meandering trail that led down the hill. He could practically feel the contentment wafting off him, the same contentment he felt in his own chest as they ran. It was strange to think how confused he had been by Kade's preference for his wolf form the first time they'd shifted together—now, it was starting to make sense.

Where? he thought, clearly enough that he could communicate the thought to Kade. His pace didn't slow, but the wolf's tangerine eyes flickered back to glance at him.

Just running, came the reply. *Nowhere.*

The answer took Florian by surprise, but that was fine. If they had stopped to look up at the stars again or something similar, he would have to stop. Running was good for now, so they kept at it—all the way down the hill at first, then Kade took a sharp right turn, following the perimeter of the wide hill until the grassy fields became barren dirt, at which point he made a big loop up the hill and went back the way they came, Florian following him all the while.

Eventually, though, they both began to visibly tire; eventually Kade slowed to a trot, then a walk, then stopped entirely. Florian mirrored his slowed movements and came to a stop alongside him. They looked at each other for a moment, breathing hard, then Kade tossed his head, indicating that they should take a break. Panting, Florian gratefully stretched out and laid down, feeling the cold air rapidly moving in and out of his lungs, and bringing with it the scents of dried grass and cool earth.

After a moment, Kade also laid down, curling up next to him protectively. If Florian could have blushed as a wolf, he would have, but luckily his dark fur did not betray his surprise. Though they were now of a similar size, Kade was still bigger than him even in wolf form, so his body was slightly curled around Florian's—if Florian curled up into a tight ball, he was sure Kade's tail could cover his feet, and his head would cover his snout. As it was, they were laying more side by side, and a sudden cold wetness in his ear told him that Kade was snuffling along his face affectionately. After a moment the cold sniffs became warm licks: a soft, tender sort of feeling radiated from the bigger wolf.

It was... sweet, somehow. He tried not to think too hard about the fact that it was still Kade, licking him, and instead enjoyed the affection for what it was. They hadn't done more than hold hands, which was fine for Florian, at least for now. But their canine bodies pressed against each other, and the soft sensation of Kade's tongue along his ears and the top of his head made him wonder if maybe Kade wanted more. He wouldn't be against that, either.

He had figured out enough about being shifted to know that Kade wouldn't know his thoughts unless he broadcasted them, so tentatively he thought, *Shift back?* Kade's tongue on his cheek paused as if he were thinking, then he pulled away slightly. Looking down at Florian, his expression was more curious than anything else, which he took for a good sign. So he pushed himself up into a sitting position and shifted back, squeezing his eyes shut until he felt his body rearrange into his usual form.

When he opened his eyes, Kade had shifted too, and they were sitting across from each other.

“What's up?” Kade asked, but Florian only clambered closer to him, so they were sitting right next to each other, his shoulder pressed into Kade's side.

“How long were you gonna lick me for, huh?” he asked playfully, nudging Kade's rib with his elbow. A small, chagrined smile spread on Kade's face, and a hint of color rose in his cheeks.

“As long as you let me,” he admitted, and his arm snaked around Florian's waist to pull him closer. “This is nice, too, though.”

“Hey,” Florian said, turning his body so he was facing Kade. Already he could feel the heat rising in his face at the thought of asking, but he was feeling bold now, and pressed through it. “...I really want to kiss you.”

Kade blinked, color still in his face, but his expression remained perfectly unreadable. Finally, he replied in a small voice, “I thought you wanted to take things slow?”

“I changed my mind,” Florian said, pressing a little closer. He had to tilt his head up, but their faces were barely an inch apart now. “Is that okay?”

For a moment all he could hear was the blood pounding in his ears and the two of them still breathing hard—partly from their run, and at least for Florian, partly from the sudden heat between them. Then carefully, Kade nodded, his movements slow and deliberate. Florian leaned forward and pressed their lips together.

He was cautious, at first, indulging in the slow slide of their lips for only a moment before starting to pull back; but Kade's lips followed him eagerly, closing the distance between them before he could move more than an inch away. The sudden movement made the kiss rougher, Florian's lower lip caught between Kade's. A low, needy sound escaped the back of the other man's throat, sending fire

flooding through Florian's veins. Kade's strong arms wrapped around him, pressing their torsos together, and a soft groan escaped Florian's lips. He pulled both his arms free to bring one hand to Kade's cheek, the other gripping the back of his neck, as if he could press their bodies even more tightly together.

He could feel Kade's tongue brush against his lips hesitantly, and eagerly he met it with his own. The scent and taste of him—earthy and woodsy and masculine—overpowered every thought still lingering in Florian's mind. All he could focus on was *Kade*: the heat that sparked everywhere their skin touched, and the budding ache of arousal between his legs.

He wasn't sure how long it had been when Kade finally pulled away with a soft gasp, though their foreheads were still pressed together. Somehow he had gotten into Kade's lap, straddling his waist, and now he could *feel* his erection pressed up against his ass, hard and insistent. Emboldened, he slowly rocked his hips to grind against him, reveling in the surprised moan it elicited.

“Wait, wait, wait,” Kade panted, shifting his weight and grabbing Florian's waist, stilling his movement and pushing him back a bit to settle on his thighs. “Wait.”

“Is this okay?” Florian asked, suddenly nervous. Maybe he had let the moment get the better of him—after all, they had just discussed taking things slow barely three days ago. “S-Sorry...”

“It's just...” Kade stammered. For the first time he looked truly lost for words, glancing away from Florian, and his mouth pressing into a hard line. It was cute, Florian thought, and he couldn't help but smile. “I, uh, I should tell you something.”

Florian blinked. “Um, okay,” he replied, wondering what *that* could mean. Did he have some kind of wolf dick? Was he not gay at all, and having second thoughts now? Was he a *bottom*? He tried to rein in his thoughts, but Kade's nervous silence as he considered his words wasn't helping.

“I, uh, I've never. *Been* with someone before,” he finally said, still not meeting Florian's eyes.

“Oh,” Florian said, relief and surprise flooding him all at once in equal measure. “Oh, that's—that's okay. I mean, I've only ever been with one person, so...” He trailed off, then laughed. “So, you know, not exactly a ton of experience either. It's okay. I don't care.”

“Can we still take it kind of slow?” Kade asked, his eyes focusing on the grass around them as an embarrassed flush crept up his face. “I don't know if, um, a grass field outside the castle is the best place to... you know.”

“Yeah!” Florian exclaimed, more forcefully than he meant to. “Yeah, of course. I'm sorry if I, uh, came on too strong... I guess I just got carried away. You're right. We'll take it slow.” Kade finally

glanced back at him, a shy grin spreading on his face, and Florian's heart melted. They looked at each other in silence for a moment, then Florian's curiosity got the better of him.

“I really feel like I need to ask,” he stammered, trying to maintain eye contact with Kade but failing. “If, um, eventually... I mean, would you want to be on top? Or for me to top you?” A visible blush had flooded Kade's face again, and the nervous words were escaping his mouth before he could stop them. “I mean, if you wanted me to, I could, I just, um, I've just never done that before. So, you know, whatever you want to do, just, um...”

Kade was shaking his head furiously, and his mouth pressed into a tight line before he managed to answer, “Either is okay. I don't want to make you uncomfortable.”

“It's not uncomfortable, I like being fucked,” Florian blurted, instantly regretting it—but the nervous laugh that escaped Kade made it worth it. Almost. “I mean—I mean—God, what am I trying to say?”

“I don't know,” Kade answered, shaking his head and pressing a hand to his mouth to stifle his giggles.

“I just mean, I'm pretty okay with my body now,” Florian answered, starting to laugh, too. “Even before all of this, you know, Changeling stuff. Having a dick was never really high on my list of priorities.”

“Well, it's worth a try if you haven't yet. I think having one is pretty nice,” Kade said, and it took Florian a moment to realize that he was *teasing him*. Serious, stoic Kade was talking about how great his dick was.

“Who *are* you?” he gaped, and Kade laughed. “I'm serious, what happened to the strong-and-silent Kade?”

“I only talk when I have something to say,” he replied with a slight shrug. “Or when it's someone worth talking to.”

“I think that's meant to be flattering,” Florian laughed, leaning a little closer to Kade, who nodded in agreement. “I'll take it as a compliment.”

Kade nodded again, wrapping his arms around Florian once more. They held each other quietly for a moment, Florian pressing his face into the crook of Kade's neck, breathing in his scent, until his pounding heart started to slow a little bit.

“Hey,” he said softly, finally pulling away to look Kade in the eye again. “Do you want to maybe make out for a little longer before we head back?”

The smile that answered him was shy and amused and eager all at once. “Yeah,” Kade agreed with a nod, and he leaned forward to press their lips together once more.

For all his bravado out in the field when they had been alone, over the course of the next several days Florian tried to back off a bit, and Kade seemed content to let him. So while Kade taught him how to shoot a bow and arrow—touching him in a way that was more intimate and more often than necessary—and they often ended their afternoon with a walk hand-in-hand through the quiet, empty parts of the garden, he did not try to kiss Kade again. Kade, for his part, didn't press any further either.

He *had* asked to take it slow, Florian told himself. It wouldn't hurt for him to have some small measure of self control. So he was patient, trying to enjoy the little shared moments that they had whenever they had them. Besides, the last thing he wanted was for Jerah to know they were... whatever they were; and it would be a lot harder to hide if they were making out in every dark corner they could get themselves into. But Jerah only occasionally went out into the gardens from what Florian could tell, spending most of his time in the library, or the study, or elsewhere in the castle—so his and Kade's early evening walks went on uninterrupted.

It was around a week later that a knock came at his door after dinner. Florian was sitting at his writing table, flipping through one of the books that Jerah had given to him. When he got up to open the door, he was surprised to see Tatiana standing there.

“Good evening, Florian,” she said with a pleasant grin, and Florian blinked in surprise, before smiling nervously in return. Of late, he had only really seen her at breakfast, so for her to come to his room was unusual.

“Oh, uh, hi,” he answered, opening the door a little wider, but she didn't move to come in. “What's up?”

“King Jerah asked me to let you know that he's planning on having the two of you and Kade set out on your first expedition in three days,” she said. “Jerah wants to have something of a feast the night before with the townsfolk. Is there anything specific you'd like to eat or drink at the feast?”

“Oh,” Florian stammered. This was all news to him, and he took a moment to process before speaking again. “I didn't realize we'd be going so soon. Um, I don't really know about the feast or food or whatever... I'm not picky, so anything is fine.”

“Great,” Tatiana said with a nod. “I'm surprised Jerah hadn't told you, although sometimes he can be impulsive. He very well may have just decided on his own today.”

“I guess I'll ask him about it,” Florian sighed. “And I'll start packing, too.”

“That's a good idea,” Tatiana agreed with another nod. “If you need help, feel free to ask. Even the spectral servants should be able to help you, but I'd be happy to help you pack, too.”

“Oh, I don't think I'll have that much, but thank you,” he stammered, shaking his head. He watched her go until she had turned down the far hallway and disappeared around the corner, before closing the door behind him with an embarrassed groan. He had not seen Tatiana often, but still—why was it so awkward to talk to her?

He planned to ask Jerah about their departure the next morning, but the man beat him to it when he sat down to breakfast.

“Ah, there you are!” he heard Jerah's voice calling from the doorway, just as he'd started to eat. “I'm glad I caught you, Florian. I wanted to let you know that we're going to be heading out in three days' time.”

“I know,” Florian replied flatly, glancing up at him. “Tatiana told me last night.”

“She did?” Jerah asked, the admission taking him by surprise. “Well... Drat. I thought I had asked her not to mention anything until today. Well, ah, surprise!” He chuckled as he sat down across from Florian. “I take it she told you about the little feast I'm planning, too?”

“Yeah, she asked me if there was anything specific I wanted to eat,” he replied, stifling a laugh as he said it. “I couldn't name half the stuff I've eaten here, but it's pretty much all been good, so I just told her anything is fine.”

“I wanted to give you a little bit of a heads up before the feast,” Jerah said, barely seeming to hear Florian's words as he continued to speak in a rush. “Well, most of the fae folk won't really know who you are. That you're my son.”

An unsettled feeling started to come over Florian at his words, and he set down the mug he'd been about to take a sip of coffee from. “What does that mean?”

“Well,” he started, then sighed, rapping his knuckles nervously on the table. “Back then, when I had sent you away to August's, I... Well, I thought it was best if no one knew where you had gone. So I... I let the populace believe you had died.”

A long moment of silence stretched between them. An icy chill spread from Florian's fingers up to his chest, and he couldn't speak for the ringing in his ears.

“You faked my death?” he finally managed to say. The cold sinking feeling in his stomach was quickly replaced with hot anger. “Is that what you're telling me?”

“No, no,” Jerah said, shaking his head. “No, I... I didn't fake anything. I let them assume, and I didn't do anything to... correct it when the rumor spread.”

“You faked my death,” Florian breathed, pressing his face to his hands. “Oh my god. That's why the people in town—I thought they were looking at me weird because they thought I was a prince, but they have no idea who the fuck I am at all, do they?”

“You went to town?” Jerah asked, suddenly looking confused.

“That's not the point!” Florian exclaimed. “Jesus. Why didn't you tell me this sooner?”

“I didn't know how,” he admitted, and in that moment his tone sounded absolutely anguished. “There's no good way to bring it up, Florian, but I'm sorry. I didn't know how to say it, so I'm saying it now. And I had hoped that at the feast, I could make an announcement that you *are* my son, the prince. The Changeling prince.”

Florian shook his head, at an utter loss for words. What could he possibly say to that? How was he supposed to react? He wasn't even sure what exactly he was feeling, though it certainly wasn't good.

The sound of someone clearing their throat in the doorway snapped him from his thoughts, and he and Jerah both looked up to see Kade standing awkwardly in the doorway. Even with his expressionless face, it was obvious to Florian that he could tell something was going on between them.

“Good morning, Kade,” Jerah said briskly, gesturing to the table. “Come, join us for breakfast?”

His gaze flickered between Jerah and Florian for a brief moment before he stepped toward the table and sat down next to Florian. “Good morning,” he answered Jerah, before looking at Florian directly. Florian looked away to glare down at his plate, still trying to calm the roiling anger in his chest. “Everything alright?”

“Oh, yes,” Jerah said, and there was a beat of awkward silence before he added, “I was just telling Florian that we were going to be leaving in a few days now, and about the feast I'm planning the night before we go.”

“I see,” Kade said, and Florian could feel his gaze linger on him, but he couldn't bring himself to look up. He did manage to relax his mouth to a more neutral expression, though his whole body still felt tense.

Kade began to eat quietly, but otherwise the silence dragged on and filled the dining hall. Jerah was the first to break, standing abruptly.

“Well, Florian, I'll see you in a bit for our lesson,” he said, and he turned to go without waiting for a reply. When he had disappeared beyond the door, Kade turned his head fully to look at Florian, his eyebrows slightly raised.

“What's going on?” he asked, and Florian groaned. How could he explain it?

“I just... learned some stuff,” he muttered, pushing his food around his plate with a fork to avoid looking at Kade as he spoke. He could practically feel the unconvinced stare coming from Kade, but he stubbornly kept his eyes downcast all the same.

“What stuff?” Kade pressed.

“Bad stuff.”

“I don't understand.”

“Look, it doesn't have anything to do with you, okay?” Florian snapped, whipping his head to glare up at Kade. Kade didn't even flinch—his expression unchanged—but Florian regretted the words almost instantly. All the tension seemed to drain from him at once as he wilted under Kade's unmoving face. “Sorry. I just..”

The words wouldn't come, but not for lack of trying as his mouth opened and closed silently for a moment. Then with a groan, he pushed his plate of food away and folded his arms onto the table, pressing his forehead into them.

“Did you know that he faked my death?” he asked, his voice muffled against the cool tabletop. “That he let everyone think I died?”

He felt more than heard a sharp intake of breath from Kade, a pause, then the same breath released in a long, slow sigh.

“I did,” Kade answered quietly. “I thought you did, too.”

“I didn't,” Florian sighed, tilting his head to look up at him again with a miserable expression. “I guess I don't know how to feel about it. I'm really... pissed off about it, I guess, but I don't know what I would rather him have done.” His eyes had filled with tears before he realized, and he pressed his face back into his arms, embarrassed. “I just—Why did he have to do it? Why did he send me away? He was my dad. He was supposed to take care of me.”

For a long moment they were both silent, and a trickling dread—that his outburst was too much for Kade to handle—started creeping up his spine. Then he felt a soft, tentative touch on his shoulder that slid down along his ribs to settle on the small of his back, leaving a comforting warmth in its wake.

“I don't know,” Kade replied, his voice barely above a whisper. Somehow that, too, was soothing. “I don't know, but I think you should talk to him. Jerah is fallible, like all of us, but I think he's a good person.”

Florian sighed—Kade's words weren't exactly what he wanted to hear, but still he leaned into the soft touch.

“I guess you're right,” he said begrudgingly. Kade's eyes softened when he looked over, knowing Florian wasn't convinced; but Florian stood up all the same. “I'll go talk to him. Our lesson is starting soon anyway.”

“Florian,” Kade said as he started to walk away. He turned back around and watched as Kade seemed to consider his next words carefully, before saying, “You don't need to forgive him, but I think if you understand why he did what he did, it'll be easier.”

Florian blinked. It made sense, of course, but still his heart surged with frustration against the idea. It sounded too much like what August had told him when Jerah had first reappeared in his life. But why should he have to understand why his father left him, why he let the world believe he was dead? The thought of having an entire prophecy about him weighed heavily enough on his shoulders—did he really have to be the one to be the bigger person, too?

“Okay,” was all he managed to answer before he turned again and left the dining hall.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The door to Jerah's study was closed when Florian arrived, and he hesitated before it for a long moment, trying to play out the conversation that they were sure to have in his head. He was nervous, and Jerah had seemed... flustered, almost irritated. There was no telling how things might go, but it would likely be a confrontation all the same. So he took as deep a breath as he could manage, trying to steady his nerves, and pushed the door open to step inside.

Jerah was sitting at his desk, a book open next to him, but a clearly distracted look on his face. He glanced up at the door as Florian arrived, but his eyes flickered back down to his desk without saying anything. Florian closed the door behind him, still standing in the entrance, and neither of them spoke for what felt like forever. Finally, Jerah cleared his throat.

“Florian, I...” he started, only to trail off with a grimace. It took a moment before he started again. “I *am* sorry, Florian. I'm sorry it took so long to tell you. I should have mentioned this with everything else about the past, and I'm sorry I was too afraid to do it. I was in the wrong. I admit that.”

Florian pressed his lips together in a tight line. Still he had no idea what to say, so instead he took a few stiff steps forward to sit across from Jerah at the table. His father glanced up again, that same miserable expression on his face; and for all the sympathy it sparked in Florian, his lingering frustration nevertheless drowned it out.

“I told you before, I still don't know if I made the right decisions back then,” Jerah sighed, shaking his head. “But I promise you, Florian, I truly was doing my best to keep you safe. Maybe my best wasn't very good then. But I truly believe I was... I hoped I was doing the right thing. I don't mean to make excuses, really, I don't. I just... I hope maybe one day you can understand. That's all.”

“I know,” Florian muttered, tears suddenly burning in his eyes. He wiped them away in frustration. “I... Growing up, I spent so much time wondering where you were, if you even remembered me. And now all this... It's like you did forget me, like everyone forgot me.”

“I didn't forget,” Jerah said.

“I know you didn't,” Florian interrupted. “I know. But it still feels that way. And, shit, even if you remembered, no one else knows me. And now I have to tell people who think I'm dead—surprise, I'm alive, but also not the fucking princess they expected?”

“You're right,” Jerah replied, his voice faint. “Of course you're right. All I thought about was how hard it was for me. I never stopped to think how much harder it's made things for you, and I'm sorry. Truly, Florian, I am.”

“I know!” Florian exclaimed, shaking his head. “I know you are. It doesn't make me feel any better.”

Jerah didn't seem to have an answer to that, so they remained in silence for a long while; the quiet only interrupted by a few soft sniffles as Florian wiped his eyes again.

Then he laughed—weakly, once—and shook his head as a thought occurred to him.

“You know,” he said, as Jerah looked over at him hopefully. “I never really fought with Uncle August at all, but my friends would tell me about fighting with their parents in high school or whatever, and I used to almost be jealous because I didn't have any parents to fight with. Isn't that ridiculous?” He laughed again. “Well, I guess I can say I've fought with my dad now.”

Jerah's expression softened, a weak smile spreading across his face, and he nodded. Reaching across the table, he laid his hand on Florian's shoulder, patting it a few times and giving it a hard squeeze, before pulling away.

“Why don't we skip our lesson for today?” he said, glancing over the books on the table. “Want to take a walk around the castle instead? If you want, I can start introducing you to some of the workers, so it's less of a big deal during the feast.”

Florian hesitated, then nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “That sounds nice.”



It wasn't until a soft knock rapped on his door late in the afternoon that Florian realized in a panic that he'd completely forgotten about his training with Kade.

“Florian?” Kade's voice came from the other side of the door, and Florian winced, mentally kicking himself as he jumped up to answer. “Are you there?”

“Yes!” he exclaimed, flinging the door open. “I'm so sorry, I completely forgot. I...” He trailed off at the sight of Kade standing awkwardly in front of the door—his usually stoic face pinched in a nervous expression. “What's wrong?”

“I just wanted to make sure you were okay. I figured you were with Jerah longer than you expected, but...” Kade answered, before trailing off as well. After a moment he cleared his throat. “I, um, I

brought you something.”

“Oh,” Florian replied, blinking in surprise. Kade met his gaze for just a second, before fixing his eyes on a point on the wall behind him.

“Can I come in?” Kade asked. Florian nodded, stepping aside so the bigger man could walk through the doorway. When they were both in Florian's room, the closed door behind them, Kade lifted one arm from behind his back and presented Florian with a flower. It was a single, thin stalk that branched into a bunch of tiny blooms at the end: a cluster of small white petals tipped with a deep purple.

Florian blushed so hard that he very well might burst into flame, but he managed to reach out and take it.

“It's one of the rarer flowers in the garden,” Kade explained as Florian took it from his hand. “It's called a midnight princess. It only blooms for a few days at a time... I wanted to make sure you got to see it before we left.”

“Thank you,” Florian answered breathlessly, turning it slowly in his fingers to look at the tiny petals from all angles. “I think I saw it in the garden when my dad and I were walking. I didn't know it would die so soon.”

Kade nodded, his gaze fixed on the flower as Florian examined it. “How did... that go?”

Florian sighed, pursing his lips before speaking.

“It went okay, I guess,” he sighed. “I mean, he apologized, so... I don't know. I'm still kind of mad if I think about it, but it's not like there's anything that can be done at this point. It's in the past.”

“Yes,” Kade agreed simply. He seemed to be thinking over what he might say, and they stood in silence for a long time, as Florian slowly twirled the flower back and forth along his forefinger with his thumb. Finally Kade's bigger hand came up to lightly touch his, stilling the movement. “May I?” he asked, and Florian nodded. Before Florian realized what the other man was doing, Kade had pushed a bit of his hair away from his face and tucked the flower behind his ear, so the burst of blooms brushed along his temple and forehead.

His face burned anew as Kade looked down at him with an unmistakable, soft affection clear on his face. “W-what are you doing?” he stammered, but he didn't pull away or move to take it out, as Kade's fingers trailed lightly down his cheek and the side of his neck.

“I don't know,” Kade admitted, shaking his head as his hand fell to his side. “I don't know what I'm doing. I just... want to be around you.” Florian laughed at that, reaching up to touch the flower in his hair. It was... sweet, in a way, even if he wasn't the type to wear flowers, in his hair or otherwise.

“You don't need an excuse to come hang out with me,” Florian replied, his voice wavering slightly.

“Florian, I...” Kade started, then stopped, biting his lip. “I... wanted to talk to you about something, before we left. But with everything with Jerah... maybe it could wait.”

“It can't be that bad,” Florian said, shaking his head. “What's wrong?”

“When we leave,” Kade said quickly, looking away as if he were afraid he might stop himself if he met Florian's eyes. “When we're out in the Blight... I have to keep you safe, both you and Jerah. That's going to be the only thing I can focus on. So we shouldn't...” He trailed off, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

“I know,” Florian replied, uncertain. Hadn't they already had this conversation? “You already said that, back in... When we were over in the field the other night. I know that.”

“No, I mean—we shouldn't be... Together, like this.” He gestured between them, his eyes still firmly planted on the ground.

“I get it,” Florian said again, though his confusion still lingered. “I mean, yeah, I wouldn't really want my dad to find out yet, so... That's fine.”

Kade nodded quickly, and although he looked like there was still more he wanted to say, he remained silent. After a beat of silence, Florian reached up to gently pull the flower out from behind his ear and set it on his writing table. He would have to get a vase or a jar to put it in water, or maybe he would dry and press it.

“Do you want to go down for dinner?” he asked, gingerly reaching over to wrap his fingers around Kade's hand. He sighed, then nodded, and they headed out and down the hallway. As they descended the stairs, Florian released his hand, though they still walked side-by-side until they reached the dining hall.



The next few days were something of a blur, cramming in a final few lessons with his father and archery practice with Kade, as well as packing and making other preparations for their imminent journey. Tatiana visited him a few more times, bringing him a new set of traveling clothes, a sturdy backpack, and other supplies as she procured them.

But all too soon it was the day of the feast. There had been a flurry of activity in the castle first thing in the morning: more workers than Florian could ever remember seeing before hurried through the corridors, especially around the kitchen and dining hall. The main courtyard was a bustle of activity as well. Since the feast would be held outdoors, long tables and benches were being set up along with all manner of decorations.

Much of it, Florian nervously watched from his room, peering down from the window to the part of the courtyard that he could see from his room's tower. He still was unsure how to feel about all this—Jerah had assured him that there would be nothing expected of him except his presence, and that he needn't worry. But from the moment he awoke to the sounds of scraping tables, quick footsteps, and voices calling out to each other, the same small, sharp fear of the unknown gnawed at his stomach.

He didn't have much of an appetite, so he skipped breakfast. Instead, he alternated between watching from the window and going to stand in front of his mirror—shifting his appearance little by little until he no longer recognized himself, before changing back. He could be whoever he wanted when his father introduced him to the fae citizens. Part of him wanted to look like himself—why shouldn't he? But part of him wanted to be someone else entirely, to avoid ever having to deal one-on-one with any of these people, who would think of him as some long-dead princess somehow returned to life. Maybe that was cowardly of him. Still, it was an appealing thought.

He kept shifting his features around until there was no more comfort in the novelty of it, then he paced around his room for a little bit before deciding to go to Kade's room on the other side of the hallway. When he knocked at the door, Kade answered after just a few seconds, but he took a startled step back as the door opened.

“Oh,” Kade said, recognition settling over him. “Florian, I... You startled me. I didn't recognize you at first.”

“Oh! Sorry,” Florian stammered. “I was, uh, you know, experimenting, I guess. I forgot. Sorry. Let me change back.” He felt his face shift, the strange sensation becoming more and more familiar now, almost like a muscle spasm.

“I didn't see you at breakfast,” Kade continued, his uncomfortable expression slowly starting to dissipate as he let Florian pass and closed the door behind him. His room was surprisingly homey: a full bookshelf in one corner, a weapons rack near the door, and several decorations on the wall that didn't look at all like anything Florian had seen in the castle—he assumed they were things he had brought from his home in the wolf kingdom. “I figured you might be feeling kind of stressed, so... I wasn't sure if you would want company. I didn't want to intrude.”

“Yeah, I'm feeling nervous about everything,” Florian sighed, glancing over at the window. Kade's view of the courtyard was similar to his own, and with the window open, he could still hear most of the commotion. “The feast, and... Heading out tomorrow. It all seems scary.”

“I'll keep you safe,” Kade said firmly, stepping closer to him and lightly touching his arms; not quite holding him, but a comforting gesture all the same. “For all of it.”

“I know,” Florian chuckled with a nod. “I’m still going to feel nervous, though. It won’t stop me, but I’ll still feel the same.”

“Can I help at all?” Kade asked, his voice soft, and Florian’s heart quickened.

“Well... you could help keep me distracted,” he replied, leaning into his arms. “If that sounds okay to you?”

Kade hesitated for only a moment, before pulling him closer. Florian wrapped his arms around Kade’s torso, so they were pressed chest-to-chest, and tilted his head up to rest his chin on the taller man’s collarbone.

“Ouch,” Kade said, one hand coming up to tilt Florian’s chin toward his face. “Your chin is pointy.”

“Sorry,” Florian said, starting to laugh, but Kade’s lips caught his own and stifled the sound. The laugh died in his throat and became a soft moan as Kade kissed him hard, picking up exactly where they left off when they had last pulled away from each other in the fields outside the castle, already over a week ago. Kade’s hands were strong and warm, one still cupping his face and the other pressed to the small of his back, so their bodies were flush together.

His whole body prickled with heat that flowed from where their lips touched, the points of contact between Kade’s skin and his own. They hadn’t kissed since that afternoon in the field, yet their bodies fit together as effortlessly as if they had always known each other, as if they had kissed a thousand times before. Had it ever felt so good just to kiss anyone else? He couldn’t imagine it, couldn’t think of anything but *Kade*—the heat of him, the smell of him.

From where Kade’s hips pressed against his own, Florian could feel his arousal hard and eager against him. They had talked about taking things slow, and yet... Tentatively, he let one hand trail along Kade’s side to find the seam of his shirt, slipping underneath to drag his fingers up his abs and feeling the smooth skin occasionally prickled with coarse hair. Kade groaned against him, but this time he did not pull away. Instead his arm tightened around Florian’s waist, pressing him even closer; and his fingers moved to run through his hair, sending little sparks of pleasure coursing from his scalp up his spine.

“Kade,” he gasped, their mouths still pressed together. “I want to—is this—is this okay?”

“Yeah,” Kade breathed between kissing him again and again. “Yeah, I want to.”

Florian nodded eagerly, and Kade gave him one last gentle nip at his lower lip, before turning his face away. He was dismayed for only a second before Kade effortlessly lifted him up and carried him a few steps to his bed. Florian laughed as he fell onto soft pillows, only for his breath to hitch as Kade pulled away, peeling his shirt off in one quick motion, before descending once more to kiss him.

This time as Florian held him, his fingers pressed against the hard bare plane of his back, feeling the muscle move and ripple as the stronger man shifted his weight and pulled Florian so that he was partly on his back beside Kade, who lay half on top of him. Kade held him close as they kissed, but his hands were nervous and still on Florian's back—but now he felt bolder, almost aggressive, and let his hand trail from the small of Kade's back to his abs again, brushing lower until his fingers played with the waistband of his pants. He felt Kade's breath hitch, but still he didn't move away or try to stop him.

In as smooth a motion as he could manage, Florian pushed his hand further in, letting his palm brush lightly against the warm, hard flesh, before wrapping his fingers around his cock. Kade gasped as Florian stroked him, long and slow. It took only a moment for Florian to realize he was uncut—*that* would be different, he thought, even as he wondered why he should be surprised. His thumb brushed against the head and came away wet with precum, eliciting another moan from the back of Kade's throat. He had pulled away from Florian's mouth—his head dipped down so his forehead was now pressed against his shoulder—and Florian could see he was looking down to his waist, watching the hand move beneath his clothes.

“Fuck, Florian,” he panted, making him grin, as he pressed a kiss to Kade's neck and stroked him just a bit faster, reveling in the vulnerable, desperate sounds Kade made in response—knowing no one had ever heard him make those sounds before. But it didn't last long, just a few more strokes before Kade grabbed his wrist with one hand.

“Wait,” he gasped. “God, I'm already—I'm barely going to last. Fuck.”

The words went straight to the heat between his legs, as if he weren't already wet enough.

“Hurry up and fuck me, then,” he said, and Kade nodded. In an easy motion he pushed Florian onto his back and got on top of him.

He had spread his legs to accommodate the bigger man's waist without even thinking about it, and from this close as Kade leaned down to kiss him, his pelvis pressed between Florian's legs; and Florian saw stars, pleasure shooting through him at the unexpected contact. He made a soft sound of bliss that was almost a whimper against Kade's lips, who seemed instantly aware of what he'd done and began to grind harder against him, making him gasp. Kade groaned—a hungry, needy sound—before pulling away to sit back on his knees, looking down at Florian pressed into his bed through heavy-lidded eyes.

“Come back,” Florian whined, but Kade's hand reached for his shirt, pushing it all the way up to his armpits to expose his bare skin. He gasped, Kade's mouth instantly on him, finding the spot just

above his hip bone and swiping it with his tongue. He moved lazily up Florian's torso, kissing and licking and biting a slow trail from his hips, to his abs much softer than Kade's, then up along his ribs. When his lips found the thin scars on his chest, he kissed along the length of them; and although he could not feel it as acutely as he could his previous ministrations, Florian still let a soft, pleased sigh escape him.

Then his soft noise of pleasure became a yelp, as Kade's mouth went a little higher and surrounded his nipple, his tongue flicking against it.

“H-hey!” he exclaimed, nearly jumping in surprise; and obediently Kade pulled away, looking up at him.

“It’s bad?” he asked, his nervousness apparent in his voice despite the confidence all his movements had been suffused with so far.

“No,” Florian stammered, shaking his head. “I just—that startled me. Sorry.” He could feel his face flushed with heat—with desire. “Stop teasing me.”

“Not teasing,” Kade murmured, but he leaned forward to kiss Florian again all the same. “I just—you know. Psyching myself up.” A slight grin played on his face as he pulled away again, just enough to look down across Florian once more. “Look. You're blushing all the way down to your chest.”

Florian blushed even harder at that—he must have been a sight: his shirt pushed up all the way to his armpits, his lips swollen with kisses, and his face a burning red, spreading in blotches along his neck and across his collarbones, far enough down that it peeked through the bunched-up fabric of his shirt.

He didn't know what to say in response, so he moved his hands to start unbuttoning his pants instead. Kade's eyes followed the movement hungrily, and he leaned back to help him start pulling them off.

A knock at the door made them both leap, and Florian barely stifled a startled yelp.

“Kade?” Jerah's voice came from the other side of the door. “I was wondering if you've seen Florian? I can't find him anywhere.”

They both remained perfectly still for what felt like minutes, but must have been only seconds, then Kade looked at him, pressed a finger to his lips, and called out, “Just a moment.” He started to stand, pulling Florian up with him, and whispered in his ear, “Wait in the bathroom.” Florian nodded, stumbling toward the open bathroom door and leaving it open just enough to peek through. He watched Kade quickly retrieve his shirt from the floor and pull it back on, take a deep breath, run a hand through his hair, and open the door.

“Sorry,” he said, his voice perfectly even. “I was in the bathroom. You haven't seen him?”

“Ah, sorry to interrupt,” Jerah's voice came. Florian couldn't see him from this angle, but he sounded hurried and distracted—lucky for them, as he was positive Kade must still have had that same half-fucked expression on his face, and his lips swollen with kisses. “No, I didn't see him at breakfast, but he wasn't in his room when I checked. I was hoping maybe you'd seen him.”

“No, sorry,” Kade said, shaking his head. He hesitated for a moment before he offered, “I could help you look?”

“Sure,” Jerah said, and Florian had to press a hand to his mouth to mute his groan of disappointment. “The sooner I find him the better.”

“Let me put my shoes on,” Kade said, and closed the door behind him as he turned without waiting for Jerah to respond. He glanced over at the bathroom door, a tiny smirk twitching across his lips as he realized Florian was peeking through it.

“Wait a few minutes before you leave,” he muttered as he stepped up to the bathroom door. “And... Maybe come find us in the gardens.”

“Okay,” Florian sighed, but Kade had already stepped away, pulling a pair of shoes from underneath his wardrobe and slipping them on quickly. As he stepped toward the door once more, his eyes met Florian's briefly, and he paused as if he wanted to say more—though his expression at first looked as neutral as ever, there was a hint of disappointed frustration in the way Kade looked over in his direction before turning away again. He disappeared through the door, and Florian could just hear the echoes of voices and footsteps as they walked away.

He busied himself in the bathroom, running his fingers through his hair and unsuccessfully trying to smooth out the wrinkles that they had made in his shirt, before cautiously stepping back out into Kade's room, then out through the door. The hallway was empty, so he darted quickly back around the corner to his own room, changed his shirt and his underwear, then headed back out to find his father and Kade again.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

When Florian finally caught up to them in the gardens, Jerah exclaimed that Florian's outfit had returned from the tailor and he wanted to see him try it on before the feast later that night. Florian and Kade shared a long, lingering look, until Kade gestured for him to go with a wry grin pressed to his lips. Not having a good excuse otherwise, Florian agreed to his father's request and followed him back into the castle to try on the silk shirt and pants. The outfit laid out for him was much finer than anything else he owned, and when he tried them on, they fit better than he could recall anything ever fitting him before in his life.

The clothes were nice, but decidedly not worth missing out on having sex with Kade, as far as Florian was concerned.

"The colors will match mine," Jerah was saying as Florian modeled the new clothes and did his best to mask the irritation that he was feeling. "The blue is just a tiny bit iridescent, too—see that in the light?"

"I see it," Florian said with a nod, glancing at the shirt in the mirror.

"The pants are a little long, but I can have them taken in really quickly—"

"No need," Florian said, and with a brief moment of concentration he was tall enough to fill out the length of the trousers without any issues. Jerah laughed in delight.

"I forgot about that, to be honest," he chuckled, clapping his hands together. "'Well, excellent. I'm glad you like the clothes. And... I had this brought out for you, too.'" He reached for a wooden box on a dresser a few steps away from them, and pulled out a crown: plain in shape without any sort of ostentatious decoration; but finely made, even at a cursory glance, in a burnished golden color that somehow paired perfectly with the dark blue of their clothes. Carefully, Jerah lifted it over Florian's head and set it, adjusting his curls so everything sat just so.

"Look at you," Jerah murmured next to him, as they both looked into the mirror. "A veritable prince."

He did look princely. It was strange how natural it felt.

“Thank you,” he said softly, still looking at his own reflection. He could see Jerah grinning with pride next to him in the mirror.

“You have nothing to thank me for. It's your birthright,” his father answered, and he carefully removed the crown and set it back in the wooden box. “Leave that for last when you're getting dressed, and call one of the servants if you need help—a fae, not one of the spectral servants. And don't wait too long to start getting ready.”

“I won't,” Florian said, but he was already striding out of the small dressing room, adjacent to Jerah's own quarters.

“Take those with you back to your room if you don't want to come back here to change, but be careful, alright? I'll meet you in the foyer before we make our entrance,” Jerah called over his shoulder, without waiting for a response. Florian watched him go, then looked back at his reflection with a sigh. The dark, almost-black navy of the silky shirt with its iridescent hue was definitely nice, and matched many of the other colors that he'd seen the Winter Court decorated with—the blue and gold theme had not been lost on him.

He wondered where Kade was. After he'd gotten back into his regular clothes and carefully laid out the outfit for the feast in his wardrobe—the box with the crown set gently on his writing desk—he padded back out into the hallway and around the corner to Kade's room.

He knocked softly on the door, but no answer came.

“Kade?” he murmured, close enough to the door that if Kade were in his room he definitely would have heard. But still there was no response, so with a sigh, he went back to his own room to wait out the rest of the day, until the feast began.



He didn't see Kade again until the feast had already started. Florian sat at the head table: Jerah had the place of prominence, and he sat to his father's right followed by Tatiana. Suddenly, without having seen him approach, Kade pulled out the chair on the opposite side of the table and sat on Jerah's left. He was dressed in a solid black tunic with some silvery accents: it was plain but well-made, and the dark and almost mysterious air it conveyed suited him. Kade met his eyes briefly, when Florian glanced over at him with a nervous smile, but only gave him a slight nod before looking away.

The whole thing had been awkward so far, so he couldn't tell if the discomfort he felt at Kade's underwhelming reaction was due to his own nerves, or if something was actually off about him. So instead of thinking too hard about it, he looked back down to his plate of food.

It hadn't been all bad: the food was great; the music was nice; Tatiana had been chatting with him more than she ever had before, which kept him occupied. But it was still early, and Jerah hadn't spoken to the crowd of fae that had gathered. From the many tables arranged in the garden, all of them facing theirs, Florian could feel their eyes linger on him with curiosity—some seeing him for the first time, and surely all of them wondering who he was that he would be seated at the king's table in the place of honor. Some of them probably assumed he was related to Kade somehow, and others may not have had any guess at all. He wasn't sure if the looks were worse than whatever Jerah was going to say in his announcement.

Florian had started on his second plate—his nerves had put a damper on his appetite at first, but the food smelled good enough to coax him into eating—when finally Jerah stood, clearing his throat. The movement was enough for the whole crowd to quiet down, all waiting for him to speak.

“Thank you so much to everyone for coming,” Jerah started, gesturing out at the crowd with a wide smile. “It is my joy and my honor to spend this time with you, all of you. And, of course, a particular thank-you to the lovely Shanna and her team in the kitchen for making all this wonderful food.”

He pointed toward a woman sitting at the closest table. She waved her hand dismissively, but the smile spreading across her tired face betrayed her appreciation; and he answered the smile warmly.

“And to everyone who helped set up everything for today, we wouldn't be here without you,” Jerah continued, spreading his arms to gesture toward the crowd. “A thousand times, thank you.”

A few smatterings of applause broke out in the crowd, and Florian clapped along politely, though his focus was almost exclusively on Jerah. His heart had started to pound, and whatever appetite he had gained was completely gone now. If anything, he felt like he might be sick.

“While I think most of us don't need much of an excuse to have a party, I'm sure some of you are wondering why all this happened at such short notice,” Jerah continued, as the noise died down once more. “The reason is twofold. The first is that I'm about to set out on a journey—a dangerous one—though of course with help. I thought it might be nice to see you all off this way, until I return to you again, so thank you for joining my farewell party.” He paused, taking in a deep breath, as a soft murmur spread through the crowd. From what he had told Florian, it seemed he often was out and about on business, but he wondered just how much the citizens of the Winter Court knew about where he went, or what he was doing all this time.

“And, secondly,” Jerah started, hesitating for a moment, as he glanced over at Florian before looking out at the gathered fae once more. “As many of you know, my wife Inessa and I had a child. For many years our child was lost from the Veil, but now he has returned.”

He gestured toward Florian. A surprised, unsettling silence had taken hold—Florian wanted to look out toward the crowd, but he couldn't bring himself to look away from Jerah, who was meeting his gaze with an unwavering smile.

“My beloved son has come home, the foretold Changeling Prince, who will help free our world from the Nova Blight. Please, welcome and celebrate the return of my son with me, Prince Florian of the Winter Court.”

For a moment all Florian could hear was his heart pounding in his ears—the crowd still silent, though whether it was out of shock, or disgust, or something else he couldn't tell—then next to him, Tatiana stood to her feet and began to clap. She beamed down at him with such unhindered pride that he couldn't help but smile back up at her, wobbly as it was. Next to Jerah, Kade also stood, clapping along with Tatiana. His expression was less clear, but the way his eyes were crinkled—the beginnings of a smirk twitching at the corners of his mouth—made Florian think he was proud of him, too, and his own smile strengthened.

That was all the encouragement it took for applause to start spreading through the crowd, growing steadily louder until all the fae were clapping and cheering. Many had expressions of confusion, just as much as delight. Jerah gestured for him to stand, so nervously Florian got to his feet and waved out at the crowd, a few more cheers rising as he did.

“Um, thank you,” he called out, still embarrassed, but heartened at how easily their uncertainty had turned to happiness. “Thank you!”

“A toast!” Jerah called out, and a resounding whoop answered him, along with the clinking of many glasses. “To my son, the prince, long may he live!”

“Long live the king! Long live the prince!” many voices answered, quieting as everyone drank deeply from their various glasses and mugs. Florian took a polite, nervous sip of his own wine, and Kade met his eyes over his own glass. He hid his expression behind his drink, but Florian could see an unmistakable grin crinkling the corner of his eyes; and he grinned back at the other man.

The music started back up again after that, and cheerful chatter among the crowd soon joined it as the next round of food was brought out. As they sat back down, Jerah reached over and put a hand on Florian's shoulder, smiling at him. The way he had grinned out at the crowd was more confident, almost regal—this small smile he gave to Florian was much softer, more intimate, more familial.

“I'm very proud of you,” he said quietly, squeezing Florian's shoulder. He wasn't sure what to say, so he only nodded in response. “And I love you. I hope you know that.”

“I know,” Florian replied, glancing down at his drink again, embarrassed. He wasn't sure if he would ever get used to having a father like this. August had raised him, but he had never tried to be his dad—had always made sure Florian knew that he could never replace his dad. Now Jerah was in his life and wanted to be his father, and Florian had no idea how to act around him... But maybe it would get easier with time.

“Well, I'm going to go around and chat,” Jerah continued, seeming to sense his uncertainty. “I'm sure some of the fae folk would love the chance to speak with you too, but no pressure.” Florian nodded, and with one last squeeze of his shoulder, Jerah stepped away toward the closest table, where voices and cheers erupted as he drew close to the group with a raucous laugh.

“You did very well, Florian,” Tatiana said gently next to him, and he smiled gratefully over at her.

“Thanks,” he said. “I didn't really know what to do.”

“You did just fine,” she affirmed with a nod. “They don't know you yet, so just acting as a figurehead is good for now. Once they get to know you, I'm sure they'll love you, just like we do. And knowing what you're working toward, that will give them a lot of hope.”

He laughed nervously at that, the idea utterly foreign. He didn't know any of these people, couldn't imagine them loving him or even looking up to him.

“I hope so,” he said, not sure of what else to say. Her gaze lingered on him, and for a moment she looked just like Jerah did the other day, when Florian had been so sure that there was more he wanted to say but didn't. He had never thought they looked especially alike, but this expression was one that they definitely shared.

“I think I'll go make my rounds, too,” she finally said, winking at him. She stood and walked toward the crowd, waving and calling out to someone as she did.

Then it was just him and Kade at the head table. Florian glanced over at him: he was a bit slouched in his chair, looking out at the crowd with the wine glass still in his hand, swirling it absentmindedly. But when Florian's eyes landed on him, he seemed to snap to attention, his spine straightening, and his eyes flickering over to him. But he did not turn his head right away, as if waiting to see if Florian would speak first.

It was impossible to be sneaky at the head table, but he still tried to be as surreptitious as possible as he slid over into Jerah's chair so he and Kade could sit next to each other. By the time he settled into the bigger chair, Kade had shifted his weight to face Florian, meeting his eyes evenly.

“Hey,” Florian said, grinning nervously at him. When he looked at Kade, the nerves that started bubbling in his stomach felt entirely different from the tension that had been clinging to him since the

start of the feast—this sort of nervousness almost felt good compared to the sick worry that had so preoccupied him before. “Thanks for... This, you know.” He gestured, and Kade smiled. He must have had more to drink than Florian had thought, because the smile spread easily across his face—far different from the usual tiny hints of a grin that were the most expressive he ever seemed to get.

“You're welcome,” Kade said, nodding.

“And, um, sorry,” Florian continued. “For earlier.”

Kade chuckled and looked back down at the wine in his hand, swirling it over and over. “No need to apologize. You couldn't have known,” he said, then glanced over at Florian again as he added, “It was probably for the best, anyway. Not like there would be much time for that once we're out of the Winter Court.”

That was certainly true. Florian had never seen the Nova Blight for himself, but from what he had heard, it didn't seem like it was going to be a pleasant trip. And Jerah would be traveling with them, so they were unlikely to get that kind of alone time at any point, not until they got back from their first mission. Florian couldn't stop his nose from wrinkling at the thought. Maybe that all had been for the best after all.

“Yeah, you're probably right,” he agreed, taking a gulp of his own drink before asking, “You've been in the Nova Blight before, right?”

Kade's light expression darkened noticeably at that. “Yes,” he said, looking back down at his drink once again. “It's... difficult. Jerah's magic, fae magic, can block out a lot of the heat, but we'll need to stay close for it to work. And it doesn't get dark at night, so... Making camp is painstaking.”

“Yeah, doesn't sound like a good time,” Florian agreed with a nervous laugh. Kade didn't look up this time, but gave a deep sigh.

“It's going to be difficult,” he repeated. “But I promise I'll keep you safe. You and Jerah both.”

“I know,” Florian said, nodding. “I know you will. So... Thank you. I don't know what we'd do without you, really.” He felt awkward saying it, but the thoughts had been weighing on his mind more often as of late. “And... Thanks for being there for Jerah, for my dad. I think that, um... I think that all this is a lot harder on him than he lets people see. I'm glad he has someone so loyal to him. I don't know if he's ever said it outright to you, but I'm sure he appreciates everything you've done.”

A small grin had returned to Kade's lips as he said it.

“I know,” he replied softly, nodding. “But that's nice of you to say. I... It's been good for me to be here, too. Gives me purpose. And he's been very kind to me. He's not my dad, but he's treated me like

a son in a lot of ways.” His grin turned into a smirk as he looked over at Florian. “I think he was practicing for when you got here.”

Florian laughed at that, shaking his head. “Not even. He'd be a lot better at it if he had practiced.”

They both chuckled at that, and Kade's gaze lingered on him for a long time, making him start to blush after a moment.

“What?” he finally stammered, looking away from the heat in Kade's eyes.

“Nothing,” he replied, standing suddenly to his feet. “C'mon. I have a few friends in town who are probably here. Want me to introduce you?”

Florian could hardly imagine Kade having friends, but who was he to say no? Kade held out his hand to Florian, and he hesitated for a moment before taking it, allowing himself to be helped to his feet.

“Yeah,” he said. “Let's go.” Kade's hand remained in his for only a few steps longer as he led him down to the other tables; but he could feel the warmth lingering on his fingers for a long time afterward.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It was late in the morning when Florian woke. He had slept much later than he meant to, and a headache throbbed at his temples from all the wine that he'd had at the feast. He rolled out of bed with a groan, heading right for the bathroom despite the late hour. They would be setting out today, but not until the afternoon. He would probably miss breakfast, but most of his things were already packed, so he would still have time to get ready.

After a long, hot shower, his head had cleared up, but a familiar tight nervousness in the pit of his stomach began to grow. For all the training and learning that had filled nearly every day that he'd spent in the Veil, Florian still felt entirely unsure of what to expect once they left the safety of the Winter Court. Burning heat, endless light, deformed monsters—all this he could imagine, but how different would the reality actually be?

He had no appetite, but this was his last chance for a good meal until they returned, so once he was dressed, he went down to the dining hall anyway. Some of the breakfast foods were still out, and part of the lunch spread had started to arrive on the long table, so he got a little of both and sat down to eat. No one else was in the dining hall, and even the nearby kitchen sounded oddly quiet, making him feel more unsettled. He tried to eat, but mostly moved the food around on his plate instead.

The sound of footsteps came from the far entrance, and Florian looked up just as Tatiana appeared in the doorway, looking surprised to see him.

“Oh, Florian,” she said, pausing before continuing to walk into the dining hall. “Late morning, huh?”

“Yeah, I think I maybe had one too many glasses of wine last night,” he said with a rueful chuckle.

Her gaze lingered on him for a long moment, and he had the distinct sensation that she was looking right through his words.

“Nervous about heading out?” she finally said, her expression softening. He flushed—was it that obvious?

“A bit, yeah,” he stammered, and to his surprise she stepped over and placed her hands on his shoulders—not quite a hug, but more physical affection than he could recall ever having received from her.

“That's understandable,” she said lightly, patting his shoulders in a soothing motion. “I don't think it will be as bad as you're fearing, though. It's dangerous, of course, but Jerah has traveled through the Blight many times and always came home safely. Fae magic will give you the best protection against the Blight. We're rather lucky in that regard. Shifters can't really get through it on their own.”

Her words were somewhat comforting, though he could still feel that tight, uncomfortable ball of anxiety in his stomach.

“Anyway, I'll be there to see you off when you leave in the afternoon,” Tatiana continued with a soft smile that seemed to indicate that she understood his silence. “But let me know if you need any help packing first.”

“I will,” Florian said, nodding. Her hands left his shoulders as she stepped away, then headed through the door to the kitchen—he smirked as she reached out to snag a sweet roll as she walked by.

Eventually, he decided that he wasn't going to get any more food down, so he went to finish up the last of his packing. A few sets of clothes, and what seemed like pretty ordinary camping gear, had all already been set aside and packed into a backpack for him, so he gathered up the last of the things he wanted to bring: a few toiletries and the sunscreen he'd brought from home, though he suspected it probably wouldn't be especially effective, all things considered.

And finally, he picked up the sword that he would be carrying—his mother's sword. He picked it up still in its scabbard; it was heavier than their practice swords, but lighter than he expected, and his gaze lingered on it for a long time.

“Keep me safe, mom,” he whispered, feeling silly even as he said it, but it felt right. Carefully, he hooked it to his belt.

When it was just about time to go, he opened his door to find Kade sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall.

“Oh,” he said, startled, as Kade's head snapped up to look at him. “What are you doing?”

“Wanted to catch you before you got too far,” he replied, barely above a murmur, as he got to his feet. He was dressed in the same loose, light cotton clothes Florian wore: the traveling outfits that had been prepared for them. On Florian they looked too big, but on Kade the off-white hooded shirt and tan pants looked comfortably loose.

“Why didn't you just—?” Florian started to ask, but was cut off as Kade roughly pulled him close and kissed him hard. He froze, surprised at the sudden aggression, but soon melted into Kade's arms, kissing him back with just as much fervor. Kade pushed him up against the wall and a soft moan escaped him—the timing of this seemed terrible, but he couldn't bring himself to pull away.

But just as quickly as it had happened, Kade released him, breaking the kiss and turning away with an expression Florian couldn't read.

“What...?” he stammered, looking up at him in bewilderment.

“That's all,” Kade said, taking a slow step away. “I'll see you out at the back gate.”

And with no further explanation, he turned and walked away. Florian watched him go in silent shock. He had no idea what that had been about, but after a moment he roused himself to action and grabbed the rest of his belongings, locking the door to his room behind him as he headed out toward the courtyard in a daze.

When he arrived outside in the courtyard, Kade was there with his pack strapped to his back, leaning a little over Jerah's shoulder, who was holding a map out in front of them, tracing out a path and speaking in a hushed voice.

“Ah, Florian,” Jerah said, noticing his arrival and gesturing for him to join them. “Just finalizing the plan with Kade. It should take three or four days to get there if we travel quickly. Kade will lead, I'll stay in the center, and you'll follow. I've shown you the map, right?”

“Yes,” Florian agreed, but obediently he looked it over anyway, following Jerah's finger along the trail marked on the paper map.

“Remember the shroud I taught you?”

“Yes,” he said again, nodding.

“I'll keep a shroud up for most of the day,” Jerah said. “But if you could help for part of the day, too, that would make things easier. But your most important task will be the quickening spell. If you can keep that up for even part of the day, that will help cut down a big chunk of our travel time. Otherwise it would be closer to a week.”

“Of course,” Florian agreed. He glanced over at Kade, who had looked away out toward the gate. His expression was perfectly blank: the same intentionally neutral face that he had worn so often when they first met. Florian blinked, realizing with a start that Kade had not ignored him so thoroughly in weeks.

“Well, I'd say we're ready to head out, but Tatiana wanted me to wait so she could see us off,” Jerah continued, glancing around.

“And I appreciate it!” Tatiana's voice called out as she appeared from the stairs that lead down to the courtyard from the other end of the castle.

“Speak of the devil,” Jerah teased, a fond grin on his face. “Thank you for seeing us off as always, Tatiana.”

“Only because I always worry,” Tatiana replied, walking up quickly to hug Jerah who embraced her just as readily. “Be careful, alright? Extra careful since Florian's with you this time.”

“I have every intention of getting him home safe,” he replied, his grin becoming a serious expression as he spoke. “I promise, Tatiana.”

“And you come home safe, too,” she murmured, barely audible as she pressed her face against his chest. He patted her back, nodding, and answered in a low voice. Florian couldn't hear what he was saying, and the moment seemed intimate, so he turned away.

After a moment they parted, and Tatiana stepped over to him, smiling despite the obvious concern in her eyes. For all her reassurances in the dining hall that morning, she seemed just as worried as he felt now.

“Be safe, alright?” she said, taking his hands into hers. “Listen to your father and Kade. As long as you do what they say, everyone should come home safely.”

“I understand,” he stammered with a nod. “I will.”

She only smiled down at him in return, again looking very much like Jerah when he wanted to say more but didn't—an expression he was starting to recognize. He managed to smile back up at her, which seemed to assuage her; and she patted his hands a few times, before giving them one last squeeze and moving on to Kade. To Florian's surprise, she hugged him too. He wrapped one arm around her, looking uncomfortable but unsurprised. Florian heard her say something to him as well, low and quiet enough that he couldn't quite make it out; but Kade simply nodded in reply, and after a brief moment, she released him.

“Well, boys,” she sighed, looking each of them over in turn. “I wish you safe travels. I hope you have good news for us when you return.”

“That's the plan,” Jerah said with a boastful grin, and she chuckled, shaking her head.

“I'll see you when you get back,” she said. They said their goodbyes, then she went back the way she came toward the castle once more. Jerah watched her go, then looked toward Florian with a sigh.

“Ready?” he asked. Kade nodded, and Florian agreed, so they started walking out of the courtyard along the eastern path.

Before long, the path faded away into grass and dirt—the same field where he and Kade had first kissed, Florian realized. It was lucky that he was behind the other two, since he could feel his face redden at the thought.

For a while, they walked in silence along the hillside and out into the empty field. Jerah had told him the Blight was out quite a ways from the city: no one wanted to ever get too close to it, so nothing was built along the edge where the Blight reached. Jerah had said Florian would know it when he saw it, so he kept his gaze on the horizon as they walked; despite the flat field that they were tramping through, he couldn't see anything like what they'd described.

Then a layer of white light appeared on the horizon, as perfectly as if someone had taken an eraser to the edge of the sky. Florian frowned—it looked like a trick of the light at first—but after only a few more steps, the white had grown and grown, and he realized that this must be it. The brilliant light was so perfectly demarcated against the rest of the sky that he hadn't realized what it was at first, but now...

“Is that it?” he blurted, pointing. It looked so benign from this distance, but he had no idea what else it could be. Jerah glanced back over at him, but his expression had become grim.

“That's it,” he answered. From here, it didn't look so bad—inconvenient, perhaps, the way the sun got in his eyes around sunset and made it difficult to see. It didn't look deadly, but Jerah's face was more than enough to convince him that it must be far worse than it appeared. He looked back over at the thick white line of light in the sky apprehensively, but followed closely as they continued on.

The line of light seemed to grow thicker with each footstep, and the closer they got the more it took over the sky, until finally there seemed to be no blue left at all. Florian could see up ahead the border meet the ground, which went almost instantly from brambles and thick undergrowth to bare, dry dirt.

Kade paused a few steps away from where the light hit and turned back to look at Jerah and Florian.

“Everyone ready?” Jerah asked, glancing between them. He lowered the goggles that had been pushed up to his forehead down over his eyes, and the other two followed suit. They nodded, and Jerah took a deep breath—with the dark lenses of the goggles, Florian couldn't quite tell, but he imagined that his father's eyes were closed as he pressed his hands together.

“Darkness hides us. Darkness protects us,” Jerah murmured, and Florian could feel the air tingling with magic as he said it. “The Blight cannot touch us. The Blight cannot harm us.”

The shadow between his fingers, where his hands were pressed together, seemed to grow and stretch of its own accord, moving to envelop first his hands, then his arms, then his whole body.

Florian watched as the shadow seemed to spread out as if it were oozing from Jerah's body—moving along the ground until it touched his own feet. He could feel the faint tingle of it as the shadow moved up his legs, then his torso, until he was fully covered in the shroud. When he looked up, Florian could see the shadow linger over Jerah and Kade, almost like a dark bubble hovering just over the surface of their skin. There was a snapping sensation as Jerah tilted his head back up, and his hands fell to his sides; but the shadow remained over them, moving with Jerah as he took a step closer to Kade.

“We should get a few good hours out of that before I need to top it up,” Jerah sighed, glancing back at Florian once more, before turning away and gesturing for Kade to continue. “Let's go.”

Kade nodded, looking toward Florian for only an instant, before he too turned away and stepped into the light. Jerah followed, and Florian took a few nervous steps forward, lingering with uncertainty at the very edge of where the light touched. It was so strange how it was perfectly delineated, as if there were a wall there that was invisible, but somehow still blocked out the light. He realized, feeling foolish, that he had never asked Jerah what prevented the Nova Blight from touching the Winter Court. His hands were trembling at his sides.

But they were waiting for him. He could see their figures—now blurred shadows in the light, even with his sun goggles on—looking back toward him.

“It's alright, Florian,” his father's voice came encouragingly. “Come along now.”

He nodded, and with a steadying breath stepped beyond the boundary and into the Blight. His vision nearly went white; even with the sun goggles, the light was so intense that he could barely see, blinking and wincing until his eyes adjusted enough to see Jerah and Kade standing and waiting for him.

Then he felt the heat. His skin prickled with it: a sharp, dry heat that seemed to pierce right through the shroud and the light, breezy clothes they wore—even breathing was distinctly uncomfortable, as impossibly hot air filled his lungs.

“Holy shit,” he groaned, looking up at Jerah in half-disbelief. “This is awful. You're sure the shroud is working?”

“Yes, definitely,” Jerah answered, nodding once. “Without it, we'd already be starting to burn.”

“God,” Florian sighed, glancing back the way they came. The line between the Winter Court and the Blight was not visible from this side.

“Let's go,” Jerah said gently, and Florian tore his gaze away to step toward them. “Remember I showed you how you could help us move faster?”

“Right,” he said, nodding quickly. In truth he had forgotten entirely about it, but now he paused, focusing his magic. “Our movements are quickened. The land shrinks beneath us.”

He could feel the magic take hold at his feet, and it took some effort to push the effect through to the others; but after a moment, he could feel the tendrils latch onto Jerah, then to Kade. It made him hyper-aware of their location, but he supposed that couldn't be helped.

“Ready?” Jerah said, Kade peering over at him silently.

Florian nodded, meeting Kade's eyes briefly—this time, Florian looked away first. “Ready.”

When they walked, each stride seemed to reach across the earth, far beyond where it should have. From what Jerah had taught him, they could cover nearly twice as much distance in the same amount of time with this magic. It would still take several days of travel, but at least it wouldn't be weeks. The sooner they could get out of the Blight, Florian thought, the better.

It took a little while to adjust, but eventually he could see a bit better. Not that there was much to see; the dirt beneath them was dry, and there was no plant life anywhere. Farther off, he could make out the shapes of rocks and maybe hills, much like the hills the Winter Court was built on. Distantly, he wondered if maybe the Winter Court had once reached this far, too.

It quickly became clear to Florian why Jerah had wanted their first day in the Blight to be a shorter one, setting out in the afternoon rather than first thing in the morning. Aside from how miserable it was with the heat and the low visibility, the walk was monotonous, and Florian soon realized there was no way to keep track of the time. Nothing seemed to break up the barren landscape, except for an occasional larger-than-usual rock.

Focusing on the rhythm of his steps, and the magic that kept the ground moving rapidly beneath them, he couldn't have said with any certainty just how long it had been when he finally looked back up. The landscape looked exactly the same, but they must have been traveling for at least a few hours.

“When are we going to make camp?” he asked, breaking the silence. Jerah gave a slight start as he glanced over at Florian—he too must have been focusing intently on maintaining the shroud around them.

“Soon, I think,” he answered, looking toward Kade before continuing, “Maybe another hour or two.”

“I'll keep an eye out for a good spot,” Kade said over his shoulder.

They kept walking. Eventually—maybe it had been an hour, maybe three—ahead of him Kade paused, then Jerah. Florian stopped and looked in the direction that Kade was looking. He pointed at

a large stone outcropping off to the left, just far enough away that Florian could make out the shape of it but without any clear details.

“Let's check it out,” Jerah agreed. “You can drop your magic, Florian.”

“Right,” he said, letting his focus fade. It was a strange sensation. He had never held onto his magic so long, and letting it go was like relaxing a muscle he hadn't realized he'd been tensing. He hadn't realized how tired it had made him, but when he let it go the relief was immediate, as was the exhaustion.

“You all right?” Jerah asked, noticing how his shoulders immediately started to sag.

“Yeah,” Florian groaned, nodding. “Just... hit me all at once. I'm just tired, but I'm okay.”

“I think we'll make camp here, then,” he said, reaching out to pull Florian along by the shoulder. He followed without putting up a fuss. Kade had moved ahead a bit, though they couldn't wander too far from Jerah and keep the shroud on them. He began inspecting the rocky outcropping, gingerly feeling along its surface, as if testing it to make sure it wouldn't crumble into dust at the contact. When it seemed to hold up to Kade's scrutiny, he looked over his shoulder at them and gestured for them to come closer.

“This should work,” he said, setting down his backpack to start unloading.

It was not exactly a tent that they began to assemble: more a series of thick sheets and tarps to be strung up or set on poles, creating a shelter thick enough to block out the Blight, at least for a little while. When all the pieces were put together, Kade pulled out one last thick ream of cloth longer than the others, draping it over everything else to ensure there were no cracks or holes where the light could come through.

It seemed shaded well enough when Florian stepped inside the makeshift shelter, tying the flap firmly closed behind them; but still Jerah and Kade each went through inspecting every joint or seam where the different pieces touched. When they both finally seemed satisfied with their handiwork, Jerah nodded first at Kade, then at Florian.

“I'm dropping the shroud,” he said, and the shadow that had been covering them vanished. The heat that had been stinging at Florian's skin intensified as the shroud dropped, but being in the shade of the tent seemed to keep the worst of it at bay. Jerah started fanning himself with his shirt. That made Florian feel a little less self-conscious about feeling so uncomfortable, at least; but still he wondered if he could have ever possibly prepared himself for what it was actually like to be enveloped in the Blight. Jerah had told him it was hard to describe—that he would understand when he saw it—but Florian had not quite believed how true that was until now.

“Good work today, Florian,” Jerah said, shaking him from his thoughts. “Your quickening spell was perfect. I know it can be tiring to maintain something for so long, but you did great. Tomorrow will be a longer day, but don't push yourself. Even if it's just half the day again, you're letting us get a lot of headway.”

“Oh, sure. No problem,” Florian stammered, grinning nervously in response. He still felt completely out of his element, but Jerah at least seemed not to have noticed.

“I'm proud of you,” Jerah said, squeezing his shoulder; and Florian couldn't feel his face with the heat already around them, but he knew he must have been blushing.

“Thanks,” he replied faintly, but Jerah had already stepped away to start unpacking his bedroll. They set up their sleeping arrangements in tired silence—Florian hesitated, considering whether or not he should try to set up his bedroll close to Kade's; but before he made up his mind, the other man was already spreading out his sleeping bag next to the opening of the tent—Jerah between them—so with a resigned sigh, he set out his own sleeping bag on the opposite end of the shelter. That was probably for the best anyway, he thought. The shelter was no more than twenty feet from one end to the other, so Jerah would be uncomfortably nearby either way.

Once everything had been unpacked and a small, quiet meal of hard bread and dried meat passed around, Jerah immediately went for his own bedroll. He started peeling off his dusty clothes, and Florian looked away self-consciously, making a mental note to change into clean clothes once the others had gone to bed. Though with how cramped the quarters were, he doubted that any real privacy would be possible.

“Don't stay up too late, you two,” Jerah said with a sigh, once he had changed clothes and settled into his sleeping bag. “You especially, Kade. I know how you get. Sleep!”

“I will,” Kade replied with a nod, though Jerah didn't look convinced.

“Good night,” Florian said, glancing uncomfortably between them. But Jerah had already set his head down on his pillow, eyes closed, and did not respond. “Man. I wish I fell asleep that fast.”

Kade made a faint noise of agreement, but he was looking away toward the tent flap. Florian hesitated, then slowly went to sit next to Kade.

“Hey,” he said quietly, and Kade only glanced over at him. “What did he mean? He knows how you get?”

A tiny, chagrined smile spread on Kade's lips. “He thinks I don't sleep enough,” he answered, his voice low. “I try to keep watch. Or listen, I guess. But it didn't seem like there was anything alive anywhere near here. So I'll sleep.”

“Do you think there'll be things that are alive further in?” Florian asked, frowning.

“Definitely.” There was no hesitation in his response, and Florian wasn't sure if his certainty was reassuring or frightening.

For a moment he wanted to reach out and hug Kade, but the memory of their strange, intense kiss that morning—and the weird, anxious energy that had been between them the rest of the day—still lingered in his thoughts. Maybe they were both nervous. And he was sweaty and dusty anyway, Florian thought. Maybe tomorrow would be better.

“I guess I'll lie down, too,” he sighed, standing back up. “Goodnight, Kade.”

Kade watched him go and hesitated for a long moment, before responding. “Goodnight.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Florian had no idea how much time had passed when he was woken by a gentle push on his shoulder. Jerah was kneeling next to him, shaking him awake.

“Time to go, Florian,” he murmured. “Start getting ready, alright?”

He groaned something unintelligible in reply and slowly nodded, which seemed to satisfy Jerah, who went back to his own sleeping bag and started to pack. It didn’t feel like a full night’s sleep, not at all. The shelter provided shade, and the inside had cooled a bit, but it was still uncomfortably warm.

Florian pulled his backpack over and unlatched his water jug, taking a long drink and splashing some through his hair and on his face for good measure. Jerah had shown him how to magically refill any vessel with liquid: as long as he had at least some left, he could always fill it back up again; and knowing that at least they wouldn’t die of thirst was a small comfort.

When all their personal belongings had been packed away, and their sun goggles pulled over their eyes, Jerah gathered them in the center of the shelter to put the shroud back over them.

“Darkness hides us. Darkness protects us. The Blight cannot touch us. The Blight cannot harm us,” he murmured, the now-familiar tendrils of shadow spreading from his hands across his body and reaching toward Florian and Kade in turn. Covered in the shroud and under the shelter, the temperature felt, for the first time since they’d set out, somewhat comfortable to Florian. He closed his eyes, taking in a deep breath of the temperate air, knowing it wouldn’t last long.

“Alright,” Jerah said, releasing a long exhalation, as if he too had taken in a steadying breath. “Ready.” They started taking down the cloth panels and tarps of the shelter, light flooding in almost instantly. It was going to be a long day.

They set out in the same order: Kade leading them, Jerah in the middle, and Florian following behind. He repeated the incantation that let them travel quickly.

Florian had no idea how Jerah seemed able to keep track of time, because everything passed by in a blur for him. The landscape looked exactly the same, barren and dry. It was all one endless stretch

of dirt and dust, moving endlessly under their feet with each step feeling the same as the last. The light never wavered, and the heat never changed.

After what must have been hours, Kade called out, gesturing for them to look at a shape that had become visible on the horizon. As they approached, the shape became clearer—a massive tree with no leaves, but many spiny branches spidering up into the air. Its bark was almost black, as if it had been burnt, but somehow it was still standing. Maybe it had been petrified, Florian thought.

“Careful,” Jerah said, looking over his shoulder at him. “If it's still standing, it was probably magical before. That makes it more likely that Blighted creatures live in it, or around it.”

Florian nodded, looking back toward it. Kade's eyes stayed locked to the tree as they approached; and he understood Jerah's caution, but at this distance he still wondered how it might have survived or been preserved. It didn't seem dangerous, only interesting.

“I don't see anything, but let's keep our distance,” Kade said, still looking toward the tree that had only grown taller as they'd gotten closer.

“Sounds like a plan,” Jerah agreed, and Florian nodded. Curious as he was, they were the ones who had been in the Blight before. Yesterday had been enough for him to know that it was clearly much more dangerous than he had anticipated.

They hadn't gotten far when Kade suddenly stopped and held one arm out, drawing his sword with the other.

“There,” he said, pointing with his sword. Florian could just barely make out moving shapes that looked to be emerging from near the trunk of the tree. Before he could look any closer, though, Jerah had grabbed him by the upper arm, pulling him closer.

“Stay close to me, Florian,” he said, drawing his own sword.

“I can fight,” he said, reaching for his, but Jerah shook his head.

“Just stay close,” he repeated, and ahead of them Kade had taken a few steps forward, moving into a ready stance that Florian recognized. “I don't want the shroud to break.”

He frowned, wanting to protest—after all, what had all of his training sessions with Kade been for if he wasn't going to fight?—but acquiesced, hovering just a pace behind as Jerah took a few steps forward. Kade remained ahead of them, waiting in a defensive stance.

They were beetles, Florian realized with a start, but absolutely massive. The light glinted off their bodies, and he realized they were either a bright white, or so shiny that he couldn't make out their color—perhaps reflecting the brilliant rays of the Blight off their carapaces to create a blinding

effect. A droning sound filled the air as they drew close, the sound of their huge wings moving rapidly.

Kade lunged at the first one to get close, slashing it open at the belly. It made a horrible squealing sound, spraying juice and guts all around them that immediately started to steam and evaporate, as its body careened past Kade and slammed into the ground. A second and third swarmed him, as a fourth turned toward Jerah.

“Fire,” Florian heard him hiss as he brought a hand up to his mouth; magic passed over his palm, erupting with flames that jetted out toward the beetle. It made a similar screeching sound as the fire engulfed it. Jerah stepped back, pulling Florian with him, as the burning creature flapped erratically until the flames consumed it, and it fell dead to the ground.

When he looked back over at Kade, one more of the beetles was dead in the dirt, while another buzzed just out of his reach, circling around to make another pass at him. Florian hadn't seen if they had fangs or stingers or something else, but figured they must have some means of attack for them to approach in the first place. And as if on cue, the beetle dropped toward Kade, a stinger emerging from its abdomen as it fell from the sky.

“Look out!” he exclaimed, but Kade had already brought his sword up, cleaving into the creature. It shrieked, but speared on the sword it couldn't pull away, liquid gushing from the wound and spilling down Kade's arm. With a look of disgust he brought his sword down and shoved it off with his foot, and it writhed on the ground for a moment before going still.

“Gross,” he muttered, shaking the viscous fluid off his hand.

“Here,” Jerah said, sheathing his sword as he stepped closer; and with a murmur of magic all the guts and fluids fell away from Kade to spill on the ground.

“Thanks,” he said, sheathing his own sword and looking down with obvious distaste.

“Good work,” Jerah continued, turning back to face Florian. “You too, Florian.”

“I didn't do anything,” Florian said, shrugging.

“You did exactly what I told you to do,” Jerah answered, gesturing toward him with a wry grin. “And you did a good job of it.” Florian chuckled, shaking his head.

“Well, thanks,” he said, and looked toward the tree once more. “Do you think the tree is petrified or something?”

“Maybe,” his father answered, following his gaze. “It probably had some kind of magical property or protection on it when the Blight hit that kept it from fully burning up.” He seemed to notice

Florian's curious look, and added, "Maybe we can check it out on the way back. For now, we should keep going."

"Yeah, definitely," Florian agreed, becoming acutely aware of the uncomfortable heat. "Let's go."

They moved on, Kade taking the lead once more. The tree was the last thing of interest that day, and by the time the exhaustion of keeping the quickening spell up hit Florian, Jerah's steps had slowed, and weariness was clear on his face, too.

"Let's look for a place to camp," he said, and Kade nodded without turning to look back at them. Jerah glanced back at Florian and managed a slight, encouraging smile.

"Told you not to push yourself too hard," he said, his tone only partly chiding. "You can drop the spell if you want."

"I can keep it up if we're stopping soon," Florian said, the words renewing his determination. If Jerah could hold the shroud over them all day, then surely he could do this. Jerah's expression softened.

"You're doing very well," he said, reaching over to gently pat his shoulder. "I'm proud of you."

Florian flushed, nodding but unsure of what to say. He just wanted to prove that he could do it—whether to himself or to Jerah he was unsure—but still the words of affirmation filled him with warmth. It was different, knowing it was his father telling him that he was proud. It seemed silly, but it didn't have the same feeling as if August had spoken those words to him. Most of his life he had told himself that he didn't need a father, but having one was strangely... comforting, in a way, even with all his mixed feelings.

He couldn't focus enough to think very hard on that, though. When Jerah turned away, and they resumed walking, all he could think of was feeding the tenuous cord of magic connecting him to Jerah and Kade, increasing their stride so they could move quickly. It wasn't quite painful now, but it made him feel tired and sore at his temples and behind his eyes.

This time they couldn't seem to find anything quite as suitable as the rocky outcropping that they'd camped against the night before. It took longer to set up the shelter, and it was even smaller without the rock to act as one of the walls. When Jerah dropped the shroud, it took longer to cool down, too, as if the Blight were pressing down harder on them without the thick rock wall to block its rays.

"I'm exhausted," Jerah groaned after they had eaten, collapsing in a heap onto his bedroll. "Goodnight, boys."

"Goodnight," Florian murmured. Kade was silent, watching from where he sat barely five feet from Florian. After a few minutes, when it looked like Jerah was truly asleep, he scooted a little closer

until they sat right next to each other.

“Hey,” he said softly, leaning against Kade's shoulder. The taller man glanced down at him from the corner of his eye, before responding just as quietly,

“Hey.”

Florian let his hand slide down Kade's forearm, reaching for his hand—then Kade pulled away suddenly, shifting his weight, so he was turned away from Florian.

“Stop,” he muttered, looking away.

Florian froze, his hand still hovering in the air for a moment where Kade's forearm had been. For an instant it felt like his heart had stopped, then it was pounding in his chest. Had he done something wrong? His mind raced, thinking of what he could have done that might have made Kade upset with him, but they had barely interacted at all in the past two days.

Kade finally looked over at him, his brows furrowing at the stunned expression that must have been obvious on Florian's face.

“I told you we shouldn't do this,” he said quietly, and Florian shook his head, still just as confused.

“Do what?” he asked. “I don't—I don't understand.”

“I have to focus,” Kade muttered, looking away again. There was a flush rising in his face, as if he were embarrassed to be having the conversation at all. “I can't... let you distract me.”

“From what?” Florian exclaimed, only to wince and glance nervously over to where Jerah lay not even ten feet away; but he seemed to still be asleep. In a more hushed tone, he repeated, “From what? We're about to go to sleep anyway. I'm not distracting you from anything.”

“We already talked about this,” Kade stammered, though he looked well and truly embarrassed now, frowning down at his feet. “I thought you... I thought you understood.”

Florian blinked, motionless as he processed the words. As far as he was concerned, they had discussed nothing of the sort. When they had talked about being out in the Blight, he had figured Kade meant keeping their distance—since Jerah would be around constantly, an awkward third wheel—whatever *this* was, he hadn't agreed to it.

“I didn't know you meant I couldn't even hold your stupid hand,” he scowled, and stood up. “Whatever. Goodnight.”

Kade's expression became pained at that, and he turned toward Florian as he started to walk away, but didn't try to stop him. He could feel Kade's eyes lingering on him, as he took the few steps over to his own sleeping bag and laid down, turning so he was facing away from Kade. After a long moment he heard Kade shift, as if he were laying down too. Then there was silence.

All the hurt from his last breakup swelled anew in his chest. Was he really being broken up with again, already? Had it really been so unbearable to be with him, even for the few short weeks that he and Kade had... been in whatever weird limbo their relationship was? Some small part of him protested that this was nothing like that, but it was drowned out by how utterly rejected he felt. If he had known that this was what Kade meant when he said they couldn't keep “doing this” out in the Blight, he might have protested a little more.

He hated that the thought of it brought stinging tears to his eyes, so he squeezed them shut and stubbornly kept them closed until he fell asleep.



The next day started the same way. They woke and dressed, Jerah placed the shroud, they tore down the tent, Florian set the quickening spell, and they set out.

He wasn't sure exactly when it happened, but at one point he heard Kade murmur something to Jerah; then they switched places, so Jerah was leading and Kade was in front of Florian. He scowled, deliberately slowing so Kade was further from him, but then Kade slowed his own pace, until they were walking next to each other.

“What?” he muttered, looking away as Kade peered down at him.

“Sorry,” Kade said softly, and it took everything in him for Florian not to look up at him. “For last night. I didn't... I guess I thought we were on the same page. But I was thinking about it, and I think you're right.”

“About what?” The words came out with more distaste than Florian had meant, but Kade continued on as if he hadn't heard.

“That maybe I'm taking it too seriously. It's my job to protect you both, but...” he replied, still barely above a whisper. Despite how quietly they were speaking, Florian was sure Jerah could hear most if not all of their conversation.

Kade let out a huff of breath, and finally Florian glanced up at him to see his mouth pressed in a tight line. For a long moment they were silent, then he added, “I don't want to drive you away.”

He sounded so miserably vulnerable that Florian couldn't bear to look at him any longer. What was that supposed to mean? That he wanted some kind of do-over? It was tempting, but his ego still ached from the blow Kade had dealt him last night.

Kade tentatively reached and touched Florian's wrist, reaching for his hand the same way he had last night—and Florian yanked his hand away, a scowl spreading across his face.

“Go do your job,” he snapped, pushing him away. Kade didn't even stumble at the force, but when Florian looked back up at him, his expression had changed entirely. Even with the sun goggles, he could tell Kade's face had gone stony and expressionless. He didn't protest, but silently stepped away, overtaking Jerah ahead of them with a muttered word.

Jerah glanced back at Florian as Kade resumed his position, the curiosity apparent on his face, but he didn't say anything. Florian frowned, his face burning with embarrassed warmth, and looked back down at his feet.

They came across more creatures in what Florian guessed was the afternoon—a large group of little pig-like beasts with short tusks and rocky-looking hides; but after only a few had been slain easily by Kade and Jerah, the rest of the pack eyed them uneasily and fled. Other than that, the trip was just as monotonous as it had been the day before, giving Florian plenty of time to do nothing but think.

He had first felt a tiny kernel of guilt when Kade had made that face—or rather, that total lack of an expression. It reminded him of how expressionless he had been when they first met: the way Kade had been cautious and guarded around him, until he had decided to stay in the Veil. Maybe he had been too harsh, vindictive, mean even. Kade had been trying to apologize. Why had he been so eager to push him away? It felt silly already.

“Fucking Cameron,” he muttered under his breath, kicking a rock as he walked. Ever since Cameron had broken up with him, any hint of rejection from anyone, ever, about anything hurt a thousand times more than it was supposed to.

But Kade hadn't rejected him, he argued with himself. He was just... maybe not a great communicator; but then, neither was he. Was that enough to justify shoving him away? The guilt pressed down on him tenfold when he came to the conclusion that, no, it wasn't exactly an appropriate response. It was hot, and he was tired and dusty and sweaty—for all his excuses, Kade was out here in the Blight alongside him and was certainly just as uncomfortable.

“All right back there, Florian?” Jerah's voice broke through his thoughts, and he realized with a start that he'd lost the thread of magic that was speeding them up.

“S-sorry,” he stammered, feeling all at once more embarrassed and frustrated than he had been before. He had been so consumed with his thoughts that his concentration on the spell had entirely faded away. “I don't... I don't know what happened.”

“That's alright,” Jerah assured him, patting his shoulder. “I've been telling you, don't push yourself too hard. I know it's tiring to use magic for so long without a break. You've done very well so far, but

I think we'll be fine if you take it easy for the rest of the day. In fact..." He pulled the map from one of the side pockets on his backpack, glancing over it. "Since you've sped us up so consistently, I think two more days of travel should get us there if you can just hold the spell for half the day tomorrow and half the day the next."

"Okay," Florian muttered, looking at the map to avoid having to look at Jerah's attempt at a reassuring grin—or worse, Kade's expressionless face.

"See? We're making good time. Not a problem at all," Jerah continued as he rolled the map back up. "I'm very proud of you, Florian."

That made him uncomfortably warm again, though for an entirely different reason. "Thanks," he said quietly, trying weakly to return the smile. Jerah must have seen his wavering expression. He lingered next to Florian for a moment, as if trying to decide what to say, then he seemed to give up—giving him another few pats on the shoulder before resuming his spot in their marching order. Kade had already turned away and was walking ahead, and Florian stumbled to catch up before they got too far from him.

Kade didn't even look at him when they made camp for the night, his eyes sliding away from Florian any time they were near each other. When the tent was set up, and Jerah dropped the shroud, he went straight to one corner of the little shelter, laying out his bedroll and settling onto it without a word to either of them.

Jerah raised a quizzical eyebrow, looking first at Kade then at Florian. "Any idea what's going on with him?" he asked in a conspiratorial half-whisper, not quiet enough for Florian to have any confidence that Kade didn't hear.

"No," he muttered, shaking his head and feeling his face burn with heat. He took a bite of the bread they were sharing, and he could feel Jerah's curious gaze linger on him; but his father didn't ask anything more, and once they were done eating, he retired to his sleeping bag as well.

Florian laid down with a distinct feeling of regret—he had hoped to catch Kade alone after Jerah went to bed, but it seemed pretty clear that Kade didn't want to interact with him at all. Maybe by tomorrow night he would have cooled off enough for them to talk.

He wasn't sure how long he had been asleep when a sudden crashing sound roused him—then the tent was flooded with light and heat. Florian sat bolt upright with a startled cry, looking around and wincing in the light. Across the tent Kade was on his feet, sword in one hand with the other lifted to cover his eyes, shouting—something was pushing against one of the walls of the tent, trying to burrow under it and tearing at the fabric.

“What the fuck is that?” Florian stammered, clambering to his feet and pulling out his sword. Between them Jerah had jumped to his feet as well, hissing at the light.

“Darkness—darkness—” he choked out, and despite the lack of incantation the words alone seemed to be enough, as the shroud first covered him then, wavering, spread first to Florian and finally to Kade.

With a roar, Kade stabbed his sword through the layers of fabric into the shape of whatever creature was trying to get into the tent. It squalled in pain, sounding very much like the strange rocky pig-creatures that they had encountered earlier in the day. It gave another shriek as Kade pulled away—the blade now coated in blood. The thrashing against the tent stopped as the creature fled, but light still flooded the shelter. One of the panels had been knocked askew, and there was a hole in the fabric where Kade had stabbed through.

“Florian, help me with this,” Jerah said, reaching for the pole to which the panel was affixed and pushing it more firmly into the ground. Florian nodded and leapt to grab the fabric, pulling it closer to the pole and tying it in place.

“Shit,” Kade was muttering under his breath, bunching up the torn fabric and tying it off. “Shit, shit...”

“It's alright, Kade, I think you've got it,” Jerah panted, stepping away once he and Florian had the panel secured once more. The tent was shaded again, and the shroud fell away from them as he said it. Kade nodded and fell back with a groan, his sword clattering to the ground as he sat and held his arm to his body, wincing.

“You're hurt,” Florian blurted, stepping toward Kade—the arm that he was cradling to his chest was red and blistered, like a terrible sunburn, despite the brief moment that he had been in the light. “Dad, can you help him?”

“Let me see,” Jerah said, kneeling down next to Kade. “Good job protecting your eyes, at least. That would have been a lot worse.”

Silently Kade nodded, his brows furrowed tight with pain. Florian watched, helpless, as Jerah murmured a few words and moved his fingers lightly over the wounded skin. A faint glimmer of magic passed from his fingers to Kade's arm, and the blisters seemed to recede and the redness faded. Kade let out a sharp breath, but his face relaxed with relief as Jerah leaned back with a sigh.

“Good work,” he said, his breath still coming in rapid bursts—Florian realized his heart was still pounding with adrenaline, too.

“I'll stay up in case it comes back,” Kade said, sitting up a little straighter, and Jerah scoffed.

“You'll do no such thing. Get some rest, so you'll heal faster,” he chided. “I mean it, Kade.”

He made a slight grunt of acknowledgement, though he didn't move as Jerah went back to his own sleeping bag with a sigh. Kade glanced over at Florian, still standing uselessly in the middle of the tent; and his expression seemed to tighten as they looked at each other for a moment, until he finally turned away. Florian had no idea what his face meant, but it must have been an improvement from the stony neutral face he'd had all day. Hopefully.

“It's alright, Florian,” Jerah said, and Florian gave a start. “Try to go back to sleep. We have a few more hours before we'll need to set out.”

He nodded, and after one more lingering look at Kade, he laid back down. It felt like a long time before he could finally will his eyes closed.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The body of the pig-creature Kade had stabbed was only twenty feet or so away from the tent when they broke camp the next morning.

“Can you eat these?” Florian asked, gesturing toward it. Jerah made a face that immediately told him that Blighted creatures probably were not edible.

“I wouldn't try it,” Jerah said, as they started walking.

Florian held the spell without an issue for the first half of the day. He was getting better at judging the time despite the unchanging light, and by around midday Jerah turned back to him.

“Drop the spell if you're tired,” he said, and Florian grimaced.

“I can hold it for another hour,” he said. He could easily hold it for longer, but knew Jerah would pester him until he relented, having been quite convinced that Florian needed to rest.

“Don't push yourself,” Jerah repeated, giving him a lingering look before turning away once more to continue along.

Luckily, they didn't run into any more Blighted creatures, and the rest of the day passed without anything much of note. Kade was quiet, but that wasn't unusual. The landscape was getting more hilly and rocky, but still there was no plant life to be found; and it was easy to find a suitable rock outcropping to set up camp.

As they sat in the shelter and began to eat, Florian couldn't help but notice how Jerah would look between himself and Kade every few moments. He obviously wanted to say something, but for whatever reason he kept silent. Kade seemingly took no notice, but Florian looked away whenever Jerah's eyes found him, feeling absolutely certain his face would somehow give everything away.

Once he was done eating, Jerah leaned back with a sigh, propping himself up with one arm where they sat on the ground and rubbing his face with his free hand.

“Only another day of this, I think,” he sighed; and when he pulled his hand away, for an instant he looked older and more tired than Florian had ever seen before. When Jerah looked up to meet his eye, he still managed a smile, and the peek of unrestrained exhaustion disappeared. “Getting home should

be easier. Thank you for your hard work so far, Florian. Both of you. This is all going to be worth it in the end.”

“Yeah,” Florian agreed, nodding weakly. It was selfish, but all he had been able to think about was Kade, and what he was going to say to him; despite the gravity of their mission, he had all but forgotten about the Golden Arrow that they were out in the Blight to retrieve.

“I’m off to bed. Get some rest,” Jerah sighed, standing and walking a few steps away to his own sleeping bag.

Florian let his eyes linger on Jerah’s motionless form for a while, until he was sure the man was asleep, then he glanced over at Kade. As if already sensing his intention, Kade was looking at him for what felt like the first time all day, but his eyes were dull and cold.

“Can I talk to you?” Florian asked softly. Kade took in a slow breath and sighed, then silently gestured for him to continue, his expression never changing. The sight of him looking so guarded made Florian’s skin cold. He hesitated, then moved to sit closer—Kade tensed, but didn’t move away.

“Sorry,” Florian blurted, every thought about what he wanted to say to Kade out the window now that the conversation was happening. “I, uh... I shouldn’t have said what I said to you. I was just... being mean. You didn’t deserve it. I’m really sorry.”

Kade peered at him for what felt like an uncomfortably long stretch of silence, his eyes searching.

“Thank you,” he finally said, quiet and measured. “I appreciate the apology.”

“Can we just... I don’t know, start over?” Florian asked, reaching for his hand—and Kade pulled away so reflexively that his whole chest flooded with heat, sticky and painful. Why? Why had he pulled away? Was he that bad, that unbearable?

“I’m not...” Kade started to say, but Florian barely heard him as he abruptly stood. “I—Florian—”

“Why are we even doing this?” he asked, feeling his voice rise with emotion but unable to stop it. “I’m serious. What are we even doing? Are we dating? What is this?”

Kade blinked, looking up at him in utter bewilderment. The way his lips had parted in surprise would have been cute if Florian weren’t so angry at him.

“I... I don’t know,” Kade stammered out, clearly taken aback. “Are we?”

“I don’t know!” Florian exclaimed, and Kade winced, glancing nervously in Jerah’s direction. “I don’t know either. We should just stop, whatever this... this is.”

Kade’s eyes immediately flashed back up to Florian at the words, a mix of surprise and hurt and frustration flashing across his face all at once. He opened his mouth, then closed it—his brows furrowing in a pained expression before speaking again.

“If that's what you want... Maybe you're right.”

All the heat roiling in Florian's belly grew cold, all the tension draining out of him at once.

Whatever he had wanted to hear from Kade in response, it certainly hadn't been *that*.

“Whatever,” he muttered, and before he could think better of it, he turned away and headed for the tent flap that was tied closed.

“Florian,” Kade's voice came from behind him, immediately sounding almost panicked in a way that gave Florian a sick satisfaction. “Florian! Stop!”

“Shut up!” he snapped, whirling around. The magic that surged through him shot toward Kade at the words, slamming his mouth closed. He stood abruptly, eyes wide in equal parts shock and rage, but Florian was already untying the opening.

“Darkness hides me. Darkness protects me,” he whispered, his hands shaking. He felt the shroud settle over his shoulders; and before Kade could grab him, he darted through the opening out into the Blight, quickly pulling it closed behind him.

Florian could hear muffled, wordless shouting from within the tent, but the flap didn't open again. He took a few cautious steps back—still watching it—then turned and stumbled away. He could barely see without the goggles, so he kept one hand on the rock that they had built the shelter against, following it for several steps until it curved around to another direction. Pressed against the corner, he sank down and sat down in the dirt, pressing his head between his knees and taking heaving gulps of the hot, dry air.

What the hell was he doing? Why had he said that? He was so angry—even now it simmered in his chest, bringing frustrated tears to his eyes that were already starting to evaporate in the heat. Telling Kade they should break up, then being mad he agreed? It felt like all the petty, immature shit that Cameron had pulled when they were dating, and he hated himself for it. And was it even a break up? Were they even dating?

“Stupid,” he growled under his breath, shaking his head. “Stupid, stupid...!”

Silencing him with his magic wasn't going to help his case, either. Whatever they had been doing, Florian was sure he had well and truly fucked it up now. He had been trying to apologize to Kade in the first place—how had he messed it up this badly?

Every shitty thing Cameron said to him when they broke up rattled around in his head. Trying to get close to Kade had been a mistake. He shouldn't have even tried.

That hurt too much to think about. It was easier to be angry, he thought bitterly as he pressed his eyes into his hands, willing the tears to stop. He would be better off on his own, anyway. He didn't

need Kade's help.

It took a long time before he could finally push all his hurt and anger down to the pit of his stomach where he could ignore it. Florian took in a steadying breath and stumbled to his feet, hoping that he was ready to face Kade without feeling the need to run away again. The shroud had held, but his eyes were aching in the bright light. He shut his eyes, feeling along the rock wall to get his bearings, and carefully made his way back toward the tent—only opening them again when he felt the smooth rock become thick fabric.

The tent flap was pulled closed but not tied, so he slipped inside easily.

“Florian!”

He had started to turn and tie the flap closed behind him, but his father's voice full of cold fury made him stop dead. Blinking hard in the dim light, he could just make out Jerah getting to his feet.

“What the hell were you thinking?” Jerah exclaimed, reaching past him to tie the flap shut before Florian could react. “You could have gotten hurt out there, Florian—you could have died.”

A surge of anger coursed through him at that, and he scowled.

“I can take care of myself,” he muttered and started to step away, but Jerah grabbed him by the wrist to stop him.

“This is unacceptable,” he growled. “And silencing Kade? Why would you do such a thing?” He gestured toward the opposite corner of the tent, and Florian felt the familiar, cold shock grip him again. Kade sat against the far wall, clearly awake, watching silently with an expressionless face, but his eyes glowering in the faint darkness. Now that he was looking, the anger on him was almost palpable, despite his neutral expression.

“I don't... I don't know,” Florian lied, his face twisting with guilt, and he looked away.

“Why did you leave?” Jerah demanded, and Florian could feel the magic take hold of him at the words. The realization that he was trying to force Florian to speak only made another spike of anger stick in his throat; but Jerah's magic was strong, and his frustration couldn't shield him.

“I was—I was scared,” he blurted. It wasn't exactly a lie, but the confession still burned as he said it. For a moment Jerah was silent, then his shoulders sagged with a long sigh, all the fight leaving him; and for a moment, that same deep weariness was visible on his face again. He still looked conflicted, and Florian was sure that Jerah knew it wasn't the whole truth.

“I know,” Jerah murmured, his voice almost weak in comparison to how forceful he had been just a moment ago. “But Florian, you can't just leave. You cannot, *cannot* do that again. Come here.” He

pulled Florian closer to him, hugging him tightly. As upset as he was, the sudden embrace was nearly enough to make Florian tear up again.

“You nearly gave me a heart attack, Florian. I didn't have enough magic for the shroud, neither of us could go after you... God. I'm sleeping in, no matter how much it delays us.”

Florian managed a single, bitter chuckle at that. “Sorry,” he muttered, his voice muffled against Jerah's chest.

“It's Kade you should be apologizing to,” Jerah replied, and guilt seized him anew. Before he could respond, Jerah had let go and given him a gentle push toward Kade. “Go on.”

Florian could feel his face burning red, and he looked down at his feet rather than at Kade. He wanted to apologize, but couldn't get the words out of his mouth.

“No need,” Kade's voice came from the far end of the tent, far colder than Florian had ever heard him before. “I don't want to hear it.”

He couldn't bear to look up at Kade, but he heard the shuffle of his footsteps as he left his post and crawled into his own sleeping bag. Even Jerah seemed taken aback at his apparent anger, remaining silent for a long moment, before touching Florian's shoulder and murmuring softly,

“We're all a little on edge still. Try and get some sleep, for real this time, alright?”

“Okay,” Florian agreed, as he stumbled toward his sleeping bag. He laid down, but sleep never came.



Both Florian and Kade were silent all through the next morning as they packed and got ready to leave.

“We're looking for the ruins of a city,” Jerah was saying, seemingly oblivious to the uncomfortable silence, or perhaps ignoring it. “Once we see that, we'll know we're getting close. It's supposed to be in a cave system, probably on the outskirts of it, but that's the most I've been able to narrow it down.”

Kade nodded in acknowledgment as Jerah spoke. Florian watched him, but his eyes always darted away from him before they were even close to looking at each other.

Jerah must have sensed their tension. They had walked in silence the last few days, but now his father was chattering away at Florian about all sorts of topics: what the ruined city had been in the distant past; where the Arrow might lie within it; where they would go next; and what meals he would like first when they got home. Florian focused on the quickening spell, but more out of spite than any real desire to talk, he kept up with the conversation, talking loud enough that he was sure Kade could hear them.

They had been walking for several hours when ahead of them Kade suddenly stopped.

“Do you see it?” Jerah asked, abruptly turning his attention away from Florian. Kade nodded, pointing, and Jerah followed the gesture, lifting a hand to cover his eyes despite their goggles.

“There,” was all Kade said. Florian squinted, and he could just make out what he thought Kade was pointing at—blocky, square shapes along a hillside in the distance, more man-made in appearance than the rock formations around it.

“I see,” Jerah said, nodding decisively. “That must be it. Stay on your guard, boys. No telling what we might find. Florian, drop the quickening spell.”

Florian nodded, letting the magic dissipate. At a normal pace now, Florian soon discerned through the light what must have once been a path becoming apparent under their feet. It was dusty and much of the stone had started to crumble away, but there was a pattern to the stonework that seemed like it may have once been a careful geometric design.

“Wait,” Kade hissed, holding a hand out. Florian froze, and Jerah took one careful step forward to peer past Kade.

“It's dead, I think,” he said, taking another step.

“What is it?” Florian asked, stepping closer; but as soon as he could see past them, he caught sight of it. A mound of flesh laid in the center of the walkway, unmoving. It must have once been some kind of Blighted creature with a thick, craggy hide similar to the pig-like beasts they had seen a few days ago, but longer, more feline in form—almost like a very large fox, though it didn't seem to have fur. Florian was certain they had not seen a creature like this in their travels so far.

“I don't know,” Jerah said, confirming his thoughts. “Something dead in the middle of the road can't be a good sign, though. Stay sharp.”

Kade nodded, drawing his sword; but they crept closer to it all the same. Florian couldn't hear anything—didn't see any movement that might indicate that there were more creatures nearby—so when they got up to it, he paused to inspect the body more closely. Up close, it looked much more like a big cat, maybe some kind of bobcat or cougar, and—

He frowned. “Look, it's burned.”

He felt Jerah come up next to him, and looking down he pointed to where its face was pressed into the dirt. There Florian saw the few lingering patches of dirty brown fur, but everywhere that was exposed to the light had burned and blackened into a hard layer. It had resembled the thick plate hides of the pig creatures from a distance, but looking closely he could now see that the cat had been burnt into a crisp by the Blight. Turning to face Jerah, he could see his father was frowning in thought.

“I thought the creatures that still lived in the Blight couldn't be killed by it,” he said. “Like they evolved or something.”

“Normally that's the case,” Jerah agreed. “I'm not sure what might have killed this thing, then, or how long it may have been here.”

Florian looked back down at it. Had something else killed it, and the Blight had just burned it away over time? He couldn't see any other kind of injury, but its body was so blackened that it could have been hiding any number of wounds or markings.

A thought occurred to him, and before he could talk himself out of it, he reached down and touched the creature near its shoulder. The burnt fur crumbled under his fingers. Above him Jerah hissed.

“Don't touch it!” he exclaimed, moving to pull Florian away. He paused, though, as Florian let his hand trail from its shoulder down along its face, where the last remaining patches of fur were pressed into the dirt. “I... Well, that's a clever thought, but I don't know if that will work, Florian.”

“Me neither,” he said, pulling his hand away.

“Maybe let's not try that now,” Jerah continued, looking down at the creature's dead body suspiciously. “I think trying to shift into a mystery beast is perhaps not the best use of our time at the moment, especially if the Blight did kill it.”

Kade's footsteps crunched from behind them, and he walked past them without looking at the creature.

“Yeah, alright,” Florian sighed, standing up straight and dusting his hands off on his pants. Jerah's gaze was still following Kade as he moved further down the path.

“I was hoping he might be in a better mood today,” he muttered, leaning closer to Florian as they started to follow. “Did something else happen? I don't think I've ever seen him this sulky before.”

Florian flushed bright red, but luckily Jerah was still looking curiously toward Kade.

“I don't know,” he replied quickly, but before Jerah could keep questioning him, something in the air changed. It was hard to pinpoint, but they both must have felt it, coming to a stop at the same moment.

“Do you feel that?” Jerah said, looking down at him. Florian nodded.

“What is it?” he asked, rubbing his arms. The air somehow felt thicker around him, clinging to him as he moved. “It feels... like static, almost.”

“Magic,” he answered, looking toward Kade again. “Kade, wait.” Obediently Kade paused, glancing back at them, but Jerah had already turned his attention back to Florian. “It must be the magic

of the Arrow. I knew it was powerful, but I hadn't expected an... an aura, or whatever this is. We're definitely close.”

Florian looked back at the dead creature in the road behind them, thinking. “Maybe that's what kept them safe, and that one went too far into the Blight, where it couldn't reach.”

Jerah paused, considering. “That certainly seems possible. The only question is why the beast would have gone beyond the boundary, where it knew it was protected.”

“There's more coming,” Kade interrupted, quickly moving his sword up into a ready stance. “Four or five. Hear them?”

Florian could hear them now that he'd pointed them out: hisses and yowls that were steadily growing louder. He reached for his sword, but Jerah grabbed him by the wrist.

“Stay back,” Jerah said, stepping in front of him. “There, Kade!” He pointed, and Florian saw the creatures emerging from the rocks around them, a group of five large feline forms. One, bigger than the rest, was hissing and spitting as it took a few more steps toward them, the others following. Now that he could see their fur—and it was fur, not the thick hides of the other creatures he'd seen in the Blight—they did look very much like bobcats, only larger and the same shade of reddish-brown all over.

For a moment they all stood perfectly still, both groups seeming to wait and see what the other would do—then with a screech the largest cat leapt toward them, and the others followed. With a shout Kade swung at the closest one. It screamed as he cleaved into its side, swiping at him with its claws glinting in the light; but the sword knocked it back before it could make contact, and it collapsed in the dirt. Two more were right behind, and they turned to rush at Jerah.

Florian drew his sword—Jerah unable to stop him this time—and ran up to meet one of the attackers.

“I told you to stay back!” Jerah snapped, but he was already bringing his own sword down on the other cat.

“I can help!” Florian exclaimed in response, slashing wildly at his own foe. It lunged to bite him, but he jumped back just before its flashing teeth caught his leg—its claws surged forward even quicker, though, catching him near his ankle. He yelped in pain, but brought his sword down hard on the cat, driving the point several inches into the top of its neck. With a gurgled screech, it fell limply away. He kicked it further from him, wincing at the sting in his leg—already he could feel blood seeping through his pants.

“What did I tell you?” Jerah chided, kneeling next to him to inspect the wound. Scowling, Florian was silent as he pulled the cloth up. “We're trying to protect you, Florian, but you won't make it easy by running into the fray.”

“Then what was all the training for? I can fight,” he muttered. Jerah sighed, but did not respond, instead pressing his hand to the three thick slash marks that curved from the back of his calf down almost to the top of his foot. He muttered softly under his breath, and Florian felt the familiar, tingling magic touch his skin, soothing away most of the sting as the skin started to knit back together.

“I know you can,” Jerah finally replied, standing back up with a sigh. “But not as well as us. That's just the truth. I need you to be able to defend yourself, but that's only if something happens that makes me or Kade unable to protect you.” A sterner expression crossed his face. “So you need to *listen* when I tell you to stay back, alright?”

He wanted to protest that he could fight, that he *wanted* to fight, that he could take care of himself. But across from them Kade, wholly unscathed, had already sheathed his sword, having killed the three cat creatures in the time it took him to handle one.

“Fine,” he muttered, sheathing his own sword and turning away. He could feel his father's gaze linger on him for a moment, but Jerah didn't press. He sheathed his weapon and started walking toward Kade.

“All set?” he asked, and Kade must have nodded in his usual way because Jerah immediately called out to him, “Come on, Florian. Let's find the Arrow and get out of here, alright?”

He followed, and they walked away from the creatures, heading further down the path until they reached the crumbling walls of the ruined city.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The worn stone path wove in and out of the rocks for a little while longer, but eventually they arrived at the crumbling city walls. There was no gate, though from the empty hinges on one side, it looked like there may have once been a wooden gate that had either rotted or burned away. Florian noticed that the heat had lessened as they walked, too, as if whatever magic the Arrow was emanating blocked out the effects of the Blight. Though there was still no plant life that he could see, the air thrummed with the palpable magic.

“Do you think you still need to keep the shroud up?” he asked Jerah as they passed through the opening in the gate. Part of him still rankled at the way Jerah had talked down to him after the fight, but his curiosity was getting the better of him now, and the walk had helped him cool off as well.

Jerah pursed his lips at the question, seeming to consider it as he looked around for signs of the Blight.

“I’m not sure,” he finally said. “Best not to risk it for now, though.”

Florian nodded, though he was feeling more and more sure that the shroud wouldn't be necessary as long as they were in the town ruins. The temperature felt almost comfortable now; while most of the empty buildings were stone, some had wooden doors or walls that were in various states of disrepair, but had not burned away entirely. From the little he knew about the Blight, it certainly seemed as though its horrible influence was lessened here, if not blocked out entirely.

“I’d bet that the magic will be stronger closer to the Arrow,” Jerah continued, shaking him from his thoughts. “If you feel anything, Florian, let us know. I’ll try and pay attention to it as well, though with the shroud it might be harder for me to feel.”

“I’ll let you know if I notice anything,” he agreed.

Ahead of them Kade surveyed the village. Florian watched him for a moment as they walked, but he seemed to be completely ignoring their existence. The sound of their footsteps echoed in the utter silence, but he seemed alert as ever, as if he expected more beasts to appear at any moment. He might not have been wrong, Florian thought in irritation, which somehow made it worse.

But from everything he could see so far, the town seemed strangely peaceful. There was no wind, no sound, no evidence of animals or plants or anything alive save for themselves. As they surveyed the town, he wondered what the insides of the buildings might look like; if anything remained that left some indication of its former residents; or if everything within had been lost to time and the elements.

They had a job to do, though, and he pushed the thoughts away for now. Maybe they could check some of the buildings after they'd found the Arrow. They might even camp here for the night, especially if there was no Blight—it would be a welcome change from the cramped tent, especially if Kade were still giving them the silent treatment. Some space would probably be good for all of them.

The path, now more dirt than stone, led them to the center of town, where the remnants of a large fountain stood—though it had long since dried up, the basin full of sandy-looking dirt. Florian ran his fingers through the sand in the fountain, dry enough that his hand came away clean easily. The magic might be keeping the Blight at bay, but it wasn't enough to let in the rain, or the night.

“There's a mine,” Kade said suddenly ahead of them, pointing. A rocky hill rose up behind some of the buildings further down the path, and where Kade pointed, Florian could see an opening in the stone with a large metal door that was ajar. “Could it be there?”

“Do you feel anything, Florian?” Jerah asked, stepping up next to him. “I don't feel anything.”

Florian closed his eyes, trying to focus on the heavy feeling of magic in the air. If he really concentrated, it did feel a little thicker, like a light fabric hovering just over his skin that tingled with static.

“Maybe,” he said, opening his eyes once more. “I can't really tell. It feels just a little bit stronger, I think.”

“Couldn't hurt to check it out,” Jerah sighed. “And even if it's not, maybe we'll have somewhere cool to rest for a bit. I could use a breather.”

“Sure,” Florian agreed. Kade was already heading toward it, and he hurried to follow.

As they got closer, Florian could see the metal door was propped against the rock face rather than swung open, as if its hinges had rusted away and the door had fallen out of the frame entirely. Kade peered in for a moment, before nodding and gesturing for them to continue. As they stepped fully into the mine, Florian's eyes struggled to adjust: the stark contrast with the outside made the dim cave seem pitch black, so he pulled his sun goggles off and saw the other two do the same.

The door opened into a large sort of staging area; several old, rusted pieces of equipment were scattered around the ground in crates, and a few minecarts were pushed up against the rock walls as well. A single set of tracks started near the middle of the room and led further into the mine, curving

around a corner far up ahead that blocked visibility of the rest of the path. The walls seemed to be an unassuming dark stone, though when Florian looked closely he could see some spots of pale blue glinting in the dim light.

“Veilian moonstone,” Jerah said next to him, the surprise apparent in his voice. “They must have been mining for it. There must be a pretty large vein for it to have reached so far east.”

“I don't hear anything,” Kade said, taking a cautious step toward the minecart tracks. “But we should move slowly.”

“Of course,” Jerah agreed, and quietly they crept forward, walking slowly alongside the tracks. When it turned, Kade pressed close to the wall and peeked around the corner, then gestured for them to follow.

“It's empty,” he said. “Looks like it just goes downhill.”

As they rounded the corner, the static-like feeling of magic in the air seemed to condense around Florian. It felt almost syrupy, as if he could squeeze his hand and pluck a fistful of it right out of the air.

“It feels stronger here,” he blurted, looking to Jerah. “The magic. Do you feel that?”

Jerah shook his head. “No, but I think we're far enough out of the Blight now I can risk dropping the shroud. It seems pretty dark.” Florian's eyes darted back the way they came—it was definitely darker and cooler in the tunnel.

“I think so too,” he said, and with a nod Jerah dropped the shroud. It felt a little warmer as the shadow fell away from them, but still a far cry from the unrelenting heat of the Blight.

“We're safe here,” Jerah said with a nod, then frowned. “I feel it now, too, Florian. We must be getting close. Though I can't imagine how it could have gotten so far underground...”

“Maybe something took it,” Florian suggested as they kept walking. “One of those animals or something.”

“Hmm. Possibly,” he said, though he didn't sound convinced. “We'll find out, I suppose.”

They kept going, following Kade through the tunnel that progressively became narrower and narrower. The pale blue and white veins of moonstone that occasionally glinted through the rock surface became more numerous as they walked, until the walls around them started to seem more moonstone than not. A faint scurrying sound, different from the rhythmic crunch of their footsteps, hit Florian's ears as they started to head down a steep decline.

“Did you hear that?” he whispered, but ahead of him Kade had already stopped, his eyes flashing orange in the darkness as he looked around.

“Something's up ahead,” he said in a hushed tone, though as he turned back his eyes remained fixed firmly on Jerah. “Can't tell how many.”

“Let's just go slow, then,” Jerah said with a nod, looking down at Florian next to him. “Florian, stay behind me—I mean it this time.”

“Yeah, I get it,” Florian muttered sheepishly, letting Jerah step in front of him as they continued down the decline. It would have been slow going even without the sound of something—or someone—up ahead, considering how steep and rocky the tunnel had become. The cart tracks still descended, and Florian wondered how anything could go down such a steep hill without tumbling right off the tracks, much less get back up. Parts of the tracks looked broken or worn down with time: wood rotted away, and metal rusted over. The scuffling sound of footsteps, or something like it, hadn't seemed to grow any louder, but still broke through the noise of their descent every so often. Whatever was making the sound, it hadn't seemed to hear them approaching, or it didn't care.

Soon, though, Florian could see where the descent tapered off into a flat tunnel again, then opened into a wider space further on—and there was a tiny glimmer of something, a hint of a warmer, yellowish light coming from the opening. Now, the scuffling noise seemed louder as they approached.

“Do you see anything?” Jerah whispered to Kade, who shook his head but slowly and quietly drew his sword. “Be careful.”

Jerah stopped, holding Florian back with him, as Kade crept toward the opening where the tunnel widened, each step painstakingly slow. When he got up to the edge of the wall, Kade peered around cautiously—even from this distance, Florian could see his eyes widen just a bit, and he ducked back closer to the wall after only a brief glance.

A pack, he mouthed, no sound leaving his lips. *Ten, maybe more.*

Jerah pursed his lips, frowning as he seemed to think it over. Kade stood motionless, waiting, and Florian glanced nervously between them. If there were that many, it seemed pointless to try and sneak in—it seemed obvious to him to go in guns blazing, but Jerah looked unsure.

“Stay close behind me,” Jerah finally whispered to Florian, who nodded in reply. They took a few careful steps forward, edging toward the opposite wall that Kade was pressed against. Jerah stood between Florian and the opening, and peeked inside to confirm for himself what lay beyond. Florian still couldn't get a good view—biting his lip, he pressed closer to the wall.

“Fire,” Jerah whispered, and flames appeared in his hand. He caught Kade's eye and held up three fingers with his other hand. Three, two, one—

Jerah lunged forward, leaping through the opening, as fire streamed from his hand in a thick line. From within a cacophony of shrieks and howls erupted. Kade ran in behind him, sword flashing, and Florian followed.

The tunnel opened into a large chamber that was lit by the soft bluish glow of the moonstone veins, spidering along the walls and the ground. The tracks came to an end near the middle of the open space. A small pool of water was far to Florian's left, and huddled around it—but quickly leaping to their feet—was a pack of creatures. Large and four-legged, they were more doglike than the cat creatures that they had encountered in the ruins of the village; but rather than fur, they were covered in a thick black hide with a row of spikes along their spines and long, thin tails that whipped through the air. And their eyes—their eyes glowed with a yellow light, the same hint of gold that Florian had seen as they approached.

Several of them had already leapt in their direction, but the continual stream of fire that poured from Jerah's hand kept them at bay. Others were lunging toward Kade now, his sword flashing through the air.

There were too many, Florian knew in an instant, for the two of them alone to handle. He drew his own sword, trying to stay behind Jerah as much as possible, as he moved through the chamber. They were focusing on the spiky creatures—he looked around for the hint of yellow light he had seen. The Arrow had to be close, he had to find it—

There! High above the pool of water at the peak of a rock formation that nearly touched the ceiling: he could see a golden yellow glow emanating through the veins of moonstone.

“I see the Arrow,” he said, stepping closer to Jerah. One of the doglike beasts was making a wide loop around Jerah, trying to get to them, but his father pressed his hands together and started to spray fire from both palms and caught the beast in its side. With a yelp it backed off, though its lips were still drawn back in a snarl.

“Stay behind me,” Jerah repeated, his eyes never leaving the creatures. “Point me in the direction. We'll try and get closer, but stay behind me.”

“Above the pool of water,” Florian said, pointing with his sword, and Jerah nodded.

Across from them Kade was being swarmed by the creatures, and Florian winced as he watched them bite into the other man. A shout of pain morphed into a sharp growl as his body glowed; and in an instant, the familiar huge wolf stood in Kade's place, his teeth flashing as he snarled and bit at the smaller dogs. This seemed to startle them and many dashed away with their tails lowered, while

others still stood their ground with their own teeth showing. Though Kade had estimated ten of them, Florian guessed there were closer to twenty still alive.

Jerah had taken a few steps toward the towering rock formation, but the dogs surged toward the movement, blocking them from getting any further. It took all of Florian's concentration just to keep their gnashing teeth and claws away from him, swinging his sword to deter them from closing in. Even Jerah's fire, though it had scared some away toward Kade, wasn't enough to keep them all at bay now.

“Kade!” Jerah shouted. “Help me clear a path for Florian!”

The wolf's eyes flashed toward them, hearing the command. He bit down hard on the creature closest to him, catching it near its neck—it yelped, but he lifted it off its feet and shook it hard, blood spraying from its wound. Florian hissed, seeing its spikes stab into Kade's shoulder as he shook it; but when he released it, the dog flew through the air, hitting the wall of the cavern and falling motionless to the floor. The other dogs seemed to shrink back from Kade at that, but now they pressed in closer to Jerah and Florian.

Kade leapt closer to them, scattering dogs in his path, just as the fire in each of Jerah's hands started to sputter and die.

“Shit,” he hissed. “Get away from us!” Florian could feel the magic rolling off his words, like a wave through the thick, heavy sensation of it in the air. Yelping, the dogs started to run from him and Jerah, giving them a wide berth.

He could see the path to the Arrow, but it could close right back up at any moment. Florian dashed forward, running as hard as he could toward the pool of water.

“Florian!” Jerah shouted, and he could hear the barking of the dogs grow closer as he ran. “I told you to stay behind me, damn it!”

“I can get it!” he shouted back in reply.

“Kade, help him!” Jerah's voice echoed through the chamber, but the snarling of the wolf didn't seem to get any closer to him.

He couldn't look back, couldn't afford to stop—his lungs burned as he sprinted, making a running jump across the water. But it was wide enough that he couldn't quite make it, splashing into the cold pool with a gasp. And there were more splashes behind him, then a sharp pain in his shoulder, his arm—he cried out in pain, more dogs leaping into the water after him.

The dogs that had bit him were latched on to him now, weighing him down. The water was just shallow enough that his feet could touch the bottom of the pool, but the dogs were thrashing against

him—pulling him under—and he couldn't speak for the water that filled his mouth.

“Get away from him!” Jerah roared, the magic rocking into Florian like another wave; and the air quivered for a moment before the dogs released him, braying as they splashed back to shore. Gasping for breath, he swam the last few feet to the far side of the pool, but as he pulled himself up out of the water, a shriek pierced the air—his father's voice, full of agony.

He looked back. The dogs had swarmed Jerah, and he could barely make out Kade trying to fight through the pack of dogs that blocked Jerah entirely from his sight. His heart froze. The screaming continued. They were going to rip him apart.

He looked up. The magic of the Arrow was making the dogs stronger, or something, somehow, he just knew it. They were ripping his father apart. If he could just reach it—

“I'm already at the top,” he said, and with a strange popping sensation, he was at the top of the towering formation. With a startled shout he clung harder to the rocks, his feet slipping, as he tried to ignore the horrific sounds from below. At this angle, he could see it now—a thin golden sliver of metal and fletching barely sticking up and out of the rock. One shaky hand reached out to grab it, but it was stuck fast. He had to get it before—before—

“Come on,” he groaned, and pulling with all his strength, the magic in the air around him seemed to surge into his hand all at once. Finally, the Arrow slipped free. The light engulfed his vision for a moment, and he turned back toward where the dogs were swarming over his father.

“Die!” he shouted, his voice cracking with fear. His command ripped through the room like a thunderbolt, golden light bursting from the Arrow in his hand and pulsing along the ground in a visible wave. Instantly, every one of the spiky dogs fell limp and collapsed to the ground. He could barely make out the shape of Jerah underneath them, bloodied and unmoving. At the edge of the pack, Kade glowed with magic as his wolf form fell away, and he scrambled to his feet to run toward Jerah.

“Dad,” Florian whispered, every inch of his skin growing cold all at once. “Dad!” Heedless of the danger, he leapt from the rocks into the pool below, wincing as his feet hit the bottom of the shallow water. Ignoring the pain, he pushed himself off from the impact and swam for the opposite end.

Kade had pulled Jerah out from underneath the dead dogs. His eyes were open, frantically looking around the room, but his face was pale and covered in blood.

“Dad,” Florian gasped as he stumbled over to him, barely noticing Kade shrink away from him as he approached. “You're hurt. You're hurt.”

Up close, it was far worse than it had looked from a distance. It seemed like there was no part of his body that wasn't covered in blood and bite marks. He was trembling violently, as Florian

wrapped his arms around him, dropping the Arrow onto the ground next to him and pulling Jerah into his lap.

“Florian,” he groaned, his eyes squeezing shut, but that was all he could manage to get out. Blood gushed from his torso as Florian pulled him up, and with a shuddering gasp, he realized one of the dog's spikes had gone right through his lower abdomen, leaving a sickening hole in his skin. Bile rose in his throat, and he wrenched his eyes away, unable to bear the sight.

“Heal,” Florian whimpered, moving his hand across Jerah's chest. The magic surged from his hands, still thick in the air, though he could feel it beginning to dissipate now. Some of the smaller wounds knit, but there were so many—so many still bleeding—and the big gaping wound in his belly didn't budge. Florian couldn't breathe. It felt like his whole chest had caved in. “Heal. Heal!”

“Florian,” Jerah rasped again, grabbing one of his wrists. His eyes were wide open now, looking panicked. “The Arrow? You got the Arrow?”

Florian blinked, his mind going blank. The Arrow. He grabbed it from where it was next to him, holding it up so Jerah could see it.

“I got it,” he replied, his voice hoarse. “See? I got it. I told you I could do it.” Tears flooded his eyes, and a sob escaped him before he realized that he was crying. “I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, I'll listen better, I swear. I'll do exactly what you tell me from now on. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Dad.”

“You got it,” Jerah breathed, releasing Florian's wrist to touch a shaking hand to the warm metal of the Arrow. “Good. Good boy. God, I'm cold.” He hesitated, then with a groan moved to wrap one arm around Florian's torso, trying to hug him. “It's alright. You're alright, Florian. You'll be okay.”

Blood had soaked through Florian's pants where he knelt in the dirt, forming a dark pool around them. There were still so many wounds untouched by his healing words, and blood still poured from his stomach. He couldn't stop it fast enough.

“Heal,” he sobbed, running his hands over Jerah's torso again. A few more wounds started to close, but it did not stop the blood. “It's not working. I don't—I don't know why it's not working.”

“Look at me,” Jerah said, his voice suddenly forceful, as he brought his free hand up to Florian's face. They locked eyes. Jerah's face was ashen, his lips turning blue, and in the pit of his stomach Florian knew that this was it. “My son. I love you so much. You'll be okay. My son.”

“Stop,” Florian begged. He could barely breathe, despite the cold air that filled his lungs between his sobs. “Please, you have to stay awake. Please.”

“My son,” Jerah repeated faintly, and he closed his eyes. A long, slow exhale escaped his lungs, his head tipped back, and his hand fell away from Florian's back.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“No, no, no,” Florian whimpered, weakly shaking Jerah's shoulders. “You have to wake up, Dad, please, you have to w-wake up. Dad. Dad!”

For the first time he looked up to where Kade had stumbled back. His face was stricken, eyes wide and unmoving from where he stared down at Jerah.

“Do s-something,” he stammered between sobs, Kade's eyes flickering toward him. Florian was sure his face was covered with tears and snot and blood, but all he could focus on was the still, unmoving weight pressed into his lap. “We have to do something.”

Silent, Kade shook his head, looking back at Jerah's face.

“He's gone,” he whispered at last.

“No!” Florian shouted, his face twisting in agony. “No, he's not, he's—we can still—” His voice trailed off into a wordless wail. He knew it was a lie even as he said it. His head fell forward, and he wept onto Jerah's cold, still chest. His father was dead.

Vaguely, he heard Kade slowly stepping closer, kneeling down next to him.

“I'm sorry,” Kade whispered. When Florian looked up, he had crouched down on the other side of Jerah, lightly touching his hand where it had fallen limply to the floor. “Florian, I'm sorry.”

Florian shook his head, squeezing his eyes shut. His ears were ringing, his whole body aching with cold. He could barely process the words, much less reply to them.

“I want to go home,” he choked out, clenching one hand into a fist around the Arrow. “I just want to go home.”

Magic swelled from the Arrow as he said it, warm and tingling, and with the same sudden popping sensation that had carried him to the top of the rock formation, the world lurched around them. He felt Kade gasp, and when he opened his eyes, they were no longer in the moonstone mine surrounded by the bodies of spike-covered dead dogs, but the Moon Garden. They were in the Winter Court. They were home.

“How—How did you—” Kade stammered, standing up quickly. A look of panic was starting to truly set in on his face now, as he stumbled back and looked around in disbelief. “Florian, how did you do that?”

Florian shook his head again. He didn't know how he did it. He hadn't even been thinking of the Winter Court when he said it. He had been thinking of the apartment in Coral Shore—but he supposed not even fae magic could take him there. This was the closest place to home.

“Kade?” a familiar voice called out from the walkway into the garden. A woman—Tatiana, Florian realized, and his heart shattered all over again. “Is that you? I saw a light. How did you...?”

She fell abruptly silent, and when Florian looked up, she was already running for him with a look of terror on her face.

“Tatiana,” he gasped, unable to form any other words.

“Oh, Jerah,” she sobbed, falling to her knees next to Florian and reaching for his father's body. “Jerah, no!”

The despair in her voice set him weeping all over again, and her hands that had hovered fearfully over Jerah's body moved to grab him instead. Tatiana hugged him close, and he could feel her frame shaking with sobs, even as he pressed his face into her shoulder and cried.

He had no idea how long they held each other over Jerah's body, weeping, but when she finally helped him stumble to his feet, Kade was gone.



Time passed by in a blur. Florian had no idea who came to take his father's body away, or how long he sat there on the ground of the Moon Garden, hollowly explaining what had happened to a still-weeping Tatiana; or how he ended up back in his room, standing in a daze inside the hot shower for an unknown length of time. He had no idea what time it was when Tatiana knocked on his door—eyes red and face gaunt—and handed him a steaming mug of something that resembled tea.

“Drink it,” she said, her voice hoarse. “It'll help you sleep.”

He could only nod, and drink. Whatever it was, it gave him a dreamless rest.

He had no idea what time it was when he finally awoke the next day, staring up at the ceiling with a sick feeling in the bottom of his stomach, hoping that the whole journey had been a terrible hallucination, a nightmare.

Eventually he rose, mechanically washing his face, brushing his teeth, changing his clothes. The Golden Arrow was on his writing desk, carefully set on some sort of display stand: a plain dark metal that made the Arrow's gleaming surface look all the brighter. He had no idea where it had come from,

or if it had always been in his room. He couldn't remember if he had even shown Tatiana that he had it.

Slowly he reached out to touch it; the metal was cool to his fingertips. It felt like a perfectly mundane arrow as he picked it up, turning it over and over in his hands.

He caught sight of something near the arrowhead—a scratch, it seemed, and he turned it again to get a better look at it. No, not a scratch. It was etched with words. He frowned, pulling it closer to his face to read the tiny inscription.

I pierce the heart of sacrifice, it read, and Florian scowled, putting it back on the stand. Whatever kind of sacrifice it wanted, he thought bitterly, Jerah's life had surely more than paid.

Next to the Arrow by its stand was the picture Jerah had given him on the first day that he arrived in the Veil. His mother smiled up at him from the picture, and Jerah looked at her with adoration, a look that almost made Florian start to cry all over again. He flipped the picture down onto the table, unable to bear their happy faces.

A sudden knock at his door—three familiar sharp raps—pulled him from his thoughts. Frowning, he stood and opened the door, taking in a sharp breath when he saw Kade standing in the hallway.

“Kade,” he said, surprised at his presence. The taller man was looking carefully at the ground, and he winced when Florian said his name. He looked as though he hadn't slept at all.

“I just wanted to say goodbye,” he said, his tone careful, but his voice gravelly. Florian blinked.

“What?” he asked. Kade's expression only became more pained, but this time he hesitantly lifted his eyes to look Florian in the face.

“I'm going home,” he said, and for what felt like the hundredth time in the past day, Florian's heart stopped. “I... My job was to protect you, and Jerah. And I failed. So I'm going home.” He gestured next to him, and Florian realized that there were two heavy-looking duffel bags on the ground. He was truly about to leave.

“What?” Florian repeated, his voice laced with panic this time. “Kade, you can't—you can't leave.”

Kade shook his head. “It's alright,” he said softly. “I'll go.”

“No!” he exclaimed, and without thinking, he reached out to grab Kade's hands. “Please, please don't go, Kade. I can't—I can't do this alone. I need help. I need *your* help. Please, you have to stay.”

“I can't help you,” Kade replied, his voice cracking with despair. “Florian, I failed. I can't help you. I can't keep you safe.”

“Yes, you can!” he protested. Tears were flooding his eyes, and his chest felt like it might cave in with grief. Everything, *everything* was slipping through his fingers. “You can. Kade, I—I’m sorry. I was... I wasn’t listening to anything you or my dad said to me, and I was being reckless, and selfish, but if I just listened, you would have been able to protect us both. It’s my fault. I’m sorry. I’ll be good now, okay? I’ll listen to whatever you tell me to do. Just, please, please don’t leave.”

Kade’s expression was anguished as he turned away, though he didn’t pull his hands out of Florian’s.

“You can’t keep doing this, Florian,” he said. “This isn’t fair.”

“Doing what?” Florian pressed. “I just—I want us to—”

“You said it yourself!” Kade exclaimed, interrupting him. “There is no ‘us’. That’s what you wanted. Why do you keep doing this to me?”

“That’s not what I wanted!” he cried—their voices were echoing down the stone hallway now. “It’s not. I wanted... I don’t know why I said all of that. I’m sorry. I was upset and I said things I didn’t mean.”

“So you can be upset and say whatever you want?” Kade snapped. His hands were squeezing tight against Florian’s hands now, hard enough to hurt. “And when you hurt me I just have to forgive you? And you can still just do whatever you want?”

“No!” he interrupted, shaking his head. “Of course not—that’s not what I meant at all. You’re—you’re hurting me, let go.”

Kade opened his mouth, but snapped it back closed before he said anything. Instead, he shoved Florian back, making him stumble back into the doorway. He was turning to go—Florian scrambled back toward him. He had to stop him, he couldn’t let Kade leave—

“Stop!” he exclaimed, grabbing Kade’s arm as he reached for his luggage. Kade’s head whipped back toward him when their skin met, his lips curling back into a snarl—before Florian could even process, orange light had covered Kade, and his wolf form was standing there instead—all his teeth showing, and a low growl rumbling through his chest.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Florian snapped, pulling his hand back. “We can’t just talk about this? You want to fight?”

The timber wolf didn’t back down, still snarling, and with a frustrated growl he shifted too. When he was down on Kade’s level—the scent of rage roiling off him heady and sharp—the other wolf’s eyes flashed with something primal, and he lunged. They scrabbled back into Florian’s room,

snapping and biting at each other. He couldn't even focus on what he was doing, acting on pure instinct, as he lunged and scratched at the other wolf.

But in this form Kade was still bigger and stronger, and without being able to speak, Florian couldn't use his magic. Kade got him onto his back, and before he could roll back to his feet, he surged down to bite hard at his neck, holding him in place—and just as quick, Florian's angry snarl became a frightened yelp.

Submit! The command came off Kade clear as day, and Florian's ears flattened against his skull, tail tucking between his legs. He would never win this way—he shifted back, shoving the wolf off of him the instant he could use his arms again. Kade stumbled back but leapt at him again in the same instant that Florian rolled out of the way. Kade thudded into the writing desk behind him, and a loud, metallic clatter came from the top of it. Florian's head snapped up just in time to see the Golden Arrow tumble from its stand.

“No!” Florian exclaimed, his hand lashing out, grabbing the Arrow just before it hit the ground.

Panting with exertion and now prone on the floor, he glanced up at Kade, who still stood over him; but the sight of the Arrow seemed to have snapped Kade out of his fury. The wolf was looking down at him now with eyes wide, ears pressed back, and his tail slowly dropping—not quite between his legs, but low and frightened.

“Can we please just talk?” Florian asked, his voice hoarse. Exhaustion weighed down on him all at once now that he was down on the floor, and with a groan he pushed himself into a sitting position. The wolf took a few nervous paces away from him, expression still the same. “Please?”

Kade didn't look at him, but his body glowed with light as he shifted back. When the light faded, he was sitting across from Florian with his hands pressed to his face.

“I'm sorry,” he said faintly. “I've never—lost it like that before. I'm sorry.”

“I'm sorry too,” Florian said. His voice cracked, tears burning at his eyes again. “I don't want to fight. I wish we could just go back to how it was before.”

Across from him, Kade let out a sharp breath—not quite a laugh, almost a gasp. When he lowered his hands away from his face, his eyes were glassy with unshed tears.

“I'm so mad at you,” he said hoarsely. “I wish—I wish I could just hate you and be done with it. You really hurt me. I don't know how to... to be open with people, but I was trying. I was trying. And you...”

Florian bit back his tears and looked away. “I know,” he rasped, steeling himself for whatever was coming next.

“So why?” Kade said, his voice breaking. “Why do I still want to stay?”

Florian’s head snapped up to look at him, not daring to believe what Kade had just said. But Kade was looking steadily back at him, tears dripping down his face with a weary look of acceptance.

“Please,” Florian heard himself beg, as he pushed himself across the floor to sit directly across from Kade, their knees touching. “Please stay.”

Weakly, Kade shook his head. “Jerah died because of me. I can’t stay.”

“That’s not true,” Florian protested, gingerly setting the Arrow down next to him, so he could grab Kade’s hands with his. “It was an accident. We were both being stupid, but it was an accident. Even if it is your fault, it’s my fault too. Okay?”

It took a moment, but eventually Kade nodded silently, looking down at their hands.

“Please stay,” Florian repeated, squeezing his hands again. “Please stay.”

“Don’t do this to me, Florian,” he breathed, looking away with an agonized expression. “I don’t think I can say no to you.”

“Please,” Florian whispered. His vision blurred with tears, but still he kept his eyes firmly on Kade who squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them again to meet Florian’s gaze. He took in a long, shuddering breath before speaking again.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll stay.”

And he pulled Florian close and kissed him. Every nerve in Florian’s body cried out in relief as he kissed back, frantic and needy. For a moment it felt like the world had slipped back onto its axis—that everything that had gone wrong was suddenly righted.

“Can we start over?” Florian asked after he pulled away, eyes still closed. “Do you still want this? To be with me?”

Kade was silent, kissing him in answer: a soft press of his lips before taking in a slow, deep breath. Florian opened his eyes. Kade was looking at him with an inscrutable expression, somehow sad and hopeful all at once.

“Part of me is still mad at you,” he finally said. Florian’s heart sank, but before he could dwell on it, Kade took in a shuddering breath and continued, “But I... I don’t want to be away from you, either.”

“Really?” Florian asked. A tiny spark of hope had lit in his heart. “You’re sure?”

Kade nodded. “If I’m going to stay, then I want to stay for you. Not just because you need help. That too, but... I wanted to be with you the first time I saw you. And then you were so curious, and you wanted to come here to help, even though you were scared, and you didn’t really believe it. You were

kind and brave. And I still... I think you're a good person, and I want to help you, and... be close to you.”

Florian pressed himself closer to Kade, who squeezed him even tighter. His arms felt strong and warm around him, and for the first time in days, Florian felt he was truly safe.

Without meaning to, he started to sob, all the anguish pouring out of him at once. His hands clenched into fists against Kade’s shirt as he wept, and in his arms Florian could distantly feel the sensation of the other man’s shoulders trembling with his own tears. If he had lost Kade, too... He didn’t know what he would have done. He would have lost everyone.

Eventually, Florian’s sobs relaxed into choked hiccups, then stuttering breaths. Kade still held him tightly, keeping him propped up as he had slumped forward against him.

“We can take it slow for real this time,” Florian said, his voice muffled against Kade's chest, damp with his tears. “Whatever you want.”

He could feel Kade shaking his head. “No point in that anymore. Everything I was afraid of already happened. Whatever you want to do is fine.”

Florian laughed weakly at that. “Whatever I want, huh?”

“I'm serious,” Kade said, squeezing him again.

“Will you go down to breakfast with me, then?” he asked. With everything that had happened in the past twenty-four hours, he felt more vulnerable and raw than he could ever recall feeling in his life. “I—I don't want to be alone in the castle.”

Kade made a soft noise, a rumble deep in his chest. “Okay. I understand.” For a moment, they were both silent. Florian could hear the thudding beat of Kade’s heart against his ear. “Maybe let me put my things back in my room first.”

Florian laughed, and Kade released him as he got to his feet. “Okay. I'll help.”

They stayed together for the rest of the day, hand in hand as they wandered through the castle, until Tatiana asked them to help sort through Jerah's things.

“These are all of his notes, everything he's compiled since he started gathering information on the Blight and the Arrows,” Tatiana told them, gesturing toward a pile of notebooks and loose papers that had been stacked on Jerah's writing desk in his private study.

She looked tired, her face drawn, but she had busied herself by organizing his belongings. She must have been planning his funeral, too, though Florian couldn't bring himself to ask about it. “I don't

know how much he had told you, but... I'm sure he would want you to have everything, to make sure nothing gets missed. And these, too.”

She handed him a wallet: plain black leather, but clearly finely crafted. When Florian opened it, it was thick with cash and had cards in each pocket.

“Where did he get all this?” he blurted, looking up at Tatiana in bewilderment. She managed a slight smile and a bitter laugh.

“He did travel on Earth fairly often,” she replied. “I think most of this was from sales of gems, ones that are quite rare on Earth but easier to find in the Veil. It dates back quite far, actually. I think some of the cards should have your name on them as well. It's a family account, so you'll be taken care of.”

“I don't—I don't know what to say,” Florian stammered, shaking his head. “I mean, thank you.”

“It's yours now,” Tatiana said, grasping his hands. “All of this is yours now. You're his son. The King of the Winter Court.”

Part of Florian knew that *that* was objectively true now, but the realization still hit him like a thunderbolt.

“No, no,” he protested on instinct, shaking his head. A laugh escaped him, more nervous than anything. “No, I'm not—I'm not a king.”

“Well, we do still have to arrange your coronation,” she said wryly. “But you are, now.” He physically recoiled, shrinking away from her as she said it. Glancing back at Kade, he searched the other man's face for some indication of... something. He wasn't sure what he was looking for. Kade's expression barely changed, though, just a slight pursing of his lips and an almost imperceptible nod.

“I don't know the first thing about any of that,” Florian said, looking back at Tatiana. “I didn't even know I was a prince a month ago, and now I have to be king?”

“That's alright. Jerah winged a lot of it, too,” she laughed. “I won't stop helping you, Florian. I'm already taking care of most of the day to day. That won't change. And, frankly, the Winter Court is small—the title of king is more a formality than anything else. And the duties of it are much more akin to being a mayor than a king. Don't stress too much about it for now. Alright?”

“Okay,” he agreed faintly. Next to him, Kade squeezed his shoulder, silent but reassuring.

They spent the rest of the afternoon reading through Jerah's notes, though Florian wasn't sure how much of it he really absorbed. He spent a long time going over the same paragraph again and again, memorizing his father's handwriting more than really reading it. Every so often the numbness that had settled around him would break, and he couldn't bear to read any longer, pacing around the study until

the nervous energy died away. Kade sat across from him, reading quietly as well, and occasionally he would reach over to squeeze his hand.

At the end of the night, they walked back toward their room, but Florian paused at the junction of the hallway, between where his room was and where the corridor curved around to Kade's.

"I don't want to be alone," he murmured. And without him needing to ask, Kade nodded, and followed him to his room.

They settled into Florian's bed with just enough room for them to lay next to each other—Kade's arm draped over Florian's side. He hadn't asked beforehand, but somehow Florian thought Kade would want to be the big spoon.

He couldn't sleep. He wasn't sure how long it had been when Florian rolled over to face Kade, only to find his tangerine eyes gleaming in the darkness, open and watching him as he turned. They looked at each other silently for a little while, then slowly Kade reached over and gently ran his fingers down Florian's cheek.

It was nice—comforting, a small and innocent pleasure that left his skin tingling. He sighed and leaned into the contact. A tiny smile twitched at the edge of Kade's lips, and he continued to trace slow, careful lines along Florian's face. His thumb brushed over his lips, the tip of his forefinger tracing lightly along his brows and his eyelashes, as if he could draw a portrait on his skin.

It was *intimate*, Florian thought, and his heart beat a little faster. He had never quite felt this way before, not exactly. It felt more vulnerable than anything they had shared. Just this morning they still hadn't been talking, and now... Everything had changed so quickly, and he had no idea how to make any of it stick.

He mulled it over as Kade continued to lightly touch his face, his fingers eventually trailing through his hair and brushing through his curls. How could he make things stay just the way they were right now? Was it even possible? In the moment, it felt as though everything he loved and cared about would eventually go away, as it always had, and he didn't know how to make this any different.

Despite his nervous thoughts, his own exhaustion eventually won out, and he fell asleep to the soft sensation of Kade's fingers on his skin.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The next day, Tatiana told him that the date was set for Jerah's funeral, and everything felt far more real and painful than it had the day before.

“Two days,” he repeated hollowly, looking down at the breakfast table where they sat. Tatiana was across from him, a tired but resolute expression on her face, only a mug of tea in front of her. Kade was next to him, his expression inscrutable. All three of them seemed to have little appetite.

The words made it feel as though he had been in a fugue state for the past forty-eight hours and had only now awakened. How had he felt anything but this unsettled grief in the pit of his stomach? Last night already seemed like it had been years ago.

“Yes,” Tatiana sighed, bringing the cup of tea to her lips and taking a small, careful sip. “And then... There's a coronation ceremony you'll have to partake in. A week from then.”

Florian groaned, pressing his face into his hands. He had been to one funeral that he could remember—a teacher from his high school—but there he had been with a group of students in the back. The idea of being at his father's funeral, a king's funeral, made him feel like he might puke despite his empty stomach. Then a whole coronation ceremony the week after... He wanted to run away, to go back home to Earth and never come back.

But he couldn't, not anymore. He had the first Arrow, and they had to find the rest. And he had Kade now too, but he suspected that Kade would not follow him to Earth if it meant staying there forever. Tatiana had said that she would still handle the day to day of the Winter Court: he would just be a figurehead, at least for now. Maybe that wouldn't be so bad. He would just have to get through the next week first.

“Okay,” he said, doing his best to slow his breathing down. “What do I have to do for those?”

“Honestly? I really just need you to show up,” Tatiana answered, a wry, weary smile spreading across her face. “But if you want to help with some of the arrangements, I wouldn't say no to that.”

Florian glanced over at Kade again. He nodded once, silently, and Florian turned back to Tatiana. “Yeah, we can help.”

She ended up putting him in charge of the flower arrangements, telling him which workers were in charge of what in the gardens, and who would help him find suitable flowers. Overall it seemed like an enjoyable enough task, though the reason for it certainly cast a shadow over what might have otherwise been a pleasant inventory of the garden and its offerings.

It was strange, he thought, as he followed one of the workers through the garden later that day, trying to parse out his feelings about everything that had happened. Jerah was his father, but he had only known him for a month. For a lifetime before that, he had quietly resented the man, but he may as well have been a stranger. Their relationship was promising, and there was certainly affection between them, but... He only truly felt grief when he thought about what they could have had, if only they'd had more time. It was a tragedy, to be sure; one that sent his future spiraling into an uncertain void in this strange world, but all he felt was a dull ache, something cold and impersonal. It was easy to tuck away the distant sadness into the same little compartment where he kept his thoughts about his mother, another loss of a person he barely knew, even less than his father.

Kade had been listening attentively to the worker as they walked, occasionally glancing back at Florian; and he could tell that Kade knew he was only half-listening at best. He managed a slight smile as Kade caught his eye.

He was lucky to have him. If Kade had left, if he hadn't stopped to say goodbye the morning before... He didn't want to think of that.

They had each other, now. And they had the first Arrow, and his father's notes would guide them to the next: that was the knowledge he could cling to for now. Everything else would come in its own time.



Kade followed him to his room again that night, and Florian gratefully let him in. Being alone would have been unbearable, and there was something comforting in the semblance of a routine that his presence created.

For a long while, they laid quietly in the dark. Florian's eyes stayed open, listening to the sound of Kade's breath. He wasn't sure how long they were laying there, before he rolled onto his back so he could look over at Kade.

“Are you awake?” he whispered, and Kade's eyes snapped open.

“Yes,” he said.

“I can't sleep.”

“Me neither.”

He leaned closer, pressing his face to Kade's. Their lips met tentatively at first, but Kade's mouth was soft and pliant against his, yielding readily as Florian pressed closer and shifted his weight until he was on top of him. Kade's arm was still wrapped around his waist, and the other came up to hold him—his hand pressed against the small of Florian's back. They kissed sleepily, lazily, until Florian pulled away just enough to murmur,

“Is this okay?”

Kade nodded, his eyes still closed. The moonlight from Florian's window caught the edge of his face, casting a long, subtle shadow from his eyelashes down his cheek. Florian leaned down and softly kissed just under his eyes, eyelashes tickling against his lips. Kade made a soft noise as he did, half surprise and half pleasure, and that was more than enough to make up Florian's mind. He moved away, falling back against his pillows and pulling Kade with him—half on his side and half on top of him—eyes open now to give him a questioning glance.

“Take your shirt off,” he said. And with only a beat of silence, as he seemed to process the words, Kade obeyed, sitting up to pull his shirt off. Florian sat up with him, taking his own off, then hesitated with his hands around the waistband of his underwear. “Don't laugh, okay?”

“Florian,” Kade replied with a frown. “Do you really think I would laugh at you?”

“No,” he stammered, looking away and hoping the flush on his face wasn't too apparent in the darkness. “But I... I don't know. I guess I'm self conscious. Only one other person has really seen me naked. It still feels weird.”

Kade shook his head. “I'm not going to laugh. And anyway, you can look however you want to, whatever makes you feel more comfortable.”

Florian considered it for a moment. “No,” he finally said, stifling a laugh. “I feel like if I'm gonna have a dick I should figure that out ahead of time. Is it weird that I haven't, like... tried that yet?”

“Not weird. It's fine,” Kade said, his eyes flashing earnestly as he looked Florian over. “It doesn't matter to me what you have, what you look like. So I won't laugh. I promise. Okay?” He paused, then added, “Want me to take mine off first?”

“Oh,” Florian said, and pressed his hands to his face, somehow feeling more embarrassed. “Um, okay.”

Kade shifted his weight to peel his underwear off in one smooth motion, no hint of shame on his face or in his body language. Florian dropped his hands from his face, doing his best to keep his eyes on Kade's face, but failing miserably. Even half-hard his cock looked just as big and intimidating as the rest of him.

Before Florian could take off the rest of his clothes, Kade pressed down on him again, capturing his lower lip gently between his teeth. Florian whimpered, and Kade shifted his weight to press one thigh between Florian's legs, only the thin layer of his underwear separating them from skin-to-skin contact.

“Show me what you want,” Kade breathed against him. Florian nodded, grabbing one of his hands and moving it slowly down the length of his torso. A soft sigh of pleasure escaped his lips at the contact, gentle but leaving a tingly, electric feeling in its wake, like the way Kade had touched his face the night before. Fingers trailed from Florian's collarbone over one nipple and down the plane of his stomach, but hesitated at the waistband of his underwear. He took a steadying breath and pushed Kade's hand underneath to settle between his legs.

“Ah,” he gasped, the contact making him shiver. “Gentle, okay?”

Kade nodded, but his eyes were firmly fixed on where his hand disappeared under the fabric. His fingers traced slow, exploratory lines against him—first near the junction of his thighs, then to his center already wet with arousal. Florian stifled a moan as Kade's fingers found his cock, pressing curiously against it.

“You're hard,” Kade said, his tone genuinely surprised. “Or—is it always like that?”

“Oh,” Florian laughed, looking away. “No, um, it—it gets a little hard. Not as much as you, of course, but a little bit. Fuck—yeah, like that.”

Kade had caught him between his thumb and forefinger, tugging carefully to jerk him off. Florian bit his lip, muscles twitching in response to the stimulation, but Kade held him in place.

“You're bigger than I thought,” he murmured, his voice low and dark. When he looked up to catch Florian's gaze, his eyes were hungry, needy. “Is it okay if I take these off?”

“Yeah,” Florian panted, nodding. He could feel a wet spot on his leg, where Kade's cock was pressed against him, leaking precum. “You can, um, you can go inside me, too, if you want.”

He whimpered as Kade pulled his hand away, grabbing his underwear with both hands and pulling them down. Florian kicked them off the bed, heat flooding his face; but before he could speak, Kade's hand was on him again. A palm pressed against his cock, and fingers trailed further to find his entrance.

“It's okay?” Kade asked, barely above a whisper, and Florian could only bring himself to nod rapidly. One finger slid inside him easily—he was already so wet—and a soft groan escaped him that was echoed by Kade.

“Another,” he prompted, and Kade nodded, a second finger slipping into him. His movements were almost unbearable, as he slowly and carefully moved his fingers in and out of Florian, making him gasp and squirm. Kade's fingers curved inside him, hitting him in the exact right spot, and his head fell back with a cry, the sensation sending a shockwave through his whole body.

“There,” he said, eyelids fluttering. “Yeah, there—and—” He couldn't formulate the words, so instead he moved his hand down to cover Kade's, pressing his palm harder against his cock and grinding against it. “Fuck, Kade.”

Kade nodded, his eyes still focused on his hand between Florian's legs—moving faster with his guidance—angling so his fingers could fuck him while his palm rubbed insistently against his cock. Florian let his hand fall away, closing his eyes and focusing only on the soft wet sounds made by the friction between the two of them; Kade's panting breath over him, the cries escaping his own mouth, and the mounting pressure building in his belly.

“I'm close,” he panted, grabbing onto Kade wherever he could reach, fingernails digging into his upper arms. “Fuck, don't stop.”

“I won't,” Kade replied, his voice a low rumble, and Florian was coming—his whole body tensing around Kade's fingers inside him as molten heat pulsed from between his legs. Florian pressed his face into Kade's shoulder, stifling a long moan. “God, I can feel you—I feel you coming.”

“W-Wait,” Florian panted, grabbing Kade's hand that immediately stilled. Pleasure still zapped through him at every point of contact where Kade was touching him, overwhelming his senses. “Give me—give me a second.”

Kade hesitated, and clearly trying to keep his hand as still as possible, he leaned down to press soft kisses along Florian's cheekbones. Florian laughed, and Kade kissed the corner of his mouth where he was smiling.

“I want you to fuck me,” he blurted as Kade started to pull back. Kade stifled a laugh, turning his face away. “Is that okay?”

“Yeah,” he said, his voice gravelly. Florian became acutely aware of his cock still pressed against his leg, still damp with precum and achingly hard. “Still want to be on your back like this?”

“Um,” Florian stammered. He was so *gentle*, and while he wasn't exactly surprised, it made his head spin. “Yeah, that's fine.”

Kade nodded and carefully pulled his hand away, Florian whining at the sudden emptiness. Kade's fingers glistened wetly in the moonlight, and he stroked himself for a moment, a soft sigh escaping him.

“You already feel good,” he murmured, moving to position himself between Florian's legs. The head of his cock pressed against Florian's, and he rocked his hips slightly for just a moment before pausing, a hesitant look on his face. “I, um... I won't come in you if you don't want me to.”

Florian blinked. That probably would have been a good conversation to have first, but... “It's okay,” he said quickly. “You can.”

Kade nodded, looking down to where his cock pressed; and though his expression didn't change, Florian swore he could see him blush even in the dim moonlight. “I'm nervous,” he breathed, looking through his eyelashes at Florian's face.

“It's okay,” he said, and raised his arms to pull him closer. “Come here.” Kade shifted his weight, leaning forward so Florian could hook his arms around Kade's back and pull him down to kiss him, mouth open and eager. Their tongues met, and Florian angled his hips, shifting so Kade's length slid down his own cock until the head pressed against his cunt.

Kade groaned—their lips still locked together—but the movement seemed to be all the invitation he needed as he pressed himself inside, making Florian gasp as his cock was buried to the hilt in one fluid motion.

“You're big,” Florian groaned, his head falling back.

“You're tight,” he countered, his voice sounding almost strangled. “Fuck, I don't want to move.”

“You won't hurt me.”

“No, it's that...” he started, then trailed off with a nervous laugh. “I don't want to come right away.”

Florian grinned wickedly, something like pride bubbling in his chest at the admission. “I don't mind. It's okay.” Again Kade shook his head.

“I want to feel you come on me first,” he said, and the words made Florian's groin flood with heat.

“Yeah?” he panted, and moved one of his hands to stroke lightly where their bodies met. “I can do that. Stay still.”

Kade nodded eagerly, though he pulled back a bit to watch as Florian touched himself, stroking his swollen cock between his thumb and forefinger. He was already more sensitive now that he'd come once, and his cunt was full of Kade's cock. The bigger man was making the most vulnerable little whimpering sounds as his inner walls pulsed and tightened around him. Kade moved one of his hands to rub his little cock, mirroring his own movements, and that was more than enough to make him come again, gasping and shuddering around him.

Kade leaned down and kissed him hard as he came. Florian moaned against his lips, only to yelp as Kade started to fuck him. He was quiet at first, but a soft gasp escaped from the back of his throat as

Florian wrapped his legs around Kade's waist, more out of instinct than any conscious intention. But hearing the noise it elicited from Kade, he hooked his ankles around each other and used his legs to press Kade's body closer to his own. Kade's movements were unsure at first, almost clumsy, but he soon found a rhythm that had them both moaning.

“Come on,” Florian begged, the hand he had kept on Kade's back trailing up to stroke his hair. “I wanna feel you come, too.”

His words seemed to be just enough to push Kade to the edge. His hips stuttered and slowed, a strained groan rumbling from deep in his chest. Florian's insides filled with wet heat and Kade stilled against him, gasping for breath.

They laid motionless for a moment, only the sound of their heavy breathing breaking through the quiet stillness. A soft, gentle pleasure still radiated from Florian's swollen cock, a warm afterglow only made stronger by Kade's cock still filling his insides. He was warm and safe, and he closed his eyes to revel in it, to focus on the physical sensation of Kade inside of him.

“Fuck,” Kade finally groaned, pressing his face against Florian's neck. “I get it. I get it now.”

“Get what?” Florian asked, opening his eyes, still running his fingers through the short wiry hair near the base of his skull.

“Why people are so obsessed with this. I already want to fuck you again,” Kade replied. Florian could feel him smiling against his skin, and a breathless laugh escaped him. As their breathing slowed, Kade cautiously pulled away, looking down at him with half-lidded eyes. “Is this okay?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean... You're the king now. I don't know if this is... if we're...” Kade said, clearly struggling to get the words out. Despite how much he hated thinking of being a king, Florian couldn't help but grin at Kade's nervousness.

“Well,” he said slowly. “If I'm the king now, then I can kind of do whatever I want, don't you think?”

“Mm,” Kade answered, a noncommittal grunt of a response. The words did seem to assuage him, though, as the anxious look left his face. Carefully he propped himself up into a kneeling position and looked down to where their bodies were still joined, though already Florian could feel him softening. “This is going to make a mess.”

Florian wrinkled his nose. “Yeah.”

When they had carefully extricated themselves and cleaned up, they settled back in bed, Kade still curled around Florian with one arm wrapped around him.

“Try and sleep now,” Kade murmured in his ear. Florian nodded. He closed his eyes and tried to hold on to the warmth and peace that he had felt when they were together, until finally his consciousness faded away.

The funeral seemed like a surprisingly small affair for a king. Apparently there were no chapels or churches in the castle, so instead the ceremony took place in a large open building that would typically be used for indoor celebrations, like balls and dances and feasts when the weather was poor. And probably other funerals, though somehow Florian doubted most funerals in the Winter Court were so crowded. As small as the population was, the big open room still felt cramped with what must have been just about every citizen sitting in narrow rows pressed tightly together. Distantly, Florian wondered if any members of the other clans had even been invited—if they even knew what had happened.

The close quarters left little room for decoration, though what had been set up was appropriately austere. The flowers that Florian had picked out were arranged at the end of every row of chairs and hung along the walls. There had been a few midnight princesses in bloom—the rare flower Kade had given him what felt like a lifetime ago—and the few precious stalks they had harvested were placed delicately beside Jerah's casket.

Florian shuddered if he thought too hard about it. The ceremony had just barely begun, and already he decided that he hated funerals. It made his skin crawl to think of his father's body just out of sight, but here in the room with them: the townspeople pressed into many rows of chairs all dressed in black, and people Florian didn't know coming up to speak about Jerah, as if they had been bosom friends... Maybe they had been. He wouldn't have known.

He knew he would have to speak, too, though he had no idea what he wanted to say. But Jerah was his father, and Florian was the king now, so it would be expected of him. One last obligation to him, a duty he had never asked for. He had never asked for any of this.

Kade stood up next to him, rattling him from his bitter thoughts, and he realized that it was Kade's turn to speak, as the last person was stepping away from the front of the large room with tears in their eyes. Kade would speak, then Florian, then finally Tatiana—and then Jerah would truly be put to rest.

Stern, quiet Kade walked slowly to the front of the room, a tiny furrow between his brows the only sign of tension on his face. He stood silently for a moment, the air thick with anticipation, then he took in a heavy breath and spoke.

“King Jerah was a good man,” he said. Though he spoke softly, the silence in the rest of the building let his voice carry. “When I first came here, it was just out of a sense of duty. To uphold something my father thought was important. But Jerah was...”

He trailed off and managed a slight grin. “Jerah was very different from what I expected. He was fun. He liked my company. He treated me like his own family, which I never expected. But most of all he dreamed of a better future for everyone, and he did everything within his power to make that future happen.”

Florian squeezed his eyes shut.

“He made me believe in that dream, too. And now...” Kade trailed off, his voice suddenly choked. “I’m going to keep working hard for him, to make sure his dream is realized. For Florian. For all of us.”

He hesitated, as if he might add more; but instead, with a sense of finality he gave a nod and stepped away. A few murmurs rose as he did, and some of the townsfolk reached out to him in familiar, comforting gestures as he passed. They all knew each other better than Florian knew any of them, he thought with a sinking feeling in his stomach. He had practiced what he was going to say, but it seemed woefully inadequate all of a sudden, as Kade sat back down next to him. Kade squeezed his hand, and he stood, feeling as though he was not quite in his own body, but floating somewhere just above it.

Florian made his way to the front of the room, standing just before his father's casket as he turned to face the crowd, the many faces of the Winter Court looking back up at him. He was their king now, and he had no idea what to say to them.

“I, um...” he started, and cleared his throat. “I thought a lot about what to say today. I don't know how much information Jerah gave about our situation, but... He was my father, but I didn't know him very well. I met him for the first time not even two months ago.” He took in a shuddering breath, his eyes scanning the crowd until they settled on Kade.

“I didn't even really want to talk to him, at first. But he talked to my uncle. I don't know what exactly they talked about, but I guess my Uncle August told him the best way to win me over, because he came back with ice cream for me.” He managed a slight laugh at that, which was echoed by some of the people watching him. Kade's lips lifted into the smallest hint of a smile.

Florian took in a shuddering breath before continuing, “And as much as I wanted to be mad at him, or stay away from him, I couldn't. He was earnest and... and kind to me, even though I had been a jerk to him at first. It didn't take much before I knew he loved me. That everything he did was because he

cared about me, even though I was upset about it. And the way he talked about the Veil, the Winter Court... He made me want to help this place I didn't know, these people I'd never met. All of you. I thought we would have more time.”

His voice hitched at that, and he looked down at his feet, willing himself not to cry. The air was hushed and still, as if they were all holding their breath, waiting for him to continue.

“I thought we would have more time,” he repeated, when he had sufficient control over his voice. “I thought he would be able to teach me what it meant to be a king. I thought we would be able to save the Veil together. I thought I might be able to really have a dad for the first time in my life. But...” He hesitated, and looked back over at Kade. “But even though those things won't happen, I'll honor his memory. I'm going to keep doing my best to work toward his goal, because it became my goal. I know he would be proud, and I want all of you to be able to be proud of me, too. I—I hope...”

The words wouldn't come. He didn't know how to put the burning ache he felt from the bottom of his ribs all the way to the tips of his fingers into words. Instead, he shook his head and concluded weakly, “I hope one day you can all see me as even half the man he was. Thank you.”

He hurried back to his seat, keeping his eyes on the ground, so he wouldn't have to look any of the other fae in the eye. Kade wrapped an arm around his shoulders as he sat down, but Florian kept his eyes on his feet. Neither said anything, even as Tatiana's wavering voice started to speak.

Florian didn't hear anything of what Tatiana said, only the pounding of blood in his ears. His body felt empty, his thoughts blank... Then Kade was gently shaking his shoulder, snapping him out of the trancelike, mind-numbing state he was in.

“Come on,” he murmured, helping Florian to his feet. “It's over now.”

Several people had gathered to help them carry the casket from the event hall down to the graveyard, which lay a bit downhill from the castle. It was almost unbearably silent as they made their way down the stone path, the only noise the crunching of footsteps behind them. Florian kept his eyes on Kade's back and focused on the feeling of the heavy metal handle in his hand. Each step carried him further and further away from the life he could have had.

When they arrived at the graveyard, the plot had already been dug, and all that was left was to put the casket in the ground. Florian stepped away as some of the other fae—one he recognized as a merchant who was something of a spokesman for the townspeople of the Winter Court, the rest still unknown to him—lifted the casket with their magic and carefully lowered it into the ground. Kade stood next to him, so close their arms were pressed together.

“For King Jerah, ruler of the Winter Court,” Tatiana said, her voice trembling. “May his spirit return to the cycle of the old magic, and carry on forever.”

“The old magic remembers,” a hundred voices answered, and Tatiana took the first shovelful of dirt and set to burying him.

When it was done, they stood awkwardly near the entrance gate of the graveyard for a little while, Florian doing his best to thank each person who came up to him with their condolences. As overwhelmed as he felt, he thought they only wanted him to know they cared. Or maybe they were sizing him up now that he was king. He didn't know.

Kade remained a silent sentinel next to him, and Tatiana on his other side. Eventually, they were the only ones left. Everyone else had started heading up to the castle, where a small dinner service was being held.

Florian didn't realize that Tatiana had moved to hug him until he was already in her arms.

“You did so well,” she was murmuring, and though her shoulders remained resolutely still, he could hear the tears in her voice. “I'm so proud of you. He would have been so proud.” He nodded, and gingerly hugged her back.

They walked back to the castle together, their steps slow and quiet along the dirt path closest to the graveyard, until it became the stone path that led up stone steps. When they were inside, Tatiana turned to him in the foyer, and they stood uncertainly for a long moment.

Finally, she smiled weakly at him and said, “I don't think I can manage going to the dinner just yet. I'm going to go lay down for a bit. Will you boys be alright without me?”

“Yeah,” Florian said hoarsely, and next to him Kade nodded. A look of gratitude crossed her eyes, but she only nodded in affirmation before turning to go. They were alone.

“Florian,” Kade said softly, turning to face him and hesitantly taking one of his hands into his own. “Do you want to go to the dinner?”

He shook his head, looking down at the floor. Why did everything still feel so distant?

“Okay,” Kade was still murmuring. Florian could feel his eyes, even though he wasn't looking at him. “What do you want to do?”

“I don't know,” Florian said, and it was as if the words were the last thing holding him together, because as soon as they were out of his mouth he burst into tears. Kade pulled him into his arms, and Florian wailed into his chest, the raw sound echoing through the empty stone chamber.

“I know,” Kade whispered, holding Florian tighter to him and rubbing his back. “I know.”

He wept until his eyes throbbed and his throat burned, until his legs were shaking so badly that he would have fallen if Kade weren't still holding him. His words came in starts and stops, dissolving into more tears the first few times he tried to speak.

"I want—I want to go home," he choked out. Even as he said it, he knew Coral Shore was no longer his home, not really, and the thought stuck bitterly in the back of his throat. "I want to go—to go back to Coral Shore."

"We have to stay for the coronation next week," Kade murmured, ever the pragmatist.

"After," he cried. "After that." He felt Kade nod against the top of his head, ruffling his hair.

"Okay," he agreed. "We can go after it's over." They stood in the foyer until Florian's breathing slowed enough that he felt he could stand on his own. They were still alone when he pulled away, though with how much the castle echoed, he was sure there must have been someone somewhere who overheard.

"Let's go," he said, his voice rasping. Kade nodded and followed as Florian turned and walked away, aimlessly at first until he ended up near Jerah's study.

He entered on a whim. The large map of the Veil was still unrolled on the largest table in the center of the library; Florian went to stand over it, leaning his trembling frame against the sturdy table.

"After we go back to Earth," he murmured, not looking to see if Kade had followed. "Let's go to your family next."

There was a beat of silence, then Kade asked uncertainly, "Why?"

"Look," he said, and placed a finger on the map. "One of the Arrows is pretty close to the wolf kingdom. We can go there and get it. I just... I don't want to be in the Winter Court for a while."

"Florian..." Kade started, then trailed off with a sigh. "I thought we were going to talk to the hag next."

Florian scowled. "We still can. After. I just... I just need a break from here. From all this." He looked up through his eyelashes at Kade, who was hovering in the doorway. "Please?"

From across the library, Kade's expression softened.

"Alright," he agreed, taking a few steps closer to Florian. "I suppose I couldn't tell you no anyway. You're the king now, after all."

Despite the jumble of feelings that the words still elicited in him, Florian managed to shoot him a wry smile.

"You'd still come even if you didn't want to?" he pressed, reaching for him. They embraced, Kade squeezing him tightly.

“I pledged everything to Jerah, and now to you,” he said softly. “I’ll follow you to the end of the Veil.”

“The wolf kingdom it is, then,” Florian murmured, pressing his face into Kade's chest. Though everything felt tumultuous and uncertain, Kade's arms were secure, strong. As long as Kade was with him, he could face it. “And the next Golden Arrow.”

TO BE CONTINUED

AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading *The Changeling Prophecy*!

To receive the prequel novella *The Endless Summer*, [please sign up for my email newsletter here](#).

The Endless Summer is a secret history of the Veil. This 14k word novella provides additional information about the mysterious figure of Queen Soleil of the Summer Court and takes place approximately two hundred years before the events of *The Changeling Prophecy*. It is not required reading to understand the events of The Chronicles of the Veil, but just provides some extra backstory for fun.

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Lionel Hart (he/him) is an indie author of MM fantasy romance and paranormal romance. Currently, he resides in north San Diego with his husband and their dog. For personal updates and new releases, follow the links below.

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