

PRINCE OF BLADES



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Prince of Blades
by Kay Thatcher

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PRINCE OF BLADES

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Chapter One

Eric was dead if the Fae caught them. It had taken months of planning for Eric, Garret, and Elena to escape tonight. A stray branch snuck past Eric's hand and whipped across his freckled face. Tears welled in his eyes, and he groaned from the sting. Another raked through his brown curls, ripping out some of his hair. Despite that, he pushed his body forward, leading them through the dark and howling forest.

"How much further?" Elena panted.

She was almost a full foot shorter than Eric and Garret with a frame thin from malnourishment, so it was difficult for her to keep up. Never mind having to navigate these eerie woods in the dead of night. She wiped sweat off her face in between gasped breaths.

"Only a little further." Garret slowed to match Elena's stride and patted her back. "We can't slow down. Not when we're so close."

Garret was one of Lord Aimar's most recent purchases, and it wasn't long before the giant of a man was enamored with Elena's unbreakable good nature. Garret did his best to shield Elena from most of Lord Aimar's sick pleasures and for that Eric was sure Elena would be forever grateful.

The three of them had banded together and did their best to endure the sick Fae lord's games that were little more than exercises in his preferred torture. A shiver ran down Eric's back at the thought of his nights with the lord. Those nights were a small price to pay if it meant Eric's survival, but that didn't make every night any easier.

Eric hardened his jaw then, ignored the burning in his lungs and tried to focus on the darkness in front of them. Tonight was the night they were going to be free of their lord and this hell.

Even the trees grew differently in the Fae world, their knotted bark and twisted branches changed by the magic the Fae breathed into the earth. They grew like mountains with their roots sprawled and broken through the ground. Everything about the Fae world made it feel like it was a place someone never left alive.

It made it that much harder to escape this place. So when a voice called to Eric, deep in the woods, it was sudden and crippling.

Follow me.

The voice that was not his own, deep and melodic, coaxed him. It was the exact same kind of feeling whenever Lord Aimar would use his magic on Eric—make him subservient. His feet skidded to a stop as every fiber in his body went rigid, and then, he relaxed. His thoughts panicked that he was in danger, he needed to run, now, but the rest of his body stayed still, wanting to go in a different direction. Eric didn't want Lord Aimar to find them. Even if the Fae lord didn't kill them for their disobedience, the punishment for running away would be far worse than death. Yet somehow, the voice inside Eric's head wasn't his lord's, but someone else entirely. Eric felt drawn to the voice, which repeated over and over in his head. It made him feel safe.

Then, like walking out of a fog, the voice stopped. As he blinked away the dreamlike voice and came back to reality, the rest of his body was slow to react. At first, Eric had no idea where he was or what he'd been doing until now.

"Hello?" Eric's voice echoed off into the depths of the midnight woods. When there was no response, he hugged his arms across his chest to stop the sudden chill. He waited longer, but there were still only twisted trees that howled and rustled in the night. His brows creased together. Where had that voice come from?

"Eric?"

Eric whirled around and saw Garret and Elena standing behind him, with Elena pressed tightly into Garret's side, likely for warmth. It was unusually cold tonight. Elena stared at him, concern plain on her face.

"Did you hear that?" When they both shook their heads, Eric rubbed the back of his neck. He felt like an ass and he didn't want to worry them for nothing. He forced a smile. "I thought I heard something... but it must have been nothing. We should keep moving."

Garret paused, his arm constricted around Elena's shoulders, and gave Eric a warning look. Its meaning was clear—Eric needed to keep it together. He was right, there wasn't time to stop like this in the middle of an escape. Not for words in the wind at least.

Eric glanced behind them one last time, to make sure no one was following them, before they took off further away from the Fae world. They just had to keep going west and they were sure to find an old Fae Path. As long as they did that, they'd be alright.

Eric's cold fingers rubbed away sweat and dark brown curls sticking to his forehead. The wounds on his body throbbed. Not long after they started running again, another broken tree branch dug into his arm and raked his skin. Eric sucked in a sharp breath and glanced down at the fresh cut on his forearm. It could have been the lack of moonlight, but his blood looked darker, black almost. He blinked away his paranoia. It was just a shallow cut, and he'd made it through much worse injuries than this one as Lord Aimar's favorite toy.

Just keep going. Eric calmed himself. *This is our chance to be free. To see my brother again.*

With renewed hope, Eric focused on the rest of the inky black woods that yawned open before them. That was when a sick feeling blossomed in Eric's stomach. Abruptly, trees that groaned in the wailing wind stopped. The only sounds right now were their footsteps and heavy breaths, which thundered like beasts in the enchanted woods' calm. Goose bumps rose on his arms as he controlled the rising panic. This silence was worse than the darkness filling the air. His tattered leather boots were soaking wet and filled with mud at this point, squishing with every step.

Eric's chest started to feel tight, like there wasn't enough air, until he couldn't breathe altogether. This was a terrible time to have a panic attack. Blood rushed through his ears and his pulse hammered at his throat. He wanted to scream but he couldn't stop, not again. He couldn't do that to Garret or Elena. Shit, what was he going to do?

Garret's large hand clamping down on Eric's shoulder was heavy enough to jar him to the immediate present. He held Eric with his gaze as they slowed to a jog. He knew Eric was having a panic attack and couldn't lead but he knew better than to say anything out loud. Garret gave Eric one curt nod, then pushed past him, Elena close behind.

Eric let out a broken and unsteady breath as he slowed down even further to a walk. He just needed a minute to get his breathing under control and he could catch back up. It was hard as hell to exert himself this much, since Lord Aimar gave them little more than scraps to live off of. The weaker they were, the less of a fight they could put up. It gave him pleasure that his slaves kept their minds sharp even when their bodies failed.

The anger of his memories, night after night in Lord Aimar's bed, was enough to battle the panic that churned in Eric's veins. His hatred of the

malicious Fae lord was stronger than his fear. He straightened and closed his eyes, before sucking in a long breath that filled his lungs.

With an exhale, Eric bolted into the night again, ready to catch up to Garret and Elena. It shouldn't take him long since Garret probably slowed himself down on purpose so Elena could keep up. The two of them made Eric believe that he could find someone after they got back to the real world and fall in love. At least he hoped. He didn't know many guys that were into their partners being covered in scars and abused.

Not that any of that mattered right now. He needed to focus on getting the hell out of these woods and through that old Fae Path. Eric's stomach knotted when he thought about how long he had to kiss Gael's ass, Lord Aimar's only Fae servant, to trick the location of the old Fae Path out of him. That purple-skinned freak liked pain almost as much as Lord Aimar did. The only difference was Gael enjoyed the beatings he took from his lord.

Follow me. Don't falter.

Shit. It was that voice inside Eric's head again. He knew in his bones that he shouldn't listen to the voice. Yet, every muscle compelled him towards the voice, which was away from Garret and Elena.

Follow me.

Eric's arm started to burn, but he was too enamored by the voice to notice. Now he understood what it probably felt like to hear a siren's call. He had no idea what the strange and cryptic words meant, but he could *feel* the pull of its voice in his body.

Follow me.

The voice grew deeper, more commanding, as it spoke to Eric. It bellowed at him, drowning out all other sounds around him. Eric was helpless against whatever was happening and obeyed the voice as its words repeated in his mind until it grew and became a melodic trance. His thoughts were a fog as he followed the voice further into a dark corner of the woods, away from the Fae Path and escape. The dread and exhaustion all but drifted away and left only the desire to do as the voice said. He wouldn't hesitate. He would take the dark crown. He would claim the thorns.

As quickly as the siren call beckoned, it disappeared. Again. Eric spun to look around and his heart plummeted. He had no idea where he was or

how long he'd been walking in the wrong direction. He didn't recognize this part of the enchanted woods. How far had Garret and Elena gotten without him? Were they at the old Fae Path already? Did they go through without him? Every fear lodged at the back of his mind came racing forward and gripped him. Then a scream rang out in the night, clear and bloodcurdling.

No.

His feet moved before he could think and he sprinted towards where the scream came from. Eric's teeth gnashed together. That scream sounded feminine, like Elena. God, he hoped nothing happened to her. He hoped they didn't get caught because of him. Please let them be alright. Lord Aimar must have woken and realized his slaves and a certain prized ring were missing and alerted the soldier patrolling the city tonight.

The only thing that could be used against magic was other magic, which humans didn't have. It was a small miracle that Eric had been able to sneak that imbued ring from Lord Aimar's room tonight, but they needed it to escape. Eric told himself the fresh scars along his chest and pelvis were worth it for that ring. Eric cursed in between breaths. If the lord had alerted the patrol soldiers, they would have noticed the fluctuation of magic along the woods that skirted the city's edge.

Then the unmistakable noise of whistling metal cut through the air. Whoever was chasing them had caught up. Eric prayed Garret and Elena were alright, even after his stomach constricted.

Another scream ripped through the forest, closer this time, before it cut off abruptly. God, no, this couldn't be happening. Everything was going wrong and they were so close. Eric veered towards the cry of agony, his only plan to try and keep them all alive. A broken root in the ground caught Eric's foot, sending him hurtling headfirst into the earth. The sound of bone crunching filled his head, followed by the sharp pain of his nose breaking. Blood poured from his nostrils and onto his dirtied black clothes. Through a pained groan, he rolled onto his back and struggled to breathe through his mouth. The metallic taste of blood drowned out any hope of sensing magic now.

He didn't have time to waste and stumbled to his feet, hanging his head as he fought to gain his balance. Blood dripped from his face steadily now.

Damn it. Eric cursed and heaved himself forward.

He could barely manage a jog now that his body was wrapped in injuries. Each breath came out in ragged hitches. Luckily, he was going slow enough that he saw the next root that jutted from the dirt and was able to avoid it. Until he realized it wasn't a tree root at all. It was a body.

Darkened blood already soaked into the dirt of the forest floor around Elena's broken body. The bones in her leg had torn through her clothes and her jaw hung from her face by the tendons. Whoever found her preferred the spear, since there was a gaping hole torn through her chest. The back of Eric's throat burned as tears welled. He'd spent over two years trapped in Lord Aimar's estate with Elena. She was his friend. More than that, she was like family. They all knew what the penalty was for a slave attempting to escape—death, or worse. She had trusted him and put her life at risk tonight. He told Garret and Elena they would get out, he *promised* them he would get them out. Guilt stabbed at his chest and twisted as he fought the urge to sob.

Another hum of metal cut the air nearby. There was no one in sight, but Eric sunk to the ground, his breaths shallow. Where the hell was Garret? He would never leave Elena's side in these horrid woods unless something terrible happened. What could have gone so wrong while Eric was gone? He had no idea how many Fae soldiers were in the pitch black with him. He bit on his fist to keep from screaming, his heart hammering. He forced his mind to keep working, to keep thinking. Garret was still out there somewhere. He couldn't imagine Garret leaving Elena by herself, but it was possible that he managed to find the Fae Path and escape. There was still hope.

The cold touch of metal pressed against Eric's back, where his heart was. Eric froze. The weapon pressed further, slicing through his dirty shirt and nicking his flesh.

"Are there others?" The Fae soldier kept the blade pinned just under Eric's shoulder blade.

If Garret was still out there, then Eric was ready to die to give him a chance to escape. When Eric stayed quiet the Fae soldier kicked his back and knocked him down with so much force he had no time to cushion his fall. His jaw hit exposed roots with a crack the same time his knees bashed into some stray crags hidden amongst the tree roots. Pain jolted through his

arms and legs. Dark crimson trickled from his broken nose and his head swam.

"Look at me, slave," the Fae commanded.

Careful not to lean into the blade at his back, Eric was slow to turn and face the soldier. He didn't dare to try and stop the gash along his chin from bleeding, unless he wanted to chance losing his hand. As he cast his bleary hazel eyes up, the world seemed to tilt.

Behind Eric, with a smooth metallic spear still pointed at him, stood a single Fae. The Fae had Garret by the neck, his friend's head hanging at a wrong angle. Garret's clothes were stained almost black and he wasn't moving or breathing. Eric understood now why there weren't other Fae around—they didn't need to be, not with a member of the Imperial Family hunting them.

The notoriously cold and ruthless prince, Cithrel Aloneth, looked down at Eric as if he was nothing more than an animal.

"How did you escape, human?"

Eric didn't answer, he was so stunned. Seeing any of the Imperial Family in passing was entirely different than being this close to them. They didn't look like the other Fae. High-born Fae resembled something closer to divinity, gods among the mortals. Their unparalleled beauty hid the fact that they were the most dangerous monsters of all. The Imperial Family was the oldest bloodline in existence, as far as Eric knew.

The fourth prince of Alonetha had flawless golden marble skin, with a complicated arrangement of platinum blond braids that hung past his shoulders. Shimmering silver armor hugged his body like a second skin. Gnarled looking roots decorated the fine metal. Somehow, it only made him look more muscular than he already was. The nightmare known as the Prince of Blades, who commanded the Imperial Army, was magnificent.

Deep blue eyes bore into Eric's plain hazel ones, full of killing intent. His grip on Garret loosened and Eric's friend fell to the ground with a sickening thud. Eric couldn't breathe or bring himself to look at Garret's lifeless body slumped face down in the dirt. The fourth prince's spearhead moved and touched the skin at Eric's throat, a shallow cut on his skin. His throat bobbed.

"Answer me. Now." The spearhead twisted against his throat. A trickle of blood ran down his neck, staining the collar of his filthy shirt.

"I stole from my lord, Your Highness." Eric said. The words came out in a rush. Both of his friends were dead, and if his only two choices were dying here or going back to Lord Aimar, his choice was easy.

When Eric was abducted by the Fae, he had still been in shock when he was bought and sold as a slave to Lord Aimar. Nothing could have prepared Eric for the countless nights of being beaten and then enthralled through the Fae lord's magic to pleasure him. It was that easy for his lord to take away Eric's free will and make him subservient, make him do whatever Lord Aimar wanted.

"Who is your lord?" the prince asked.

The gash on Eric's arm started to burn even more than before, a lot more than a shallow cut ever should. Between the gash on his jaw and his broken nose, Eric's skull was pounding. He blinked hard in an effort to keep himself upright.

"Lord Aimar, Your Highness." Eric's breath huffed through clenched teeth. The blood was finally starting to clot in his nose, making his breathing even more labored.

The Prince stared at him, apathetic. This was it for Eric, he'd be dead in a second. This was better than going back to that estate where Lord Aimar no doubt waited, furious and eager to punish him.

"Are there others?" the Fae Prince asked again. "Answer and I'll let your death be quick."

Eric hung his head. "No."

The blade groaned under the Prince's tightening grip and Eric felt the lump in his throat swell. His arm felt like it was on fire now and it was all Eric could do to grit his teeth and not scream. It would be over soon. After five years of unspeakable nightmares, it would all stop.

"A runaway and a thief." The fourth prince raised his weapon. "Your punishment is death, slave."

Light surged out from where the Fae Prince held his spear in the air. In an iridescent flourish, his spear vanished and in its place a thin sword appeared that came to a curve at its point. The metal gleamed despite the darkness that ebbed from the forest. Eric didn't want to look away, but the skin on his arm felt like it was being flayed with fire. With a sharp hiss, Eric doubled over in pain and clutched at his forearm. Through his pained

expression, Eric saw charred black markings that looked like they were burned onto his skin.

As the Prince's muscles flexed and he brought down his blade, everything moved at once. Eric threw out his arm in an instinctual gesture just as the burning climaxed and the woods exploded into a living nightmare.

Thorns that looked like burnt metal surged out of thin air from Eric's hand splayed wide. The color drained from his sight, leaving everything in black and white. Dark thorns wrapped around the arm that held the prince's sword inches from Eric's face and constricted like a coiling snake. Shock and anger now plain on the Prince's face, he struggled to fight against the thorns that converged on him and overpowered him.

The ethereal voice called out once again. *The dark crown is yours. My thorns are yours to command.*

Nothing felt real as Eric watched rotted thorns pour from his hand and wrap themselves around the Fae Prince. The gorgeous Prince thrashed and struggled in vain. The black thorns trapped him as another tightened across his face and choked the Fae Prince. Droplets of pearlescent blood dripped onto the vines where the thorns cut into the alluring prince. He was going to suffocate or be eviscerated, whichever came first.

The sight of the prince nearing death was enough to bring a smile to Eric's face. Finally, the Fae would pay for all the horrible and monstrous things they had done. The awful way they treated Eric. He was going to kill the Fae prince. But as soon as he gave in to the dark thoughts that lingered in the corner of his mind, the thorns unfurled their death grip on the prince and disintegrated into dust. Back in his own skin, Eric fell on all fours and gasped for air. Color seeped back into his vision with each frantic inhale. His entire body was shaking as he stared down at his left forearm.

Eric's blood dripped down from where the thorns materialized and just below it were black scorch marks. The marks themselves wound around his forearm like a crown of ghoulish spikes. This couldn't be real. It had to be his imagination. He reached out to touch it, his shaking fingertips running along the marking. The mark was still hot to the touch.

"It's not possible."

Eric's head turned mechanically to look at the prince's face. His wounds from the decayed thorns had already healed, but Cithrel had paled. It wasn't

just Eric who couldn't believe what was happening. The fourth prince was looking at the marking on Eric's arm with an intense gaze. Eric's chest swelled and he held his breath as Cithrel approached him and took Eric's arm in his hand. He turned it over slowly, studying every inch of the marking. The longer he looked at the mark, the unhappier he seemed to get. Eric watched as the Prince's face went from one of disbelief to grim anger.

A second later, he tossed Eric's arm away like it was the most disgusting thing he'd ever seen. Cithrel turned his back to Eric and his voice was low and dominating. "Get up, slave."

Eric stared at the ground. It was like his thoughts were broken as he struggled to piece what just happened together. Even as he replayed it in his head, he still didn't understand. What the hell was happening to him? How was he still alive?

"*Get up*," Cithrel repeated through bared teeth. "You just made an attempt on the life of a member of the Imperial Family. It's time to go back, criminal."

Those words caught Eric's attention and his head snapped up to look at the prince. The flawless Fae prince looked murderous. Eric clambered to his feet without protest, but his pulse thundered. The prince said they were going back.

The world fell away from Eric as Cithrel strode over to him and grabbed him by his unmarked arm. He didn't miss the way the prince glanced at the marking again. Eric swallowed hard but said nothing.

Questions swirled in his mind. What the hell was the marking on his arm and where did it come from? What was going to happen to him now? He was a slave that not only tried to escape after stealing from his lord, but he'd just tried to kill a member of the Imperial Family.

Eric let himself be led back to the city where all his nightmares lived, certain of only one thing. He'd done the impossible—he was able to use magic.

Chapter Two

Neither one of them spoke, except for the occasional bark at Eric to hurry up whenever he stumbled over roots and thickets. It was hard enough to leave Elena and Garret's bodies behind like that, without a second thought, let alone that he was hurrying back to the city he never wanted to see again. His friends were just abandoned there, left to be consumed by nature and decay, and it made Eric sick. He looked down at the marking on his arm again. That marking branded onto his skin was what kept him alive, at least for now. Cold sweat clung to the back of Eric's neck and his chin throbbed. His knee and broken nose ached with the thud of each step he took.

Once the prince noticed Eric could barely manage a walk, he stopped dragging Eric behind him by the wrist. He never said whether or not he was taking Eric back to Lord Aimar or not. Eric chewed on his lip, unsure if he wanted to know, but after another few minutes of being left alone with his thoughts he couldn't ignore the burning question.

"Are you taking me back to Lord Aimar, Your Highness?"

"Keep walking." The Fae prince didn't slow down or even turn around. *So much for that idea.* "Yes, Your Highness."

He did his best to hide his own misery as he walked, so he was surprised to see that the Fae prince had stopped and was looking at Eric with glazed-over eyes.

"How long have you been the lord's property?"

Eric blinked. That was not what he expected to come from the prince's mouth. Cithrel stood there waiting for an answer. The question was so unexpected that Eric answered without thinking.

"Just over five years, Your Highness."

"Labor slave?"

There were several different kinds of slaves in the Fae world, the most common one being a labor slave. After he was abducted and broken, Eric was trained for hard labor. He wasn't ready to become a sex slave when he was bought by Lord Aimar.

Eric bit the side of his cheek in an effort to hide his scowl. He didn't want to answer the prince's question, but he was sure he'd be punished for

not answering. The words were acrid on his tongue. "I was his pleasure slave, Your Highness."

When he said the words out loud, it reminded him how the Fae lord used his magic to touch Eric every night and then force Eric to pleasure Lord Aimar against his will. The scent of the lord's magic haunted him. It was all he could smell when he was compelled to let Lord Aimar plunge into him night after night—then beaten for entertainment after. Eric never let his tears fall when Lord Aimar had his way with him. His teeth gnashed together as shame and loathing heated his face.

Eric kept his head down and didn't say anything else to Cithrel. It wasn't until the prince finally broke the silence that he looked up. "You don't look like a pleasure slave."

His hands clenched into fists at his side, but Eric kept his expression even. "I wasn't purchased as one, but it was the lord's preference."

He was going to throw up. Even after being a slave for years, he couldn't stomach talking about it because then Eric had to acknowledge what his life had become.

Cithrel's blue eyes darkened a little as he gave Eric one last assessing look. Then he spun on his heel and continued forward without another word. Eric worked his jaw but said nothing as he followed the prince. It was humiliating to talk about his life as a sex slave.

Eric needed to think of something else, anything else, to take his mind off of Lord Aimar. He found himself studying the prince. The way his intricate braids hung past his armor, the fact that the gnarled-looking roots and vines that decorated the front of Cithrel's breastplate were mirrored on the back.

His gaze shifted to the Fae prince's broad shoulders and the emerald-green cloak that hung off his back. Cithrel was a Fae monster who decided whether Eric lived or died, but he couldn't ignore the fact that the prince was gorgeous. Every inch of him was perfection, more so than other high-born Fae. There was something dominating and alluring about the prince that Eric was drawn to. Until he noticed the dirtied edges of the prince's cloak.

At the bottom of the cloak were splatters of mud and blood. Elena and Garret's blood. His body started to shake as emotions filled him. Guilt for being the only survivor. Rage that there was nothing Eric could do, even

now as he was led back to the city of Alonetha. And sadness. Deep, sinking, sadness that it was all for nothing.

The tears that rolled down his cheeks were silent as he mourned them. Eric was fighting to get back to his brother, Bryce, and to his old life. He wanted to graduate college, he wanted to fall in love with someone, own a weird breed of dog and grow old together. Elena and Garret wanted their own freedom. Eric couldn't stop seeing their faces, hearing their voices in his head. It felt like he was already going mad.

"Move faster," the prince ordered on cue.

The aching throughout Eric's body though was dizzying as he picked up his pace as best he could. He hadn't eaten anything since dusk and he guessed the sun was now rising. On top of that, his fractured nose made his headache worse by the second. He wasn't sure how much more he had left in him. The pounding in his head echoed in his chest as the dizziness worsened, even though he could see the glimmer of sunlight. A clearing.

The pounding in Eric's chest grew erratic. The city was just beyond that clearing and he couldn't imagine what was in store for him. His legs gave out and he tipped headfirst towards the ground. The air rushed from his chest as something hard as iron caught him from falling. Eric's cheeks heated as he looked up, but only slowly. Every muscle in Cithrel's face went taut with irritation.

"Get up," the prince said, though Eric could feel the warmth of Cithrel pressed to his chest. "I won't warn you again, slave."

The hardened tone was enough for Eric to clamber to his own feet and out of the prince's touch. He dipped his head, both in submission and to hide the flames that ran up his neck and face. "I'm very sorry, Your Highness. I won't inconvenience you again."

Cithrel didn't say anything else, and Eric heard him turn away and start towards the clearing again. The thumping in Eric's chest was twice as fast as he wanted it to be, still feeling the phantom touch of the prince on his chest. He stared after him a moment longer before falling into a disjointed stride behind him. Eric stopped any other thoughts in their tracks and reminded himself he still had to face punishment for multiple crimes he had committed. It was a miracle he was still alive.

The sputtering of Eric's heart worsened as they broke through the clearing and overlooked the city. Past all the monolithic trees carved out of

the forest itself was Alonetha, the capital to the Alonethan Empire. An empire that was older than Rome and that Cithrel was a prince to. Eric swallowed as his chest panged painfully.

The prince didn't wait for Eric and started down the embedded stairs, the steps nothing more than packed down earth, that led down to the city. It took all of Eric's focus to keep himself from falling to his death on these steps. It was over a hundred-foot drop if one slipped from these hillside stairs. If he was going to die in this hell, it wasn't going to be because he fell down stairs.

As they walked, Eric's eyes roved towards the edge of the city where Lord Aimar's estate was. The Adlar family had owned the estate for millennia and now it was run by the sole heir, Lord Aimar. The estate mansion stood out most of all because of the expansive and lavish garden that made up most of his land. The Fae lord particularly enjoyed that show of extravagance.

Then Cithrel stepped on a stray branch on the stairs and it set Eric's heart racing. The sound reminded him of Garret's limp body falling in the dirt. He clenched his jaw and took deep, labored breaths to chase away the haunting sight.

Eric's fear began to spiral out of control when they reached the bottom of the steps and the packed earth led into the city. The Fae prince whirled to face Eric, his cloak billowing behind him and casting a dominating shadow.

"If you try anything, I will ensure your fate will be worse than what you could ever imagine," he said, his tone hard. "Keep your head down and don't speak unless I tell you to."

Eric nodded. He followed behind as the prince's braids swayed with each step.

As they neared the city, the dirt path slowly molded into speckled cobblestones, their edges lined with low-born Fae peddlers selling their wares, each one claiming a stronger connection to the aether than the last.

Aether was the source of all the Fae's and other mythological beings' power. It was what gave them, and now Eric somehow, the ability to use magic. The Fae believed it to be divine and to be given exceptional power was a blessing from the aether itself. It was their logic behind scorning and abusing the low-born Fae, and most of all humans, who had little power or none at all since the aether cursed them.

When a Fae merchant with skin that had been scarred to ribbons caught Eric's gaze, he hissed and began spitting expletives. Eric was quick to look away, but he didn't miss the filthy and bruised boy slave at the merchant's side. Eric's heart ached having to see a kid, who couldn't be more than twelve years old, stolen away and living in this city.

It was a near-impossible reality that he had had to accept as his and hundreds of others' reality. For years, he was unable to come to terms with the fact that he wasn't hysterical and in a mental hospital after his abduction from the real world.

One second, he was hiking up a park trail outside of San Francisco. The next, he was dragged off into the woods. That was all it took for his life to shatter. The memory of scratching bark raking over his mouth and the staggering smell of sap and its acrid taste gave him nightmares, even after five years.

It was then that Eric noticed bright colors out of the corner of his eye and stiffened. Speckled across the tree roots they passed hung offshoots of a plant he hated seeing. Its deep blue buds sagged from its own weight. In other places, the flowers cascaded all over the rooftops and down along the sides of buildings like vines. Bright blue, green, and gold flowers basked in the canopied sunlight. He'd been so preoccupied by the markets he didn't notice they were in front of Lord Aimar's estate.

In a twist of ill-timed coincidence, a Fae walking by Eric shoved him aside like trash and knocked him off balance. Cithrel either didn't notice or didn't care as Eric stumbled and tripped. For the second time this morning, a deft arm lashed out and caught Eric, not letting his already broken nose smash into the earth. As he looked up, his face went ashen. Lord Aimar gazed down at Eric in his arms with his white eyes that made his pupils indistinguishable.

"Where have you been, little pet?" He asked, an awful crook in his lips. His magic crawled over Eric's skin and the scent of acid filled his nose. Eric's stomach turned.

Tousled auburn hair fell forward over buzzed sides, which accentuated the fine points to Aimar's ears. The brightness of his hair made his pure white eyes all the more unsettling. Lord Aimar always made a point of wearing expensive and complicated clothing, as a show of his wealth and to test his slaves. The Fae lord found it pleasing to give his slaves difficult

tasks so he could punish them every time they made mistakes. Today he wore a corseted striped-blue jacket with a high collar and a belt with multiple clasps.

Lord Aimar's gloved grip on Eric tightened, pulling him closer. Eric winced at the hold on him, his eyes wide with terror, and felt his muscles tremble as Lord Aimar's magic seeped under his skin. He felt his ability to fight back being drained from him and leaving him a dehydrated husk.

"Pets must be disciplined when they disobey," he leered, his voice an eerie calm. He pulled Eric close to him and caressed Eric's jawline with his free hand. "Like when they run away. Now look at you, pet. Your face is completely ruined. With all this bruising I can hardly see those delightfully exotic freckles on your face."

Eric's heart pounded in his chest while the rest of his body stood idle. He was a puppet for the Fae lord to play with as he saw fit. Aimar turned and dragged Eric behind him as he headed towards his estate. This couldn't be happening to him right now. It couldn't be real. His eyes fell on the black leather boots Aimar wore. Its criss-crossed laces looked like they would take hours to tie and untie. His whole body trembled, unable to escape the lord's hold on him.

Another hand clamped down on Eric's shoulder. It was enough to make even Lord Aimar stop in his tracks. The fourth prince stood with his grip on Eric, his frigid and indifferent gaze turned on Aimar. Abruptly, the pressure in the air lightened and the compulsion he felt in his mind vanished, returning Eric's will to himself.

"What are you doing?" Cithrel kept his hand on Eric.

"My Prince," Aimar replied, bowing automatically. Eric saw with petty satisfaction that the Fae lord looked nervous. "I was merely collecting my property. This slave stole from his master, and then tried to run away. I have to punish him for this, of course."

Eric's mind recoiled in disgust. He knew what kind of punishment faced him if he went with Lord Aimar. His nails dug into his palms, not wanting to move when both high-born Fae had their hands on him.

"I was on border patrol last night with my soldiers," Cithrel said as if Lord Aimar hadn't spoken at all, "and I was the one to capture this slave." Then the fourth prince tilted his head and eyed Aimar's hand that was still

wrapped around Eric like a hungry serpent not ready to part with its meal. "Is it not my right as *your* prince to punish this slave?"

There was one weakness the Fae had, if it could even be considered a weakness. They were unable to lie. Everything Cithrel said was the truth, and Eric was positive that the Imperial Family would have been taught from a young age how to twist words to avoid the truth while forcing it out of others, like the question he just asked Lord Aimar.

Aimar's grip on Eric loosened, fighting to control his anger. He knew he had no right to disobey the fourth prince and his favorite slave was about to be taken from him. In answer, the prince pulled Eric close to him and out of the Fae lord's touch entirely.

"It would be my honor, my Prince." Aimar put his hand over his chest but Eric saw the lord's white eyes darken faintly. Then he gave Cithrel a big show of emotion. "But I wonder where my other two slaves are. If you've punished them, then their fate was fitting, but you see, all three of them were expensive. To lose that much property, well, that's quite a sum of money, my Prince."

Eric's blood turned to ice. The countless scars that marked Eric's skin were an unbearable reminder that he was just property to the Fae lord. Elena and Garret were left to rot in the Wilder Woods and Lord Aimar had the nerve to be bartering with the prince.

"I wonder why the Imperial Merchant has so much difficulty keeping his slaves under control." Cithrel's tone went flat as his gaze flicked from Eric and back to Aimar. "Especially when you know how valuable they are."

Lord Aimar's eyes darted to Eric and narrowed. He held Eric with his gaze, his brow low. The Fae lord looked calm, but Eric knew his patience was threadbare by now and his pride was dashed. Aimar was furious. Good. "An error on my part, Your Highness."

Eric thought Aimar was going to choke on those words, admitting he was the one in the wrong. Speaking the exposed truth was something all Fae hated being cornered into. Despite that, Lord Aimar recovered quickly and straightened his high collar and smoothed back his wavy hair.

"I do hope you'll forgive me, though, for insisting on compensation, my Prince." Aimar said through honeyed words and his face regretful. "That slave in particular is quite precious to me."

Bile rose and burned in Eric's throat at what the lord said. The hazel in Eric's eyes dulled as he looked down at Lord Aimar's hands. His shoulders went stiff as he remembered all the horrible ways Aimar had touched him with those hands, with those talon-like nails.

"This slave shall be judged by your prince, the commander of the Imperial Army, and punished accordingly," Cithrel said, the blue in his eyes hardening. "Whatever that judgement may be, rest assured, Lord Aimar, you shall be compensated as the empire sees fit."

The dissatisfaction was plain on Aimar's face, but there was nothing he could do or say once the Fae prince gave his word. The lord took a step back and lowered his head in front of Cithrel, likely to hide his rage.

"Of course, my Prince," Aimar said as he rose and met Eric's face again. His white eyes narrowed as a broad smile covered his face.

Eric blanched but kept perfectly still, thankful that at least he wasn't returning to the Adlar estate. Aimar didn't take his eyes off Eric even when Cithrel turned Eric away and pushed him forward, motioning for him to start back up the cobblestone street. It still felt as if he was being watched. Against his better judgement, he looked back over his shoulder and saw that Lord Aimar was still staring after them. The white-eyed devil flashed his teeth in a wide grin and waved. Eric jerked his head back around and moved in disjointed steps, regretting his choice to look back instantly.

Everyone gave them a wide berth the rest of the way up the cobblestone streets. No one knew what to make of the fourth prince taking a battered human slave back to the palace with him. Eric met the eyes of other human slaves with hollowed gazes before they shrunk away behind their Fae masters. They all looked disheveled and defeated, making the sting of their pitying glances hurt that much more.

As they walked up the streets, the closer they got to the palace, the nicer the buildings that surrounded them got. At some point all he saw were the high-born nobility, with their low-born Fae servants in tow. There weren't any human slaves in sight, certainly not this close to the palace, since they were aether-cursed.

Nobility murmured and hissed insults at Eric as he passed, while several others bowed and placed their hands on their hearts as Cithrel passed. Shame warmed Eric's cheeks but he kept his head low and said nothing. It

wasn't until the Alonethan Palace towered over Eric's head and blotted out the sun that he looked up.

Every piece and every building annex were literally part of the trees at the palace. Roots, stone, earth, and flowers thrived and completely integrated with the architecture. Efficient and straightforward structures reminiscent of Greece mixed with the extravagance and intricacies of medieval Europe. All of the expansive glass was decorated or colored by the wildflowers that grew within the palace walls. The trees themselves were what made it all look enchanting—they were so otherworldly that they formed a living cage over the palace, protecting it from the rest of the world. He knew better now than to fall for its beauty. It made his stomach twist every time he looked at it. Something so beautiful was a lie. It housed true horrors behind all its whimsy.

The palace had several twisting spires with tree roots growing in chaotic swirls around them. Each spire was adorned with something that looked like somewhere between stone and blanket flowers. Flowers that didn't care about the lives they swallowed.

Cithrel was inexplicably next to Eric then, his calloused hand wrapped around Eric's thin arm like a heavy manacle. "Not a word," he warned as they approached multiple palace knights on guard duty in front of the monolithic Darkwood palace gates. Eric nodded and dipped his head. He didn't have a death wish now that he was on palace grounds.

"Prince Commander." Two Fae guards pounded their fists on their chests in salute and bowed. Eric chanced a glimpse of the guards and saw that they both eyed him with their lips pulled back in disgust, but said nothing. "Welcome back from patrol."

The light struck Cithrel at an angle that made his already hard features look intimidating. He gave the guards an indecipherable expression and pulled Eric close to him. "I'm taking this prisoner to the dungeons. Call for the empress, I need to speak with her."

The two Fae guards exchanged looks and shifted on their feet before they answered. "Yes, Prince Commander."

Cithrel hauled Eric away from the guards without another word, making it clear they were dismissed, and headed towards one of the smaller annexes. It was a building where the countless flowers refused to bloom and the putrid smell of decay wafted—the dungeons. Eric swallowed down his

fear and fought to keep his breathing steady. He knew this was where he was headed and was glad it was here rather than Lord Aimar's estate. But it didn't make him feel any safer.

As Cithrel led them through the small stone doorway, the feeling of whimsy and surrealism vanished. The tree roots grew darker until they were all black and rotted. They passed cell after cell, all of which grew fungi and moss, in the dimly lit stone chambers while a sickening yet sweet smell became overpowering. Criminal Fae watched him as they passed, threatening and hissing at him. Some prisoners laid prone or unmoving in their cells, while others wailed and thrashed against their walls. His heart plummeted as they went deeper into the dungeons. Even more unsettling was the absence of other knights as they wound down the twisting stone corridors. His pulse hammered in his throat as they descended, the noxious roots growing thicker on the walls around them.

A cold sweat formed at the back of Eric's neck as they kept walking. If it wasn't for his broken nose, Eric would have long since vomited from the smell. It was overpowering and he still had to cover his mouth to keep himself from being sick. It was clear now that his hopes of escaping were all but destroyed, and his chances of surviving dwindled. They had gone too far into the dungeons to be going anywhere else.

When the fourth prince stopped and turned to face him, Eric felt himself deflate. They were in one of the worst places prisoners and criminals could end up in—the Black Thorn. It was enchanted to hinder a Fae's connection to the aether, which for some severed the connection altogether and was equivalent to losing a limb. For humans, it was far worse. No human that ended up in this place ever came out. The Black Thorn consumed them.

Eric's chest tightened, each thump of his heart pounding. No light reached this place except for a few aether-infused lamps every hundred feet. Between the shadows and the overwhelming smell, Eric already felt frail.

"Consider yourself lucky you're still alive, slave," Cithrel stated.

Eric didn't.

With the flick of his wrist, Cithrel shoved Eric like garbage into a dank and putrid cell. Eric just barely managed to keep his footing as he stumbled into the cell, feeling the instant chill that clung to his skin and bones. He spun to face the prince as a myriad of blackened vines weaved in and out,

knotting themselves together, and trapped Eric inside his cell. The wet and crunching sound they made was nauseating.

Eric could vaguely make out Cithrel from the other side of his cell through the thorns and vines, mostly from the almost white braids that highlighted Cithrel's face. The rugged and atrocious Fae prince gave Eric an apathetic look. "There'll be food if you're not already dead when I return, slave."

Eric's legs were shaking as the prince spoke. He was only able to stand long enough for the prince to leave before collapsing on the ground. Everything about the Black Thorn was overpowering. Whatever insignificant amount of energy Eric had left, this prison had sapped from him.

The entire cell was so dark he could barely see his hands in front of his face. Unfortunately, the sounds of other prisoners' moans and pleading cries carried throughout the dungeons. All of his senses were being assaulted. It was dizzying.

Eric hugged his knees to his chest in an effort to fight off the frigid air in this sunless pit. Cithrel said he would come back, but he never said when. And that was if Eric managed to survive being imprisoned in the Black Thorn, something no human had ever done.

A sob wracked Eric's chest and he tucked his head into his chest as he huddled on the floor. His only friends in this city were dead and now he probably would be too. He was trapped and whatever hope he had was dwindling. Everything that could have gone wrong did.

Eric didn't hold back the tears as his cries muddled in the dark with those of the other prisoners. The Black Thorn was a death sentence.

Chapter Three

Eric couldn't sleep. No more than a day could have passed but it felt like an eternity. Anytime he was able to stomach the grotesque smell and ignore the relentless chill, the other prisoners' screams cut through him. It was impossible to shut them out. No matter how much he tried to ignore them, it was like their wails were just outside his cell.

Some begged for help, others roared that it wasn't their fault, they were innocent, they didn't mean to kill anyone. A select few just pleaded for someone to kill them. At one point, Eric swore he heard the cries coming from the raven vines that trapped him in his cell.

By now, Eric was curled on his side on the floor of the cell. He managed to feel his way to a corner on his hands and knees in an effort to get further from the voices. He didn't have any energy left to get up and walk around. His chin and nose throbbed in tandem with his pulse and his stomach ached for food and water.

Eric's breathing was ragged, his lips dry and splitting, as he wondered when Cithrel would come back for him. It crossed his mind more than once that Cithrel would only come back after he was dead, since it would have still been the truth. Eric's bottom lip quivered at the very real possibility.

His bloodshot eyes fell on his arm that had the strange marking branded onto him. He could just manage to make out the marking and turned his thoughts away from the morbid. It was still there, so he must not have imagined it. But it wasn't as if he could try to use any magic, not in the Black Thorn.

He was still staring at the marking on his arm when he heard footsteps approaching. His heart started racing and it took all his strength just to sit up. The sound of boots scraping against the dank stone floors was so sweet Eric could have cried. He crawled and stumbled towards the door, a hysterical smile on his lips.

The figure that appeared outside Eric's cell wasn't Cithrel, though. Eric's smile fell and his mouth hung open, dejected. The figure was much smaller than the fourth prince and noticeably more petite.

"The prince commander arranged to have me tend to you," a female voice said through the dark. "I have food and water for you."

Eric's disappointment was short-lived at the mention of food. He nodded in response and then felt stupid for doing so in the pitch-dark.

As the vines and roots began to recede to create a doorway, Eric cringed at the wet slithering noise they made. Every sound in this prison made him shiver and cower. He didn't know how much longer he could last.

The shadowed figure stepped into Eric's cell, and the dull glow of an aether-infused lamp lit the small space around her. She was a petite Fae in every sense of the word, with skin like bark, and hair like autumn leaves. Even her eyes, black as the thorns in his prison, were somehow amiable. Despite that, every inch of his body was drawn to the tray of food and wooden jug of water that she carried. He half-heartedly registered the leather bag slung across her back.

Eric licked his chapped lips, unable to look away from the sloshing sound of heavenly water. He could already taste it on his lips and feel the cooling sensation slide down his throat. Now that it was in front of him, he realized just how feverish he was.

"My name is Hinni Faeven and I'm the prince commander's attendant," Hinni said as she knelt and placed the tray on the ground for Eric to take. "May I see to your injuries when you're done eating?"

Eric nodded, his hands already on the jug of water. The wood jug was smooth to the touch and he tipped its contents back without ceremony. God, it tasted good. The only noise in his cell was the sound of him gulping down the water. After he drank half the water he panted, his eyes now trained on the plate of food in front of him.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen so much food that was for him. The meat was heaped with butter, as was the portion of root vegetables and thick-cut bread. The only time he even got to see this much food was whenever Lord Aimar forced Eric to feed him. All of this food was for him though.

Eric was ravenous when he tore into the meat before tearing off a piece of bread and shoving that into his mouth too.

Hinni stood by, her hands clasped together, with a patient expression and watched Eric eat in silence. She waited until Eric's plate was licked clean and he was in the middle of finishing the last of the water to speak again. "May I ask your name?"

Eric wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, bloated and stuffed, before he met Hinni's black eyes. He paused. Fae never cared to know someone's name or anything about them, only how useful they were as property. How long had it been since he said his full name out loud? "Eric Becker," he said.

Hinni smiled through the dimly lit cell. "That sounds lovely."

Eric squirmed; he had never heard that about his name before.

"Thanks," he said, feeling a little better after eating.

"May I tend to your wounds now?" She held out her hand in inquiry.

He nodded and shuffled so that he could lean against the damp wall at the back of his cell. She wasn't like any other Fae he had met before. She was pleasant and treated him like a living being. He couldn't help but like her. It made him wonder how she ended up as Cithrel's attendant.

She reached into her leather bag with her tree-like limbs and pulled out some salve and bandages. Strapped at her side was a small vial of liquid. "I'll do my best to be gentle." Then she gestured to his dirty and torn shirt. "If you wouldn't mind taking that off?"

Eric did as she asked and winced where the pieces of his shirt that had stuck to his dried injuries peeled off. He didn't want to look at Hinni's expression now that five years' worth of scars were exposed. His brows fell and he swallowed back the shame, having proof of his abuse on full display.

If Hinni noticed, she didn't make any indication and set to work on his fresh injuries. Eric gritted his teeth as whatever was in the vial seeped into his gashes. It stung worse than hydrogen peroxide, but after a few moments he was rewarded with the relief of numbness. After that she dabbed generous amounts of her salve onto the lesions before bandaging them.

The worst was when she started on his broken nose. He held his head back, and he would have sworn she dumped an entire vial of that painful numbing liquid up his nose. But it still wasn't enough when she started prodding at his crushed bones.

"Shit," Eric hissed between his teeth.

"I'm sorry, Eric." Hinni's fingers applied a little less pressure to his shattered nose. "I'm almost done."

He gave her a faint nod in between rough breaths and closed his eyes. He didn't want to watch her work anymore. It made him feel faint. It was

starting to feel hot in the room, even though this pit was cold and damp. Sweat dripped down from his forehead.

"Here." Eric opened his eyes to see Hinni with an armful of fresh clothes, which she handed to him. "You should change into these right away."

After finally getting to eat and drink something and then sitting through getting treated, Eric was exhausted. His arms shook as he set the clothes down beside him. He could barely keep his eyes open and gave Hinni a weak nod. "Thank you, Hinni."

Concerned black eyes gleamed back at him, which looked bottomless in the dim glow of her lamp. "You still don't look alright."

"I just need some rest." Eric gestured to the dungeons. "It's hard to sleep in this place when you're starving and everyone else is screaming day and night."

Hinni's brows pinched together with worry and she hesitated a moment longer, as if she struggled whether or not to leave. Eric managed a meek smile and that seemed to be enough for her to get back to her feet.

She collected her things. Once on the other side of the cell, she gave him one last concerned look. "I'll come back soon."

Eric waved like they were best friends and by the time the light from her lamp faded, his entire body felt like it was on fire. Except for the places where the salve was applied, his skin was hot to the touch and he couldn't stop sweating. He knew he should change into the clean, and probably warmer, clothes, but his arms refused to listen to him. It was a bad idea to pass out, he knew that, but after being awake for two days straight, he didn't fight it when his eyelids fluttered closed. The last thing he saw were the raven thorns twisting in the walls.

The next thing Eric knew, he was floating. "Am I dead?" he asked. His eyelids were too heavy to open.

"No," a low voice answered.

The feeling of floating ended abruptly when his body was jerked to the side. That was when the rancid smell of the dungeons came rushing back and filled his lungs. His insides curdled. "I'm going to be sick," Eric moaned.

His chest heaved, but nothing came. His insides felt like they were being wrung out, painfully tight and unable to breathe. In between heaves,

he gulped down air, gasping. Heat increased with each breath he took, and he felt his brown curls stick to his slick forehead. Everything was too hot.

"How long has he been like this?" the low voice asked.

Eric heard the murmur of another voice, but he couldn't tell who anyone around him was. His head was getting fuzzy again. He was going to pass out. Just before he fell unconscious again, he felt the intense relief of fresh summer air caress his skin and the warmth of the sun on his eyelids.

When Eric came to again, he knew right away he wasn't in the dungeons. The rags that were his clothes were replaced with soft and expensive-feeling fabric. He was pleased to feel soft sheets over a plush bed instead of ice-cold stone floors or the ratty cots from his slave quarters. The blanket wrapped around him was like a Sunday morning with cloudless skies.

Blinking away the sleep, he sat up in bed and found himself in a brightly-lit and extravagant room. All the walls were a honey-colored wood and at the farthest wall from the bed, with swirling designs of vines ingrained, was an engraved black doe. More importantly, there were massive windows that let light filter in through thin linen curtains.

A weak smile spread on his face. He never realized how much he could miss the sun after being in the Black Thorn for who knows how long.

He moved to get out of bed and stand in the sunbeam, but the world began to spin. As he fell back in bed he noticed he wasn't alone in this room. Seated at Eric's bedside was the fourth prince, Cithrel. Eric felt his cheeks flush for an entirely different reason than his fever.

"You're awake," Cithrel said, matter of fact. His face gave away nothing.

Eric swallowed and cleared his throat. It was odd for the prince to be at his bedside. Actually, this whole situation was odd. He was grateful, but it made no sense for him to be treated so well and be watched over by royalty.

"You did much better than I thought you would." The prince's words pulled Eric from his thoughts.

He frowned. "I don't understand, Your Highness."

Cithrel sat forward in his chair, his tone level. "You should have died right away in the dungeons, yet here you are, Eric."

Oh. The realization was sobering and his gaze fell to his left arm, where the branding was. The blackened marks still covered his forearm.

Then Eric's hazel eyes leveled on the prince. Cithrel had just used his name. He guessed Hinni was the one who told him, but why would the prince care about knowing his name? It left a strange feeling in his stomach that he didn't want to dwell on. There were more important things to worry about, like keeping himself alive.

"This marking has something to do with why I was able to survive the Black Thorn, isn't it?"

Cithrel exhaled, leaning back in his chair. The hue of his eyes looked more gray than blue today. "Unfortunately."

Eric gripped the impossibly soft bedding in his hands. He didn't expect that kind of response from the prince, especially how annoyed he sounded. The next question on his mind was one he didn't want to ask, but knew he had to.

"What's going to happen to me now, Your Highness?" He regretted the words as soon as they left his mouth.

The chair Cithrel was perched on creaked and the prince leaned forward, his hands on the bed, until Eric felt the prince's weight at the edge of the mattress. The unflinching stare was enough to make Eric press his back against the headboard of the bed. Any other words died in Eric's mouth as Cithrel studied him, a stony look that could suck the air from a room.

Eric felt his heart in his throat the longer he was pinned by the Fae prince's piercing gaze. When it was unbearable, the prince finally shoved himself back off the bed and turned away. Whatever he was looking for, he didn't seem happy with the result. Eric's shoulders slumped in a deep exhale.

"It should be impossible," Cithrel muttered, his back to Eric.

He noticed then that the prince wore his braids differently today. Now they were styled in whorls that made them look like woven vines. It made him wonder if the braids were done by hand or with magic.

"What should be impossible, Your Highness?" Eric asked.

Cithrel whirled and looked at Eric like he forgot Eric was even there. The hue of blue softened in his gaze as if stormy waters had suddenly calmed. There was vulnerability there that Eric never saw in the Fae. Then the iron wall fell back down and the prince's blank expression was back.

"Hinni."

The door to the room creaked open and Hinni glided in at the call of her name. She gave Eric a brief nod before she bowed in front of Cithrel. "Yes, Prince Commander?"

"Get him ready. He's been summoned."

"Of course, Prince Commander." Hinni drifted past Cithrel towards Eric. Eric watched as the prince strode out of the room and didn't give Eric a second look.

Worry slithered its way throughout Eric at what Cithrel said. If he was summoned, that could only mean one thing. He was summoned by the empress. The relief of making it out of the Black Thorn alive withered away. He was going to face his punishment for all his crimes and in front of the empress, of all beings.

"Do you need help getting up?" Hinni's kind words pulled Eric back to the present.

He pulled back the covers and slid his legs over the edge of the bed. It wasn't until now that Eric noticed how much better he felt. He could breathe perfectly fine, and his chin didn't ache constantly anymore. With a frown, he felt at his face and realized his injuries were almost completely healed.

"I'm fine," Eric said even though he himself could barely believe it.

Hinni gave him a knowing smile but said nothing more as she led him to the bathroom just off the room they were in. "There's a change of clothes over there when you're done washing up." She leaned in as Eric stared at the luxurious bathroom suite that was larger than his entire living quarters at Adlar estate. "I would say take your time, but the empress wouldn't like to be kept waiting under these circumstances."

Eric cleared the lump in his throat. "I'll be quick." He didn't think it would even be possible to enjoy hot, clean bathing water knowing the empress was waiting for him.

With that, Hinni shut the door behind her with a soft thud. There was almost nothing else Eric wanted more than to put off his judgement and soak in a hot bath. But his nerves were on the verge of fraying, so bathing was more mechanical than anything.

Everything was happening so fast it seemed like a dream, or a hallucination, that only a few days ago he had tried to escape and now he was inside the palace and living better than he ever had, even in the real world with his brother.

Steam billowed off his skin as he toweled off before padding over to the pile of rich-looking garments. It dawned on Eric then that he didn't actually know how long he was in the Black Thorn for, or even how long it had been since he was taken from the dungeons.

All those thoughts were cut off though when he reached for the shirt Hinni set out. The quality of the fabric was nicer even than what Lord Aimar usually wore, and status was everything to that white-eyed devil. It had to be a mistake that he was given such nice clothes. But then again, it might only be because he was to be presentable in front of the ruler of the empire.

"Christ," Eric breathed and ran a hand through his curls to try and calm himself down.

The humidity in the bathroom made it twice as difficult for Eric to finish getting dressed now that his hands were shaking. When he was done, he wore a dark, fine doe-hair tunic that hugged his malnourished body and some dark pants with leather padding along the thigh and knee. Still, as he left the bathroom, Hinni must have only waited five or six minutes for him.

She pivoted towards the door with a sympathetic smile. "Ready?"

No. "Yes," Eric said.

Hinni walked ahead of him and opened the door that led into the palace halls where Cithrel was waiting for him. The Fae prince wore an intricately designed charcoal short coat that clasped asymmetrically and pants with a matching design down the legs. The imperial look was completed with black leather boots, an emerald green mantle, and a metal pendant of a black doe pinned over his heart.

Cool blue-gray eyes bore into Eric and studied him then. Those eyes always balanced on the edge between daunting and mesmerizing, and Eric never knew which. A heartbeat later the prince turned and started down the hallway.

"Let's go."

"Where are we going?" Eric chanced to ask.

"The Throne Room."

Eric fell silent, while the growing anxiety in his chest flourished and spread. The Throne Room meant there would be an audience. Just how bad could his punishment possibly be? He couldn't help but fidget with the cuffs of his own shirt now as they walked, a futile effort to calm himself down.

The edges of the branding on his arm poked through the shirt cuffs as if it were an omen.

All of the Fae servants and soldiers alike retreated to give them a wide berth as Eric passed. Smoothed pale stones made up the palace floors while redwood and oak seemed to swirl together in the walls. Tall windows lined the halls on one side and colorful oil paintings the other. Eric caught the eye of a young Fae boy, whose jade-colored goat eyes widened in revulsion. His skin was dark like coal and his long, pointed ears flattened as Eric walked by.

It felt like a cruel joke that he was abducted and forced into slavery, yet he was the one treated like a monster. Bitterness filled his thoughts as the fourth prince strode past, unmoved by the eyes on them. Following the prince's example, Eric ignored the hateful glances his way and instead focused on their walk through the palace.

They had gone through the entirety of the west wing of the palace before they reached a walkway encased in nothing but glass. It gave them a full view of the Imperial Gardens. These gardens rivalled the Adlar estate, since Eric noticed some flora that even Aimar didn't grow. He was a little remiss when they left the gardens behind and kept heading towards the Throne Room.

Eric's thoughts were cut short when Cithrel stopped in front of thick wooden double doors. Grand carvings of woodland animals and exotic flowers blooming all over decorated the fine wood. A single black doe was pictured in the middle of each door, a shining crown haloing its head. There were even rare-looking stones that glinted in the sunlight that shone in. Before they entered, though, Hinni appeared. In her arms she carried a raven-colored coronet with obsidian spikes, wrapped with small protruding thorns. Cithrel's crown.

"Thank you," the prince said.

He stooped low enough for Hinni to place the diadem on his head. When he lifted his head, he looked the part of a prince, his expression vacant yet composed. Cithrel straightened before he pushed open the high-spanning doors. Before the prince entered, though, he reached over and thrust Eric into the Throne Room first. Eric froze as his face went slack-jawed.

Several enchanting-looking thrones lined the far wall atop a dais with a canopy of greenery, each one growing larger as it neared the largest and most regal throne, centered on the wall. Already seated in five of the seven thrones were the rest of the Imperial Family. Each of them had the same gleaming black and barbed coronet placed on their heads and illustrious mantles hung from their shoulders.

The blood in Eric's veins chilled when all eyes in the Throne Room turned on him. A mixture of fear and the instinct to run kept him frozen on the spot. The crowd of nobles looked on at Eric with expressions that ranged from sick anticipation to revulsion. A few looked utterly bored.

One of the Fae nobles stood out to Eric, though. Baroness Olaera. She was one of the wealthiest nobles in Alonetha, next to Archduke Laen, and the owner of the city's slave trade. She was the one responsible for how Eric ended up living in this unending nightmare of a world. A rush of anger heated his cheeks, and his eyes blazed with emotion as they locked gazes. The baroness cast him one displeased look and then resumed her conversation with another noble. She didn't even recognize him.

Eric was stunned. He couldn't believe it. She ruined his life and to her he was nothing more than currency. He stared wide-eyed at nothing until Cithrel shoved him forward again, this time hard enough to bruise.

As the prince strode past him to sit as his own throne, Eric looked up and felt the weight of the Imperial Family's eyes on him. Eric's pulse fluttered.

Seated in the chair next to the empress's throne was the crown prince, Solonar Aloneth. His diadem was more elaborate, with golden vines twined around the blackened thorns. It rested atop long raven hair that fell well past his shoulders. His mantle was a vibrant crimson and gold that shone in the natural light and matched the gold studs along his pointed ears and thin chain threaded along his neck. Deep amber eyes with pupils like a cat's fixed on Eric. As their eyes met, the crown prince gave him a wolfish smile.

Chapter Four

The pressure in the room was nothing like Lord Aimar's sickening thrall. The Throne Room dripped with power and it roared around Eric. With the entire room's eyes on him, Eric had never felt more exposed and vulnerable. The smell of fresh foliage wafted through the room. Paired with the beams of sunlight that streamed in, it was a room that invited warmth. At least for everyone but Eric. For him, this room was as good as an execution room.

The murmurs in the room grew louder the longer Eric stood frozen just inside the Throne Room doors. He jumped when the heavy thud of the doors shut behind him. He couldn't help but look over his shoulder and felt his heart race when he saw there was no way out now. When he turned back, the crown prince was still looking at him, smiling as if he had found his latest meal. It was enough to make Eric's skin crawl.

"I find it rather interesting," a decidedly male voice said, and the rest of the Throne Room fell silent. "That my brother, who usually can't stop his mouth from moving, is rendered silent by this human." The voice was deep and velveteen.

The prince who spoke was as divine as his siblings, with the same finely pointed ears and mesmerizing looks. Silver hair fell to his shoulders, a contrast to his purple eyes. He was different from his siblings in one evident way, though; his face was decorated with metallic piercings and thin chains. The second prince, Luthais Aloneth, arched a mischievous brow at his brother, the crown prince.

"I'm surprised you could even be bothered to show up." Solonar's gaze, seemingly reluctant, broke away from Eric to Luthais. "I was just thinking of how I was going to play with this disgraceful thing."

Eric's face turned scarlet with humiliation. *Thing*. He cast his eyes to the ground, no longer wanting to look at the Imperial Family.

"Our dear brother thought it worthwhile not to kill him." Luthais rested his chin in between his fingers. "Surely that must mean something. Why not wait and see what the pitiful slave does?"

Surprise got the better of Eric and he met the second prince's curious stare. His purple eyes flashed to bronze then, the same way Cithrel manifested whatever weaponry he desired. The scent of earthy clay wafted

through the Throne Room as Luthais used his magic. Eric watched as the prince actually winked at him before he directed his attention to his brother again. All the while, the rest of the nobility looked on in total silence.

As Luthais fixed Solonar with a challenging smile, the silver chain connected from his ear to nose marred the otherwise dashing grin. He blew a kiss at his brother. Growing up with an older brother, even Eric knew a taunt when he saw one. A disgusted snarl ripped from the crown prince's lips, prompting the silver-haired prince's grin to spread.

"Bearing your fangs at me already?" Luthais tossed his head back and chuckled. "What a temper the heir apparent has today. You must be feeling threatened by our father's choice."

Solonar leaned on the arm of his throne so that he could leer at his brother. "Maybe you should care more, little brother. Or is any shred of responsibility too frightening to you?"

The smile fell from Luthais's face then, bronze eyes melting back to a vibrant purple. He rose to his feet then, to meet his raven-haired brother's gaze. His skin-tight leather clothing accentuated his long legs and slender build. Solonar pushed out of his throne then too, until they were both glowering at each other. Neither brother spoke, only making the pressure in the room feel heavier in the air.

Unsure of what the hell was happening right now, Eric nervously scanned the room to see if anyone else found this bizarre and terrifying. To everyone else, though, this seemed to be normal. Eric chanced a look at Cithrel, who was looking at his brothers arguing with a tired expression. He must have sensed Eric's eyes on him because he turned his attention to Eric and his annoyance morphed into something else.

"Where are my manners?" Luthais's voice was clear enough to draw Eric's attention and he regretted it. The second prince was beaming back at Eric, suddenly the demure prince.

Luthais brushed past Solonar, making sure to bump his shoulder harder than necessary, and descended the stairs straight towards Eric.

Eric glanced at Cithrel, as if the fourth prince would suddenly decide to come to his rescue, but he sat in his chair with an iced-over look still focused on Eric. It looked like Cithrel was waiting for something to happen.

Great.

Luthais stopped in front of Eric. The chain piercing stood out even more up close in front of his grin. He made a show of resting a hand over his heart. He must have been playing some kind of game right now, otherwise there was no conceivable reason for a member of the Imperial Family to treat a criminal about to be publicly judged and punished so well.

"I am Luthais Aloneth, second prince of Alonetha, and the Prince of Masks." He inclined his head and when he met Eric's eyes again, there was almost sympathy hidden behind those deep purple eyes. "And you are?"

His question hung in the air, expectant. It wasn't like Eric had any other choice but to answer, but something set his heart racing again. This felt like a trap that would lead to further punishment and pain.

"I am honored by your presence, Your Highness." Eric bowed. "My name is Eric Becker. I'm not worthy of your attention."

The nobility in the Throne Room burst into a flurry of gasps and murmurs amongst themselves at this exchange. It was clear the nobility were just as flabbergasted as he was by Luthais's interest. Eric hardened his jaw to stop his lip from trembling. Bowed before the second prince, the marking on his arm burned like a forbidden secret. He hoped Luthais hadn't noticed it peeking past his cuffs.

"I'm flattered you think so, Eric," Luthais mused. "It's charming to meet such a curious slave. You already have the two most intolerable princes wrapped around your little human finger." Eric frowned and glanced up at Luthais. The prince twiddled his fingers to mimic a puppeteer with an eager smile.

Eric blinked. The truth hidden behind his words was so muddled he couldn't make sense of it. Cithrel finally saw enough and let out a low rumbling warning at Luthais's words. Relief churned in his stomach with the dread that already made itself at home as Cithrel came to defend him. At least he hoped that's what he was doing.

"Stop hissing like nixies and wait for the empress," the third prince barked.

All eyes roved over to look at the angriest looking one of them all. Shaved head and glowering dark green eyes met Eric's from his throne. A scowl was on his lips, his brow furrowed, and his arms crossed tightly over his chest.

He moved to lean forward in his chair, his cape falling away from him, revealing a bodysuit of fitted chainmail that cascaded down his chest and wrapped around his arms like gauntlets. Black leather was strapped across his chest and torso like a harness. The edges of a snaking tattoo poked through the collar of the third prince's bodysuit.

"Wagging your tail for mother already, Elasuin?" Solonar said, a glint in his eye.

"Ever the narcissist, Solonar," Elasuin mocked. His hateful green eyes slid over to Cithrel, who now looked uncomfortable in his throne. "So obsessed with yourself that you can't even tell your brothers apart. Faithful Cithrel is the one desperate for her approval."

The way Elasuin said Cithrel's name was so full of disdain it was more of an insult than the rest of what he said combined.

Cithrel gripped either arm of his throne, his knuckles gone white. He didn't respond to Elasuin's insult and glared a hole in the floor. But it was clear just how much he didn't want to be in the Throne Room anymore. The entire exchange since Eric entered this room was unbelievable. His life hung in the balance while everyone else in the room seemed to be in an episode of trashy reality television. It was terrifying and infuriating.

Solonar laughed, which only made the tension in the room worse. Eric's entire body was shaking by now and Luthais must have noticed because he pressed his hand against Eric's back. "Come with me, Eric." He leaned in close so that only Eric could hear what he said next. "I want to test my little theory."

Cithrel turned his attention to Luthais and Eric immediately and he looked like he was fuming. Eric kept his head low and knitted his fingers together in front of him as he walked. He did his best to tug at his cuffs again in an effort to hide the marking.

Eric sucked in a breath between clenched teeth, desperate to avoid anyone's stares. He was positive if he so much as looked at any of the Imperial Family wrong, they'd have him beaten for it.

Luthais led them to the bottom of the dais so that Eric stood before the Aloneth family. He bit down on the inside of his cheek to keep his face even, hard enough that he tasted blood.

Just then, a soft harmonic voice chimed in. "Brother, you're scaring him." Eric knew without looking up it was the princess who spoke.

"Furthermore, I think we've been sidetracked enough from why we're all here."

At first, Eric was relieved to hear the princess put him out of his misery. But when she continued he felt his heart drop. She was right, he was there to likely be tortured and put to death for his crimes. In a room full of nobles looking on. Tears welled in Eric's eyes and he kept his head down.

Eric heard heels that clacked against the black marble stone floors, breaking the eerie silence. Glancing over to where the sound came from, his lips wordlessly parted.

A stunning Fae woman with a silvered gown and matching silver chain veil that covered half her profile approached. She was blind, yet she was rumoured to see more than anyone else ever could. Her long brown hair was pinned and braided in a floral looking crown that shaped her face. Several flowers in vibrant pinks, yellows, and purples bloomed amongst her braids. The only princess, Lyari Aloneth, stood in front of Eric, her lips pressed together.

"You have no idea why you're here, do you?" Her voice was so soft, Eric wasn't sure if she was speaking to him or not.

He frowned. He thought he was here for his last few moments alive. If it wasn't for that, then what other reason could there be?

"Don't coddle the thing, sister," Solonar called from behind Lyari, venom laced in his tone. "Look at him quivering in fear. He's clearly too weak. We should just kill him now and stop wasting time. The sooner we're rid of him, the sooner another will take his place."

Solonar's words were like a knife. The thumping in Eric's chest filled his ears as fear took hold of him. He didn't understand what the princess and prince were talking about. It was hopeless trying to make sense of the truth from their cryptic words.

As Solonar and Lyari argued with each other, the swirl of nobles' hushed voices began to fill the Throne Room. They talked about Eric and said horrible things about him like he was livestock, as if he wasn't in the room at all.

His thoughts roared with a fervent need to leave this place. The thought of wanting to leave and be free consumed him as the rest of the world fell away. Then, the baritone voice he swore he heard days ago spoke. The

familiar burn started in Eric's arm where the marking was and he faltered backwards, his other hand gripped over his arm that blazed with pain.

"Look at him," the crown prince said with scorn. "Look at how weak that thing is. He can't even bear it."

That voice. A surge of anger rushed through Eric at Solonar's words. *Thing.* It was that word again. Color began to drain from Eric's vision, washing away all other thoughts.

"Stop it," Cithrel warned.

"You do not command me, brother." Solonar flicked a dismissive wave at Cithrel.

"We don't know what else he is capable of." Cithrel's words were strained.

Eric bared his teeth at Solonar in the most animalist instinct he had ever had. His insides felt as if they were being melted.

Show them. The voice tempted Eric—and he listened.

The mark on Eric's arm seared into his skin like a fresh brand and the smell of burnt flesh rose in the air. With colorless vision, he let the euphoric sensation of aether, magic, flow through him. It poured over Eric's body like water, bathing him in its strength. Eric raised his hand at the crown prince, his face a mask of bloodthirsty intent, fingers splayed.

Just as the black thorns that poured from Eric's hand surged towards Solonar faster than even a high-born Fae could react, the entire world fell silent. The thorns stopped in their advance. Eric was frozen, unable to move at all.

The only sound that could be heard, other than Eric's steady heartbeat, were the clack of heels as the most unearthly being he had ever seen walked through the double doors of the Throne Room.

An ornate, golden gown clung to her chest and waist before it cascaded around her and trailed behind her. A juniper mantle hung down her back, two greenwood plants framed and hung from her shoulders. The living foliage twisted and wrapped around her thin arms before the greenery billowed in her wake. What was most alluring, though, was the way her long white hair cascaded down her in waves, fluttering with each step. Atop her head sat a beguiling coronet of twisting greenwood and blackened spikes. Without a doubt, she was the empress.

No one dared move a muscle, even if they could, as she strode in. Eric almost didn't notice the two slight Fae servants that followed behind her in silence. They resembled Hinni in the sense that they looked like trees with smooth, bark-like skin and hair like downy leaves.

Her violet eyes ringed with silver focused on Eric upon her entrance. The rest of the Fae in the room followed her gaze, wide-eyed. Eric stood motionless, wholly exposed to the most powerful Fae in the empire, who now stood before him.

"I apologize for the lack of decorum my children have." The empress's expression was poised as she inclined her head. "But I'm rather attached to this room and would prefer it if you didn't destroy it."

Once the words left her mouth, Eric was able to move and the world fell back in motion. It was as if time itself stopped for her and her alone. Eric dropped his head immediately and looked at the ground.

"I'm very sorry, Your Imperial Majesty," Eric choked. "I acted impulsively and embarrassed you, forgive me. I am unworthy."

"Look at me."

He lifted his head slowly, unsure if her words were some kind of trap, or if she wanted to look at him as she beat him for his insolence. She gazed down at him, impassive. It almost hurt to look at her right now.

"Your Majesty, allow me to introduce you," Cithrel said, swiftly intervening. The empress eyed Eric a moment longer before she turned and ascended the dais. Her servants seemed to disappear from her sides, which only added to her ethereal presence. As she reached her throne, the fourth prince continued, now addressing Eric. "Present before you stands Nithroel Aloneth, the Lady of the Woods, and Empress of Alonetha."

As Cithrel spoke, Eric watched with the same awed glaze in his eyes as the goddess Fae took her place on her throne and looked on at the rest of the room. The gold of her dress shone even brighter from her throne as sunlight streamed through the vaulted windows. Being in her presence alone made him feel transparent. The sensation was chilling. The nobles in the Throne Room must have felt the same way as Eric, because not a single whisper was uttered. Everyone was waiting for her to speak.

Cithrel drifted to the empress's side and whispered something in her ear before he returned to his own throne. Eric looked confused as he caught Cithrel's steeled blue gaze. The prince opened his mouth as if to say

something, but a breath later he closed it and looked ahead towards the rest of the room.

"Eric." The tranquility of the empress's voice didn't hide the demand in her voice. Eric lifted nervous hazel eyes at Nithroel. "Remove your shirt."

Eric had gone wide-eyed as the color drained from his face. He hoped he didn't hear her correctly but when she said nothing else and stared, waiting, he swallowed. There was no mistake in her words. He bit down on his tongue to stifle his emotions.

His eyes flicked to the rest of the Imperial Family on the dais, including Cithrel, and all of them looked on, expectant. Eric dipped his head in resignation.

"Yes, Your Majesty," he finally said, his words a whisper.

The sensation in his hands went numb as he mechanically undid the buttons to his tunic. If anyone breathed too heavily in the Throne Room you could hear it with how quiet the room had gone. It was like the empress's presence and voice sucked sound itself out of the room.

Eric's hands hesitated on the edges of his shirt, unsure if he could stomach exposing his entire torso to a room full of nobility and royals. After a strangled exhale, he pulled off his tunic with wavering hands and let the costly fabric fall the ground at his feet.

The Throne Room burst into a rush of gasps and stunned whispers. The nobility in the room made noises of disbelief, anger, and worst of all, disgust. Blood rushed in Eric's ears as he kept his eyes on the ground, unable to blink. The muscles in his arms tensed along with his shoulders. He couldn't process the feeling that roared in his chest, having his scarred body exposed. It was if the world tilted and he was suddenly unsteady on his feet.

"Come closer," Nithroel said. Eric did as she commanded and stopped at the bottom of the dais steps. "Let me look at you."

Like breathing through smoke, Eric's chest shook with each inhale and he stared straight ahead with watering eyes. He half-convinced himself this wasn't real, and he wasn't an animal being displayed, therefore he had no need to cry.

Apathetic silver ringed mauve eyes were not fixed on Eric but on his marking. She gazed at the scorched crown of black spikes that ringed his arm. The crown on her head looked a lot like the mark on his forearm. The

unease in Eric's stomach shifted as he registered too late that the entire room was staring at the marking and not his scars.

"So this is who you've chosen," the empress said, her expression wistful. "Then I will respect your choice, dear husband."

Eric's brows knotted together at her words, pulling him from his humiliation. Her husband was the late emperor, Volodar Aloneth. The Fae didn't die like other living beings; rather, they returned to the aether from where they were born. It was why they aged and treated time differently in the Fae world—because their time moved in a circle within the aether.

The empress rose from her twining greenwood and iron throne, pulling Eric from his thoughts. His heart plummeted in his chest, the knots in his stomach tightening, as realisation dawned on him. This was it. He was going to die.

"I have made my decision," Nithroel began, addressing the entire room, "regarding what to do with the human known as Eric Becker."

He paled. The goddess Fae slid her attention to Eric. Her opalescent gaze bore into him and peered into his soul. Somehow, he couldn't help but feel stripped bare.

"Eric Becker has been chosen as the next bearer of the Progenitor's Mark. He has been Marked, the highest blessing from the aether, and shall remain under the protection of the Imperial Family as long as he is Marked. As an extension of the Imperial Family, any ill-will towards him will be seen as a threat to the Aloneth family, and swift judgement shall be made."

"Mother," Solonar started and pushed to his feet, his face twisted with anger.

The empress lifted her hand and the raven-haired prince came to a halt. "The crown prince and heir to the empire should act in a way that is befitting of his title." With that, Solonar was silenced. He stood there in his quiet fury.

Eric's hands shook, his breaths shallow. Panic swirled within him. What the empress said wasn't registering in his brain. He couldn't be Marked, and yet, he was able to use magic and the branding on his arm was still there. With Nithroel in front of him, there was no denying how much his marking resembled her crown.

Nithroel continued. "Charged with his protection on behalf of the empire shall be Prince Commander Cithrel Aloneth, fourth prince, and

Prince of Blades. This is final."

She strode down the dais without ceremony and left the rest of the Throne Room reeling. Her two servants appeared at her sides again and without another word the empress was gone, chaos left in her wake.

As soon as she left the room, Eric was frantic to cover himself up again and scrambled to put his tunic back on. He wasn't sure if this was real as his hands absently worked on his shirt buttons. Not only was he not going to be punished and executed, but now he was an extension of the Imperial Family. Even though the Fae were bound by the truth, he couldn't help but feel like it was a trick.

When he turned his head back to the rest of the Imperial Family, there was a flurry of emotions. Solonar said nothing but stormed out of the door after the empress. Luthais lounged in his throne, the piercings adorning his face gleaming in the sunlight, with an excited glint in his eye.

"I'm not in the mood to be so restrained right now." He turned to smirk at Eric as he pulled off his imperial mantle and diadem with more sensuality than should be possible. He never took his eyes off Eric as he removed his coronet and mantle. "I hope you enjoyed the show."

He smiled at Eric as he left the Throne Room. A prickling sensation ran down Eric's spine, even after Luthais was gone. That was because someone else couldn't take their eyes off Eric.

Rhistel Aloneth was the fifth prince and sixth child of the Imperial Family. Even as a Fae he was young, not much older than a boy would look. Rhistel's sable eyes shimmered with small galaxies as he studied Eric. His dishevelled white-blond hair that fell in his face only made the Fae prince look more childlike, even though he was at least 80 years older than Eric.

Curiosity was plain on Rhistel's face as he leaned forward in his throne and eyed Eric. The youngest prince was probably the only Fae that didn't make Eric want to crawl out of his own skin.

"Rhistel," Elasuin barked. "We still have work to do."

The young prince gave one last inquisitive look before following his older brother down the dais. Elasuin cast a murderous glare at Eric as they passed. Then it was only Lyari and Cithrel left.

Lyari was the first one to reach Eric as the siblings descended the dais. Her body moved with enough grace, like she was gliding rather than taking

footsteps, it was enchanting in itself. She paused next to him, her veiled face not looking at him.

"He's kinder than he seems." At that, she drifted away from Eric, which left him virtually alone with Cithrel.

The rest of the Throne Room had almost trickled out now, consumed by the shocking news that a human slave was Marked and now protected by the empire. Even thinking about it still didn't make any of it seem real. He was still waiting for the real punishment to come when the fourth prince stopped in front of Eric.

"You're under my charge now," Cithrel said. "Let's go." His tone bordered on hostile. So much for being kinder than he seems. Then, with the enthusiasm of a corpse, the prince continued. "Welcome to the palace."

Chapter Five

When Eric didn't follow the prince, he scowled and stormed back over. Cithrel's calloused hand clamped down on Eric's jaw and forced their eyes to meet.

"Let's go," he repeated, irritation sparking in the blue of his eyes. "Or do I need to drag you everywhere?"

Eric didn't answer fast enough because a second later Cithrel grabbed Eric by the wrist and marched him out into the palace halls. His grip was too tight, but it was nothing compared to the restraints Lord Aimar used on Eric in the past.

Eric's lip quirked a little while they walked in silence through the palace. There was a lightness in his chest for the first time in a long time, long enough he had forgotten what it felt like. He wasn't going back to Lord Aimar, he wasn't going to be tortured or killed for his actions, and he could use magic. He wasn't powerless anymore.

Maybe it was the newfound optimism or his survival instincts kicking in, but he had the nagging feeling that someone was watching him as they walked. When he glanced over his shoulder, he half-expected to see Hinni walking behind them silently, but there was nothing. The unsettling feeling didn't stop when he turned back around to look at Cithrel. If the Fae felt it too, he didn't acknowledge it.

Eric needed to focus. Now that he could do something, he had a real chance of getting out of this place. The weight of Cithrel's hand on his wrist was a reminder of the friends he'd just lost. He would find a way out for himself and for them. The halls they roamed were lined with different types of artwork, each painting impossibly old and immaculate. Now that the halls were absent of any other judgemental Fae, it was the perfect time to take note of the route they took. The sooner he could learn the palace layout, the sooner he could try and find a way out of it.

His first problem would be his body. It only took one look at Eric to see he was malnourished and weak, even more now after his last failed escape attempt and his stay in the dungeons. He assumed he'd be well fed in the palace, but he needed to get stronger and do it fast.

The outside of the palace was fresh out of a Grimm's fairy tale, but the inside was a testament to Greek and Renaissance beauty. Through a large opening looked to be a sitting room of some kind, lined with marble and other rare stone statues of high-born Fae. His footsteps slowed to take in the view as they walked past the vaulted ceiling held up by ornate Corinthian columns. Vibrant green and gold colored the ceiling as vegetation and sunlight mingled.

Eric slowed to a stop, mesmerized by the statues. One in particular caught his attention and held it.

The statue was a Fae male that for some reason Eric felt inexplicably drawn to. He looked so much like the crown prince—both had an air of feline elegance with a predatory dominance. What drew Eric in was the crown adorning the statue. Long prongs rose from the coronet and it looked like the whole thing had been charred. It was identical in design to the Marking on Eric's arm.

His lips parted as his breaths came faster. He wanted to get closer to look at the statue. The stone eyes gazed back at him, called for him in a way that only Eric understood. His arm reached out towards the statue without him realizing.

"Stop." Cithrel grabbed Eric by the arm and pulled Eric to face him. It tore Eric's gaze from the statue. "That room is off-limits."

Eric frowned and blurted out his thoughts. "Why? What's so special about that room? And who is that a statue of? He looks just like the crown prince."

Cithrel was already leading them away from the sitting room. There was a rigidity to his back as he walked, like he was uncomfortable. His next words were edged with ice. "It doesn't matter. I said it's off limits so it's off limits."

Clearly, the prince did not want to talk about that room, which only made Eric want to know more about it. As a general rule, if Fae didn't want to talk about something, there was a valuable reason why. It meant the truth was something that could be used against them.

"Yes, Your Highness." Eric nodded, dropping the subject.

He made a mental note to look into the Aloneth family history later on. The Imperial Family must be related to whoever that statue was if Solonar had such a strong likeness. Though, the Fae could really look identical and

have no familial relation, or look like different species and be brothers. It wasn't blood that connected the Fae, but the aether. However it resided in their bodies was what mattered. The aether chose how to shape and manifest itself within the Fae.

The rest of the walk was in awkward silence. The tension stayed in Cithrel's shoulders the whole way. It was hard not to wonder what it was about that sitting room that upset the prince so much that he had this kind of physical reaction.

As they wound their way up the stairs to the next level, he found himself taking mental notes of all the artwork as they went. There were endless paintings of the imperial families through the ages. Engraved in all of the frames and the walls surrounding the artwork was a black doe, the symbol of the Aloneths, along with various flowers and greenery.

When they entered a private-looking wing of the palace, Cithrel came to an abrupt halt and whirled to face Eric. There was almost no artwork on the walls here, only the large spanning windows that let in sunlight and intermittent doorways. The entire hallway felt detached, cold. He guessed this was where he would be staying under Cithrel's watchful eyes.

"This will be your room for now, until more permanent arrangements can be made for you," Cithrel said, an unspoken warning in his tone. Which meant he was staying there until the prince could decide on a better way to watch Eric.

Just behind Cithrel were double arched doors made up of twisting tree roots, with inlaid gold in the shape of various plant life. He shoved open the doors without pause, likely hoping to avoid any further questions from Eric. He gave off the impression that he wanted to speak to a human as little as possible.

"Hinni will come by later with your meal and to see how you're healing." Cithrel pushed Eric into the room as he spoke. "I'll have a guard assigned to you in the morning."

He turned to shut the door but Eric stepped in the way, forcing the door open, and touched Cithrel's chest. "What's going to happen now?"

He didn't realize that he had dropped formalities with Cithrel, or that he was touching him, until he saw the prince's blue eyes darken. Faster than Eric could follow, Cithrel shoved him into the room and slammed Eric up against the wall, his arm pressed into Eric's throat.

"Let's get one thing straight." The Fae stared, his eyes gone hollow and voice low. "The *only* reason you're still alive is because you've been Marked. If not for that, I would have cut you down like the worthless piece of life you are and left your bones for the animals in the woods. Don't ever touch me again, or address me as anything less than prince. You're pathetic."

Eric stared wide-eyed, his mouth agape for air that didn't come. It felt like he'd been slapped, his entire face stinging with mortification. That was when two male Fae servants passed by the open doorway. One with long hooked ears and blue skin carried a stack of books in his arms. The other, with exposed fangs and purple skin, had a basket of what Eric guessed was linen. They didn't so much as blink when they passed by and saw Cithrel threatening Eric.

"Do you understand, slave?" Cithrel asked.

Tears welled in Eric's eyes. *Slave*. The word was a cruel reminder that just because he was alive and could use magic, it didn't mean anything. Everyone in this palace hated him and wanted him dead. He was just a dirty human.

Eric gave Cithrel a single nod, ashamed and desperate to breathe again.

Cithrel pulled away and let Eric slump against the wall. "Good."

Gasping for air and before Eric could utter another word or move, the door slammed shut. Well, shut wasn't the right description since there was no door at all anymore. There was only a wall now where the door used to be. Eric exhaled and ran shaking hands through his brown curls. His neck burned, and when he moved to touch it his skin stung. There was probably going to be a large bruise by the morning.

He cursed. He had been an idiot for getting so comfortable. The prince was psychotic and so was the rest of his family, just like everyone in this god-forsaken city. The palace was nothing more than a gigantic prison and he was trapped here now.

Slowly, Eric got to his feet to look at where he'd be staying for now. Anything to stop thinking about that blond-haired bastard and his hands around Eric's neck.

At least these living quarters were much larger and cleaner than anything Eric could have hoped for. What stood out most was the massive bed with an emerald and gold colored canopy. Its four posts were large

twisting roots that broke through the floor and the ceiling in a continuous path.

The walls and floors were a combination of stone, wood, and earth, like they were a purposeful mosaic made by nature herself. Green and gray accented the wood tones to make a heavenly place, made sweeter by the long rays of sunshine that beamed through the tall windows.

As he strode past the table that stood in the sunbeams, he paused at the armoires that lined the opposite wall. They were all filled with folded and hanging clothes. One even held all the linen for his bedding and toiletries. It was a step up from the skimpy towel that barely covered his ass Lord Aimar made him use.

Chasing away the looming thoughts, Eric moved into the bathing room. He found his own reflection in the mirror and saw large red marks wound around his neck. The outline of the prince's fingers was clear against his skin. Eric swore. It would definitely leave an ugly bruise. Eric shook his head and turned away, appalled, to face a gigantic glossed-wood tub spanned in front of him. There was nothing more he wanted now than a hot bath. Peeling off his sweat-soaked clothes, he sunk into the tub. Like everything else, the tub was enchanted with magic to fill with water. So within moments, hot water was soaking into his bones.

He soaked for well over an hour before he towelled off and found the closest thing to a T-shirt and sweatpants in the armoire to change into. Not long after the sun started its descent, Hinni appeared through the enchanted doors with a large tray of food, water, and what he guessed was medicine.

"Hello again, Eric." Hinni moved towards the table opposite the massive bed.

"This looks amazing, thank you." Eric rasped by way of greeting. He didn't meet her eyes as he rubbed at his throat.

His stomach growled, eager to devour the heaping plate full of food. He wondered how long it would take for him to get used to seeing so much food just for him. The thought made his eyes water.

"Once you're done, may I inspect how your injuries are healing?" she asked.

"Of course." Eric smacked his lips, unable to take his eyes off the meal and sat down.

Tonight, there was a bowl full of stewed meat and steamed vegetables with another chunk of thick buttered bread. The pitcher of water was bigger this time, which Eric supposed Hinni was responsible for after she saw how ravenously he downed the water in the Black Thorn. In addition, though, there was a goblet and a decanter of deep red wine, along with a side of cheese.

He was a few bites into his meal when he noticed Hinni wasn't sitting down with him or talking. She just kept standing off to the side and quietly waited with her hands folded in front of her.

It made him uneasy, being watched by her. After what Cithrel did to him, Hinni's calming presence was gone and all he saw was an extension of the prince. Besides, she must have noticed the fresh scratches and bruising around his neck, but she said nothing about it.

He ate another mouthful of food before he broke the silence again. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

Eric chewed on his lip and sipped at his wine. "Were you forced to serve under the prince?"

Hinni let out a soft chuckle, amused by his question. "It's a honor to serve the Imperial Family, especially Prince Cithrel. I wanted to work in the palace and was blessed by the aether to be chosen to serve the prince."

"Why?" Eric blurted. He bit down on his tongue, angry that he let the question slip out. He needed to be more careful.

"He's fair. And kind."

Eric's lips thinned. He was yet to see any kindness or fairness from the prince since he tried to kill Eric in the Wilder Woods. He sipped his wine again to chase away the bitterness tainting his mouth. In the five years Eric had been a slave in Alonetha, Hinni was the only Fae who treated him with some benevolence and even he had a hard time believing her gentle nature was genuine.

Hinni gave him a sad smile. "The prince has endured a lot. The palace can be a very... difficult place to live, particularly to be raised in. It's not my place to speak of the prince's affairs any more than that, but you should know I consider myself lucky to attend to Prince Cithrel."

"Right," Eric said and turned away. He took another bite.

Hearing about the prince's hardships only made him angry. He was still the man that murdered Eric's friends and left their bodies to rot in the Wilder Woods. Whatever Cithrel endured in the palace, it still made him a heartless killer that treated humans like animals. If it wasn't for the fact that Eric was Marked, he would be dead by now. He couldn't let himself forget any of that.

For the rest of his meal they talked about other things, mostly of the gardens and other places he would be able to see while he was staying in the palace. He was happy to hear that he would be able to access the library without issue and could roam relatively freely. It would make getting stronger easier for him, even if he had a guard trailing him everywhere.

Though, once he finished his meal and Hinni had applied some salve to the bruising around his throat, he was exhausted and just wanted to be alone. Today had felt impossibly long. Combined with however long he spent in the Black Thorn and his altercation with Cithrel, his body was well past its limits.

He crawled into the massive bed and under the plush covers and as he drifted to sleep, he resolved to start his new plan of escape tomorrow.

Chapter Six

The Fae that the prince assigned to guard Eric was about as warm as Cithrel. The guard knight, Cithrel, and Eric stood just inside Eric's room as Hinni flitted behind them, laying out another delicious meal.

Eric gave Cithrel and the Fae knight a honeyed smile while he crossed his arms tightly across his chest. It burned him to see the prince looking so unbothered after what he did to Eric yesterday. He even had the nerve to look almost annoyed to have to be here this morning.

"This is First Class Knight Malor Sylhorn." Cithrel gestured to the Fae at his side. "He serves under me in the Alonethan military. He'll be your personal guard in my absence."

Eric's teeth ground together when he gave Cithrel a toothy smile. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Sir Malor." He inclined his head to the hulking Fae, who was yet to show any sign of emotion whatsoever. "It's an honor to be in the hands of a high-ranking knight. Thank you, Your Highness."

The words felt vile as they left his tongue, addressing the prince formally. Eric had been stupid to forget his place yesterday, but that didn't mean he was okay with what the prince did. He was just as awful as everyone else in this city.

When Eric looked back up, Malor averted his gaze, just as impassive as the prince, and said nothing. His green eyes glowed, not like embers in a fire but like a lantern that illuminated fog. In contrast to his eyes, his skin was the color of pale birch. Crowning his temples was long hair that flowed like water but somehow looked more like leaves. It was off-putting how much Malor held an air of tranquility despite the fact that he was one of Cithrel's trusted soldiers.

"If that's all, then I'll be going," Cithrel said, ignoring Eric's thanks entirely. Such an ass.

Eric's smile faltered. "You won't be joining us today, Your Highness?"

"I'm busy." Which probably meant he was going to be busy avoiding Eric. It would technically be the truth.

"Of course, Your Highness," Eric ground out, his pleasant expression on the edge of fracturing. His fingers dug into his folded arms as he bowed to the prince.

The words were barely out of his mouth when Cithrel was halfway through the door, his back turned to Eric. He didn't think it was possible to make it any more clear that the prince wanted as little to do with Eric as possible.

When Eric rose he directed his attention to the spread of food Hinni had laid out for him. He wasted no time devouring everything. It was all so delicious he wasn't even bothered by Malor hovering over Eric's shoulder like an unwanted shadow.

After he gave his thanks to Hinni for the food, he sucked in a breath. He couldn't ignore Malor's existence any longer, not if he wanted to go outside. "Sir Malor, how do you feel about going for a run?"

His guard fixed him with a soul-crushing gaze, the glow guttering. "The prince commander instructed me to be your personal guard."

Eric waited, expecting him to finish what he was saying. But Malor just stared at him, his face wiped clean of emotion. That was all he was going to get, then. His guard wasn't going to be much for conversation, that much was clear.

"Then if you'll excuse me," Eric said and turned to change into better clothes for running.

He grabbed a pair of dark trousers that hugged his thighs but were made of a light fabric. The striped undershirt hung open at his throat, which exposed his collarbone, but it was at least breathable. He wasn't happy that these clothes accentuated how thin and out of shape he currently was, but he had to start somewhere.

If his appearance bothered Malor, Eric had no idea. His guard stood in the middle of his room like a statue, waiting for Eric to be ready. Eric came to join Malor in the open space of his room and gestured to the enchanted doorway.

"Shall we?"

Malor whirled and pressed his hand to the wall where the ornate wooden door materialized a second later. It annoyed the hell out of Eric that even though he was now living in the palace, he was still caged in his own room and escorted everywhere. Though he had to admit he was just caught for attempting to escape not that long ago.

The run was agony. Eric was barely able to make it a mile and had to slow down several times. It was especially infuriating having Malor run

next to him in his armor while the Fae bastard barely even broke a sweat. The tree-skinned Fae was almost a foot taller than Eric and well muscled. Eric guessed the run wasn't even exercise to him.

By the time they had run through the palace grounds, Eric was gasping for air and his legs shook like a newborn faun. They finished their run just outside the Imperial Gardens. He doubled over, his hands on his knees, and gulped down air. His lungs burned as much as his legs did and it took him longer than he wanted to admit to catch his breath. At least he didn't throw up his breakfast. That was something.

As he wiped the sweat off his forehead, Eric straightened and turned towards Malor. "Do you mind if we take a small detour while I catch my breath, Sir Malor?"

Malor, who'd just watched Eric struggle to finish his run and looked completely fine, lifted dull green eyes to meet Eric's watery hazel ones. "Very well."

Mr. Personality stood still, so Eric took it upon himself to wander as he pleased. At least Malor was indifferent to Eric, rather than the usual loathing he experienced. Like every single Fae he passed during his run, for example. He lost count how many nobles and soldiers cast slurs and sickened looks their way as he ran by. Still, going for runs was a good way for Eric to memorize the palace layout and observe the rotations of guards. That included the gardens they now strolled through.

The Imperial Gardens were on the edge of the palace grounds, reinforced with the same enchantment barrier Eric had broke using Lord Aimar's ring. Just beyond the invisible barrier was the beginnings of the Wilder Woods. Eric and Malor had been walking through the gardens for several minutes now and they were yet to pass by any other guards. Whenever the opportunity for escape presented itself, this was probably his best route to take. If he was ever left unguarded. Judging by the way Sir Malor followed Eric's every move, that was a big if. Plus, he would have to find another way to break the enchantment barrier. He had his own magic, but he didn't really know how to use it, or command it. It just sort of happened, which worried him for a hundred other reasons.

Eric paused when he spotted a chain of deep orange flowers, the tips of their heavy petals a bright red. His heart thrummed painfully at the sight of

flowers he knew all too well. They were one of Lord Aimar's favorites. The Kauma flower.

Eric bent to get a closer look at the plant he had grown to hate. Kauma flowers had similar effects to stinging nettle for Fae, but to humans they were more like acid. When even just gently brushed against his skin, the petals left burn marks that resembled clouds. The burns took weeks to heal and often scarred. Sometimes when the Fae lord was in the mood, he would give Eric lashings with a whip that was coated in the flower's pollen.

Eric swallowed, his eyes focused on the orange flora. "What do you think of these flowers, Sir Malor?"

He reached out as if he was going to touch the flower, but let his hand hover over its petals instead. That was when he caught sight of the discoloration of his skin on the back of his hand. It looked like little red clouds floated on Eric's hand.

"I don't spend much time in the gardens."

If Eric wasn't twisted in his own emotions, he would have been surprised to hear Malor actually answering his questions. Instead, his mind raced with all the savage memories of being forced to work in the Adlar estate gardens. Then later being stripped naked and forced onto Lord Aimar's bed.

Eric squeezed his eyes shut, his hand clenching tight. His heart hammered against his ribs, the ache in his chest unrelenting.

When he opened his eyes again, he pulled his hand away from the nightmarish plant. "I tended to many of these flowers at the Adlar estate. I didn't expect to see these here, as they're quite difficult to grow."

"If I knew you liked those flowers," a smooth voice cut through Eric's haze, "I would have hand-delivered you a bouquet."

The muscles in Eric's shoulders tensed, recognizing the voice that spoke behind him. He got to his feet slowly, a combination of soreness from running and dread, and turned to greet the crown prince.

Solonar took slow swaggering steps down the packed earth path of the Imperial Gardens towards Eric and Malor. Eric did his best to ignore the falling sensation in his stomach as the crown prince approached, but the feeling only worsened when he saw how rigid Sir Malor had gone. For the first time since he'd met his guard, he saw that Malor looked nervous.

"Enjoying your stroll together?" Solonar tilted his head. "Mind if I join you?"

Eric saw the way the black-haired prince's eyes shifted from his face to his Marking as he spoke. He bowed, and noticed that so did Malor. "I would be honored, Crown Prince, though I am not worthy of your time."

"You're surprisingly well-spoken for a human slave."

"I'm pleased you think so, Crown Prince."

Eric kept his head bowed and his hands clasped behind his back. He clenched his fingers together until it hurt. The pulse at his throat raced the longer he was with Solonar. Instinct told him to run immediately.

"You don't need to bow all day," Solonar said, his voice amused. The look in his eyes showed just how much the prince enjoyed his power over Eric. He glanced at Eric's Marking once more before his amber gaze darted to Malor. "Leave us."

It was short, but the authority in his voice was oppressive. Eric watched as Malor stepped forward, the glow of his eyes dimmed imperceptibly. He placed his fist over his heart before he answered Solonar.

"The prince commander has ordered me to guard the human. I cannot leave his side in the prince's absence."

"Oh?" Solonar arched a brow. "Well, I'm ordering you to leave."

Then Solonar lifted his hand in the air. "Tell me, as your crown prince and heir to the Alonethan Empire, do you not obey my orders before my brother's?"

Malor went still. "I do, Crown Prince."

Eric's face had gone pale looking between the two Fae. He didn't so much as breathe when Solonar approached Malor and took the knight's chin in his hands. Then he wrenched Malor's face up with brutal speed so that he looked the crown prince in the eyes.

"Then I shouldn't have to repeat myself, should I?" The prince's grip on Malor tightened so hard that Malor looked like he was in a great deal of pain.

"No, Crown Prince." Malor's voice was quiet. "My deepest apologies."

Eric cursed inwardly as his stomach dropped. He was going to be left alone with Solonar, who had all but stormed out in unbridled fury the last time they saw each other.

"If you understand, then leave." He cast his hand away, which sent Malor staggering back until he found his footing.

Sir Malor didn't give any sort of reaction, even though the skin along his jaw was darker. Instead, he adjusted himself and gave the crown prince one final bow before he turned his back on Eric and strode down the garden path. Eric hoped that the Fae knight would leave to go get Cithrel.

When Solonar was satisfied with Malor's disappearance, he directed his attention to Eric. A coy smile danced on his lips. He moved next to Eric with the fluidity of a panther. Then he extended his hand and tilted his head.

"Much better," he chimed. "Shall we?"

Eric's hands shook as he stared at Solonar's hand. The crown prince expected him to go first but everything in his brain screamed at him not to. He had to remind himself that the empress gave orders he was not to be harmed. Now that he was Marked, he was part of the Imperial Family. Though the knot in his stomach told him that didn't mean he was safe with Solonar.

"As you wish, Crown Prince," Eric said, recovering his smile.

Eric continued on the path and led the way, Solonar close at his side. The crown prince might be the one member of the Imperial Family who hated humans the most if his reaction to the empress's decision was any indicator. He was also the imperial with the sharpest tongue—skilled at weaving a dangerous web of half-truths.

"You can relax." Solonar eyed him. "You have my word I won't lay a hand on you."

The crown prince's voice purred as his cat-eyes flashed. He said he wouldn't lay a hand on Eric but he didn't say he wouldn't harm him. It did nothing to ease Eric's fears. "I trust you, Crown Prince." The lie slid off his lips.

It was the one upside of being human in the Fae world. They couldn't lie but he could. The trick was not to get caught in a lie, since it infuriated the Fae to be lied to. Eric kept his chin up and kept walking, doing his best to sell his lie, even though he felt like he could barely breathe.

"My, you're awfully quiet." Solonar broke the silence and spun on his heel to face Eric. Just as easily as before, he walked backwards, in step with Eric. "Did my brother tell you to keep quiet?"

"It would be improper for me to speak so freely with you, Crown Prince."

"That's dull," he replied. "Converse with me, human. Otherwise this walk will be very boring."

Eric stumbled. Suddenly his legs felt weak. Solonar was still smiling, but it didn't mask the demand in his words. Eric had no choice now. He was wandering into dangerous territory. It was an effort to keep the shaking out of his voice. "What would you like to talk about, Crown Prince?"

"Why don't we start with how you got that?" Solonar was pointing directly at the Marking on Eric's arm. "How is it that a human was Marked?"

The hairs on the back of Eric's neck stood up. "I'm not sure how it happened, Crown Prince. I didn't realize it had even appeared on my arm until I was able to use...." Eric's words trailed off, suddenly unsure if he should even say he could use magic. He didn't want to be attacked for saying the wrong thing, like what happened yesterday with Cithrel.

"Use magic?" Solonar supplied. The slits of his cat-eyes widened, waiting for Eric to continue.

"Yes, Crown Prince." Eric exhaled. "After that, it's been on my arm ever since."

Solonar sighed, gesturing for Eric to hurry up. "But what happened when you did use magic? I know you stole an imbued ring and then tried to escape. Among other things, since whatever you did warranted locking you up in the Black Thorn. But my annoying brother has maintained his silence on you, for whatever reason, and I find it rather frustrating."

Eric didn't know that Cithrel kept the attempted murder from his brother, the crown prince no less. What reason could there be for him to hide that information? He figured it was probably in his best interest then not to tell Solonar everything. He definitely wasn't going to mention the voice inside his head before Cithrel found him.

"I was foolish for trying to escape and for stealing from my master." Eric's tone sobered. "The prince happened to be on patrol with his men the night I fled. Not long after he found us. He killed the other slaves first. Then, my arm started burning and... and the next thing I knew there were thorns and vines all around me. Then they vanished and I was Marked. The fourth prince brought me back after that and I was put in the dungeons."

Solonar stopped in front of Eric, blocking his path. "That's it? Nothing else?" His eyes thinned to slits and studied Eric's face for any crack in his lie.

He wasn't technically lying. What he said was true—it was just that he omitted some information. It was ironic that Eric was using the Fae's own game against them. They deserved it. It did make him wonder why he was suddenly Marked and given the ability to use magic. As much as it stung to admit, he wasn't special.

"Well, I'm unsure how long I was actually in the dungeons for. The fourth prince said he wanted to see if I'd survive down there or not because I was Marked."

"Three days," Solonar said, his gaze fixed on Eric.

"What?"

"You were down there for three days before he carried you out of the Black Thorn himself," he clarified. "I wonder why he kept that from you?"

Eric's face heated. It had been Cithrel who carried him out of there, not just some hallucination. He tried to remember if he said anything humiliating back then. God, he hoped not. Then he cursed himself for even caring if he said anything embarrassing in front of Cithrel. He was an ass who wanted him dead, and he had made that very clear.

"I'm unsure why he would keep that from me, Crown Prince. I don't think he concerns himself much with a human."

"If you're unaware," Solonar said, painting his face into one of pity, a sudden sweetness to his voice, "then why don't you ask the questions I know you're curious about? I'd guess that my brother has hardly told you anything since he was charged with your protection. He's doing a marvelous job so far, what with being nowhere in sight at the moment."

It bothered Eric how much the crown prince already knew about him, while Cithrel wanted nothing to do with him already. Still, he was sure that whatever he told the crown prince would be used against him somehow. He didn't trust Cithrel, but he'd be an idiot to spill his secrets to Solonar. So instead, Eric matched the prince's sugared voice and fell back in step, continuing their walk through the gardens.

"You're right, Crown Prince," Eric began letting the saccharine words flow. "The prince commander has been quite busy already. If you wish, I will speak relatively freely."

"Of course." Amber eyes shone back at Eric, eager. Their dangerous game of words began.

"The empress's choice of words was interesting yesterday."

"That's not a question," he pointed out.

"Well, what did she mean she by chosen? I'm sure she wasn't talking to me." He feigned ignorance, his brows knitted together.

The crown prince gaged Eric's reaction, a curve to his lip. "No, she wasn't talking to you."

When he didn't elaborate further Eric just nodded, accepting the answer. "I see."

"And I can see the wheels turning in your head." Solonar's smirk turned into a wide smile, his canines gleaming. "Tell me what you're thinking."

Eric kept his pace as they walked, rounding a bend in the earthen path. A patch of bright yellow flowers, the tips of their petals an even brighter blue, reminded him of Cithrel's eyes. "I was wondering if that had anything to do with why I was Marked. Why I'm now living in the palace and under the fourth prince's protection instead of dead. Why the crown prince himself has sought me out."

Solonar burst into laughter at that. Eric's stomach twisted, the peel of laughter grating on him. They stopped walking abruptly, and faster than Eric could follow, Solonar's hand hovered an inch from Eric's face, forcing Eric to look at him. "I'm starting to understand how such a weak thing like you could survive so long in the Adler estate. You're quite clever."

Eric frowned, unable to hide his rising anger. The crown prince already knew everything about his background, that he was a pleasure slave of Lord Aimar's before he tried to escape. Now he was trying to use that against Eric to provoke him, to lure him into saying something he shouldn't.

"You're very kind, Crown Prince," he said, refusing to take the bait.

For a moment, they stood in silence, challenging one another to slip up. It was the crown prince who gave in first, his hand falling back at his side before knitting them together behind his back.

"Shall I tell you then?"

This time, Eric kept quiet. He could feel the way the crown prince looked at him. Sizing up his meal, as if the Fae hadn't eaten in weeks. The hunger emanated from Solonar as he gazed with those amber-slitted eyes.

"Everything is because of this."

Eric stiffened as the crown prince pointed at the Marking on his forearm. He blinked, his eyes widening a little. Solonar's sudden interest was because of the Marking.

"That mark is how a weak human like you has magic." Eric's heart pounded as Solonar spoke. He didn't miss the crown prince's lip pull back at the words. "A gift from the emperor."

Eric furrowed his brow, while his insides churned and twisted. The Marking on his arm and the ability to use magic, that was all from the emperor but he had no idea why. Solonar's answers still didn't explain anything. The empress had said Eric was chosen but he didn't know why. He was just as much in the dark as Solonar why he, a human slave, was chosen to be blessed by the aether. After five years of being imprisoned in this world Eric had never heard of anyone being Marked, let alone by the emperor.

The unanswered questions didn't stop and it was probably why Eric didn't notice that Solonar was suddenly close to him, very close. The prince towered over Eric, his lips next to Eric's ear. "I can help you get rid of that gift."

Eric looked around, seeing that they were in a dead end of the garden. A high stone wall covered in moss stood behind him, while the packed dirt path they came from was the only exit. He swallowed down the rising fear in his throat. His hands gripped his pants so his nails didn't dig into his palms.

"That's very generous of you, Crown Prince," Eric said, hazel eyes glancing around for any sign of help or escape. "But I wouldn't dare reject such an honor from the Imperial Family, or rather, from the emperor himself."

Solonar's eyes darkened, which gave his smile an entirely different feeling. "Even if getting rid of it meant you could be free to leave Alonetha?"

Shit. The crown prince was baiting Eric, he had to be. His offer had to have some truth to it, but that meant there was a potentially fatal *if* to his truth.

Eric's heart thumped erratically, aware of just how isolated he was. He stepped back.

The crown prince stepped forward at the same time. They mirrored each other in a sickening dance until he was backed against the wall, moss pressed into his shirt. Jet black hair fell against his face as the crown prince stared down at him. He pressed his hand on the wall above Eric's head, long fingers splayed.

"Is my offer not tempting enough for you?" he said, his warm breath on Eric's face. It was, that was the problem.

Solonar's words sent a shiver through Eric, along with his scent, smoke and ash. The air heated with magic that emanated from the crown prince. Eric was unable to look away from Solonar, his lips parted.

Their faces were inches apart as the crown prince stepped in closer to him, their bodies almost pressed together. A different look crossed Solonar then, one Eric couldn't make sense of. The same predatory eyes roved over him as the prince's hand slid down the moss-covered wall until it was next to Eric's face.

Eric swallowed, his heart racing in his chest, unable to look away from the crown prince unless he wanted to die. He was in trouble.

A javelin whistled through the air so fast Eric didn't know it was coming until it was embedded in the wall next to his face. In its wake was the scent of citrus and metal, Cithrel's scent. His relief at seeing the fourth prince was overshadowed by the fact that he was almost impaled by his javelin.

The crown prince should have been gored by the javelin, but he was already several feet in front of Eric, his arms bathed in brilliant blue flames. The javelin next to Eric vanished. As Cithrel stalked towards his brother, a plain-looking gladius shimmered and manifested in his hand.

"It took you longer than expected to get here," Solonar taunted. Fire swam over his body like a second skin.

One minute Cithrel was in front of his brother. The next, he was behind him in a flash. The only thing Eric saw was the look of surprise and rage on Solonar's face. "It seems to take you even longer to learn," Cithrel said as his sword ripped through the crown prince's chest.

A snarl ripped from the raven-haired prince as he darted away. Deep gold liquid pumped as Solonar clutched at his wound, a look somewhere between a grimace and rage on his face. The Fae skin moved of its own

volition under Solonar's palm, knotting itself back together until the wound was completely healed.

"It's aggravating how hypocritical you are," the crown prince hissed at Cithrel, casting a sinister glance at Eric. "What kind of protector are you to leave him by himself?" He lunged at his brother, attempting to burn Cithrel alive.

"Perhaps you should have listened better in the Throne Room." Cithrel parried, moving in front of Eric. Eric's stomach knotted. "The empress said the human wasn't to be harmed."

"I said I wouldn't lay a hand on him and I kept my word. Am I not allowed to even speak with the human that's been Marked?" The flames that bathed Solonar vanished in a wisp of smoke, his face a mask of boredom seeing that Cithrel wouldn't move from in front of Eric.

"You've talked to him long enough. Leave," Cithrel snapped.

The crown prince waved a dismissive hand at his brother before catching Eric's eye. "Don't forget what we talked about," Solonar called over his shoulder as he started to walk away. "I know I won't."

Eric stiffened, his hairs standing on end. He didn't have a chance to respond because before he could blink Solonar was gone. A second later Cithrel's hand was wrapped around Eric's wrist, hard as iron.

"Don't go near him again," he said. Then he turned and dragged Eric from the Imperial Gardens.

When they reached the edge of the gardens Malor was waiting for them. There were traces of dirt and black blood on Malor's overcoat. His tunic was torn and exposed his birch skin. Eric realized without satisfaction that Sir Malor would have been punished for listening to the crown prince's order and leaving Eric alone with Solonar.

Cithrel let go of Eric's arm and left him in front of Malor. "Next time I order you to protect him, do it. I don't give a shit what the crown prince says."

"Yes, Prince Commander," Malor said. With that, Cithrel stalked off, his hands fisted at his sides.

The walk back to his living quarters was silent. Back in his rooms, even Hinni wasn't much for conversation. Eric didn't see anyone else for the rest of the day. He couldn't stop thinking about the offer Solonar made him.

Part of what he said had to be true. But it was whichever parts he left out that Eric was concerned about. If he could get rid of Eric's Marking and his magic, and he could be free, what was the cost? Eric's life?

Eric spent hours mulling it all over, until his eyes were bloodshot and he was almost asleep. As he nodded off, his head snapped up, startling himself awake. When his eyes focused again, he was staring at the wall where the enchanted door was.

He shot up in bed, his half-asleep brain struggling to think. Solonar had said Eric didn't even know how to control his magic. If the crown prince was trying to get Eric to agree to his offer, then he probably didn't want Eric to learn how to use his Marking at all.

Eric looked from his Marking to the door and back again. He chewed on his lip a moment, mulling it over. Both times he used his magic, he had lost control of it completely, and almost killed Cithrel. It would be a huge risk to try and call on it and use it by himself. There were about a million things that could go wrong for him.

Shoving himself out of bed, he padded across the floors to sit in front of the wall where the enchanted door stood. No matter how he thought about it, leaving his life in the hands of the crown prince was worse than anything his magic could do to him.

Eric scrubbed his face before he lifted his Marked arm and pressed his palm to the wall. He took in a deep breath and then, with an exhale, squared his shoulders. Eric was going to find a way to use his magic and he would start by breaking the enchantment.

Chapter Seven

Nothing happened. Eric gritted his teeth and pressed his hand against the wall again, his fingers splayed. Using magic of his own volition was something he'd never done before, so maybe there needed to be more concentration.

That's what he told himself for the next several hours, with nothing to show for it.

By this time, the night was almost through. Closing his tired eyes, he took in a deep breath and held it. Then, with a slow exhale he emptied his mind of any other thoughts.

Open.

Nothing.

Open.

Still nothing.

Release! Break! Please open!

Nothing, nothing, and nothing.

"I need to do this." Eric's chest heaved. His hand slid down the wall. "This might be my only chance."

There was no telling how long Solonar would leave him alone to consider his offer. The sooner he could defend himself, the less likely it was that the crown prince would try anything. The feeling of Solonar's breath on his face was reminder enough that he wasn't going to be safe with just Malor and Cithrel.

"Come on." Eric gritted his teeth, trying and failing again to break the enchantment. "Fuck!"

Eric's forehead pressed against the wall. He had no god-damned idea what he was doing. The promise he made to Garret and Elena felt childish. Even with a connection to the aether, he wasn't any closer to getting strong enough to escape.

With a sigh, Eric ran a hand through his hair, more annoyed than usual at the knots in his curls. After his run this morning and walk through the gardens, all he wanted to do was forget. But what he actually forgot to do was bathe.

He was tired and dirty, and after smelling himself, reeked. That was all the convincing he needed to get off the floor and go take a bath, then get at least a few hours of sleep. With his back turned to the enchanted door, he told himself he'd try again tomorrow night.

When Eric woke up, he was relieved to smell fresh linen and petrichor, and even more relieved not to smell his stench from yesterday. Rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, he sat up and noticed it was pouring rain outside. So much for going for a morning run then.

Shoving off the covers, Eric made his way over to his armoire. He took his time slipping into a pair of black pants that hung loose past his hips. Feeling how loose they were around the waist, he knew he had a ways to go to put some weight and muscle back on. Stretching out his shoulders, he grabbed a nearby charcoal tunic off its hanger. As he slouched into it, he noticed that the back of the tunic hung lower in the shape of a fishtail. He thought about changing out of it when he heard someone clear their throat behind him.

"Good morning, Eric," Hinni's soft voice greeted.

"Morning," he said, rubbing the back of his neck, "Sorry, I didn't realize I wasn't alone."

"It's quite alright." The lithe Fae flitted to the table with breakfast. "I've seen you in worse condition."

Eric chewed on his lip, unhappy to be reminded of what happened in the Black Thorn, which reminded him of what Solonar told him in the gardens. "Hinni, how long was I in the Black Thorn?"

Hinni paused in the middle of setting Eric's place at the table, for just a fraction of a second, then she recovered. "About three days."

Eric nodded, taking his seat. He was fairly certain there was no way for Solonar to lie about that, but it was good to hear Hinni confirm it. What was odd was that Cithrel never mentioned it. He likely couldn't be bothered.

With a huff, Eric bit into a piece of thick-cut meat that tasted a lot like bacon. He didn't ask what animal it actually was, but it was delicious.

"It looks like it's going to rain all day," Eric commented between bites.

"It usually does," she agreed.

"I think I'll go to the library today then."

Hinni nodded, her smile back. "The palace library is beautiful."

It was probably ancient and massive. "I imagine it is."

"I'll inform the prince commander."

Eric halted mid-bite. "What?"

"He asked that I inform him of your activities beforehand. I don't believe he has any pressing matters in court today."

"Makes sense," he mumbled. He finished his bite, though his food lost its taste. He didn't want to spend time with Cithrel.

Eric finished with breakfast and then stared out the window, watching the raindrops patter against the glass. When the door to his room swung open, he was only half-disappointed to see Cithrel standing there. The prince's hair was in a single high ponytail today with thin braids at his temples.

As Eric got up from the windowsill, the prince's eyes drifted to Eric's outfit, looking him up and down. On his way back up, his gaze lingered on the questionably revealing tunic that left half of Eric's chest exposed. He stared longer than Eric thought he should before he looked back up. It sent a small thrill through him before he quashed the feeling. He had no reason to have any good feelings towards the prince.

"Let's go," Cithrel said, his jaw set.

"Yes, Your Highness." Eric smiled. It wasn't until the prince's back was turned that the smile fell from his face and was replaced with a grimace.

The walk to the library was more awkward than Eric thought possible. Cithrel did his best not to stomp ahead of Eric, but that made it so much worse to walk next to each other without a word.

He was slowly getting used to the looks he got from other Fae in the palace now, too. Most of them averted their eyes, since they were in the prince's presence, but some couldn't help but look at him with disgust, or loathing. Eric thought one soldier would rip his throat open from the way his blood-red eyes burned with killing intent.

"Hurry up," Cithrel called ahead of him, drawing Eric's attention from the angry Fae soldier.

Eric kept his head low the rest of the way through the palace's annexes until they reached the doors to the Imperial Library. Cithrel stepped in front of the floor to ceiling archway that led into the library, preventing Eric from continuing.

"This library can be dangerous, so don't wander off on your own."

What the hell did that mean? Eric knew the prince likely didn't mean anything by it, but his words came off as condescending. It made it harder for Eric to ignore it and nod.

"I won't, Your Highness."

Cithrel regarded him, a hidden emotion in the blues of his eyes, before stepping aside and leading Eric into the library.

Eric's eyes went wide. Cithrel was right when he said the library was dangerous. It was *massive*. Even that word didn't really do this part of the palace justice. The Imperial Library took on a life of its own—literally.

There were trees that grew untamed, their branches extending through entire bookcases before they broke through the impossibly high ceilings and kept going well past where Eric could see. The library shelves weren't much smaller.

The bookshelves grew from the ground and continued to grow over 50 feet high to the ceiling, before they were carved and shaped to store thousands upon thousands of books. There were several images of a black doe surrounded by thorns and thicket burned into the wood of various shelves. Among the shelves hung metal bars painted in metallic emerald, gold, and black.

Eric only remembered to keep walking when Cithrel shoved him forward. "What do you want to read?" When he didn't answer the prince sighed. "Did you just want to go to the library to stand there all day?"

For a cold-hearted prince, he was pretty damn sarcastic. Eric bit back a snide remark. "History, Your Highness."

Cithrel's expression fell, his lips tightening. "History."

"History," Eric repeated with a nod.

The prince didn't say anything else and disappeared down a long and winding corridor that was lined with books, leaving Eric standing by himself. He looked around and noticed he was literally standing by himself. There were no librarians in sight. He guessed that was where Cithrel must have gone.

He knew Cithrel told him not to wander off, so he started pacing in the main atrium of the library, not daring to go down any aisle. That was when he saw a blur from the corner of his eye.

Eric whirled but there was no one there. A feeling of being watched crawled up along Eric's spine. Another flash of movement came from his

peripheries. This time he caught sight of the culprit.

A Fae with skin that looked like a dried-out onion stood among the vaulting shelves of the gigantic library. Milky brown eyes looked up from their book to stare directly at Eric. The Fae's pupils looked like static from a TV, scattering across his irises. He looked as old as half the books in the Imperial Library, his movements as slow and quiet as a whisper.

Eric opened his mouth to say something when he heard Cithrel bark from behind him. "Over here!"

When Eric turned back to the withered-looking Fae, he was gone. Eric rubbed his arms, his chill returning. Cithrel was waiting for him with his arms crossed. Eric couldn't tell if he was irritated or if that was his usual face.

"You didn't say what kind of history you wanted to read," Cithrel said, leading Eric down a shadowed and dusty aisle. "So I just looked for general history."

Eric blinked in surprise. He didn't expect the prince to be so accommodating. "Thank you, Your Highness." This time he actually meant it. "I'd like to learn more about the palace itself. Or perhaps the history of the Imperial Family. I'm grateful for the empress's generosity."

Cithrel gave him a long look over his shoulder. Pinned by those piercing eyes, it was hard not to drown in the bottomless blue that looked back. It wasn't until the prince looked away from Eric, his white-blond ponytail swaying with his steps, that he answered.

"This way."

After a few minutes of walking, Eric understood why Cithrel had given him such a dirty look when he dumbly said history. The entire section they were walking through was the Alonethan history section. He didn't think through just how far Fae history would date back to when they generally lived for a millennia.

Eric gnawed on his lip as they walked, unable to shake the creeping feeling that he was being watched as they meandered the history section. He hoped it wasn't that ancient-looking Fae following him.

After what felt like a small eternity, Cithrel stopped at a section of books. The smell of old wood and dust filled his lungs as Eric moved to stand next to Cithrel. He'd stopped at the origins of the city of Alonetha, which included the first family.

"I'll find us a lamp while you pick out some books." Before Eric could say anything Cithrel vanished, clearly on a mission.

Eric stared at the hundreds of book spines that stared back at him. His mind went blank, overwhelmed by just how much information there was on the Imperial Family. Staring at all the spines was starting to hurt his eyes when he saw something strange.

He leaned in close to be sure, but there was a book with a design along the spine that looked a lot like the Marking on his arm. Eric's gaze sidled from the book to his arm and back again. There was no mistake. It was the same symbol.

"Did you choose some books?" Cithrel's voice startled Eric from his thoughts.

"Y-yes, Your Highness," he lied, grabbing the book with symbols before he randomly pulled a few others off the shelf as well. As he reached out, Eric realized his hand was shaking, riddled with nerves.

With a half dozen books in his arms, Eric scurried after the prince, who now held a lamp lit by aether, and followed him to a reading nook. "Nook" was an accurate description, since where Cithrel led them was a sitting area carved from one of the wild trees that grew in the middle of the Imperial Library.

The prince sat in what looked like a seat and set the lamp down. "Start reading."

"Yes, Your Highness." Eric dipped his head.

The prince's eyes lingered on Eric, waiting like a stone statue. He saw where Sir Malor got his stoniness from. With an exhale of resignation, Eric slumped in a neighboring seat and reached for the book on top of the stack, his mouth thinned.

The book was deep green in color and made of what felt like tree bark, weathered after centuries. The cover of the book was completely blank, but it gave off the scent of ancient pine and brisk air. A lot of the Fae's language was rooted in the aether, which meant the Fae preferred to go by the way aether felt first and foremost. Since these were history books, the authors obviously didn't like to waste time with words.

Eric wondered if he would have been able to sense the book that matched his Mark. He had to admit that the book had a feeling to it before Eric had noticed it in the first place. Shaking off the thought, Eric cracked

open the green book. This book in particular discussed the history of the most famous and infamous balls, dinner parties, and ceremonies among the Fae nobles, including the Imperial Family.

Lord Aimar had him learn the language of the Fae when he first became his slave. He would send him to find a certain book and bring it back to him. When Eric inevitably failed, he suffered through beatings. He learnt the language faster than most because of it. He glanced at his wrists, which had several small scars along them.

When Eric turned back to his reading, he was surprised how many scandals were traced back to a single Fae, Archduke Halwin. Halwin managed to cause a scene at not one but two crowning ceremonies for new emperors—the first time due to how blindly drunk he got, the second because of very obvious rejections after failing miserably to court other Fae nobles. As he read, it was clear that Halwin was an impossibly old Fae, living much longer than was normal, even by Fae standards. His legacy was enough to grant him leniency for his repeated social embarrassments. On one occasion, Halwin almost destroyed the birth of a new tree, the ones that grow after a new emperor is crowned. Each tree made up part of the wooded cage that surrounded the palace. By the time he flipped through the last pages, Eric hoped he would never have to attend a social season.

He peeked up at Cithrel to see the prince buried in a book of his own that he'd picked up along the way. Good. He wasn't paying attention to Eric so he felt comfortable reaching for the mysterious book he'd found earlier.

Eric didn't know why, but somehow he felt like he shouldn't be reading the book. Definitely not in front of the prince.

Still, as his fingertips brushed the tarnished black cover, a jolt ran up through his arm. That was all it took for his Marking to react to the contents of the book. Dust motes floated in the warm light of the lamp. A familiar sting ran up Eric's arm, moving in rhythmic waves as if the pain called to this book.

"Eric?" Cithrel asked but Eric didn't answer. He couldn't. He was paralyzed by the book. Then, as Cithrel's eyes fell on the book, his vision darkened and he shouted something, but Eric couldn't hear him anymore.

The damaged black book reeked of ash and putrid decay. Eric's hands moved on their own and opened the book. His body shuddered, fighting back bile.

Every single page was blackened and burned. The rotting smell worsened the more he flipped through the pages. Eric screamed at his body to listen to him and stop but the aching that ran through his body was in control now. The sound of pages fluttering filled the air and the light from the lamp was snuffed out until the fluttering turned into another sound. Slithering.

Eric blanched as he watched jet black vines and sharp thorns churn and spill from the charred pages and onto the floor at his feet. Thorns cut at his skin as they emerged from the book. He wanted to scream but his body remained frozen, clutching the book. The harder he tried to let go, the tighter his fingers gripped the book. When one of the raven vines curled itself around Eric's arm, touching his Marking, a second jolt coursed through him. Then, from the darkness, a voice spoke.

Vessel. Pain.

Wish. Agony.

Crown. Torture.

Each word sent a fresh current of fire up his arm and into his chest. He was convinced he was having a heart attack, ready for his body to give out and collapse. His heart thundered in his chest but he still couldn't let go of this book. The vines and thorns now rooted themselves onto Eric's arms and chest, as if he himself was their new home. Thorns pierced his skin, drawing blood. The vines pulsed, as if Eric's blood fed them, nourished them.

His body convulsed, rejecting the foul-smelling magic of rot and ruin. He was finally able to fling the book away, watching it skitter and fall open on the ground. The thorns and vines vanished, leaving Eric and Cithrel alone again. Every movement stung and Eric noticed with horror that not all the vines disappeared. The thorns on him were still there, constricting, gouging his flesh, taking more of his blood. *Feeding.*

He cried out in terror, realizing that the thorns now came from him and not from the book. Tears stung his eyes as his skin was flayed by his own magic. Color began to drain from his vision and his blood roared.

Something wrapped around him, hard but somehow warm, his vision going dark. Blackened and rotting vines spasmed before striking at the crumbling book like adders. Sounds of churning and squishing lessened until they stopped all together.

Eric didn't move even when the room fell silent, except for his own shaking breaths. He realized it was Cithrel that held him, his hand over Eric's face. The darkness was a small mercy. As he fell into Cithrel's embrace and their bodies clung to one another, he became suddenly aware that the prince's heart was also racing.

The longer they held each other, the more Eric clung to the prince, listening to his steady heartbeat. He pressed himself tighter to Cithrel, drowning out all other thoughts, as if his heartbeat alone could calm Eric down. He felt the prince's muscles go rigid. Eric felt himself stiffen, aware of how pressed up against each other they were. Sucking in a deep breath, and tasting only air, no magic, he looked up at Cithrel. Eric's lips parted; Cithrel's eyes were already on him, the blue seemingly devouring the hazel in Eric's.

A different feeling entirely flooded through Eric's chest and his body warmed. Their sudden closeness blurred his better judgement and all Eric wanted to do was kiss him. An ocean of blue stared back at him, almost as wide-eyed as Eric was.

Eric felt Cithrel's breath on his cheek as he let out a soft groan. His heart raced with a deep want to be closer to Cithrel, closer, as he moved to wrap his arms around the prince's neck. A whimper of pleasure spilled from him, wanting more. Feverish, he slid his hand down the prince's pants.

Cithrel had suddenly gone still. Eric watched as the prince's summer sky gaze froze over into a tundra. Eric's face paled as he understood too late what he had done. Cithrel's hand wrapped around his throat as he threw Eric down, the back of his skull cracked on the stone floors. The desire to touch and be touched was crushed as his head rang with a blast of pain. Fear coated his nerves.

"I did not say you could touch me." Cithrel's low voice growled. "Do not lay your hands on me, slave."

His grip on Eric's throat tightened, choking out any air. The look in Cithrel's eyes were feverish, almost panicked, as he held Eric pinned. Eric's eyes burned as tears slid down his cheeks. What was he thinking, throwing himself at the prince? The last time he touched Cithrel he was choked and slammed into a wall. Cithrel had warned him then not to let it happen again. What the fuck was wrong with Eric? He was disgusting.

"I'm sorry, Your Highness." Eric choked the words out, his world still spinning. "I don't know what happened."

"You have no idea what you just did," he hissed, wrenching himself away from Eric. There was an edge to the prince's voice, something other than anger. "I shouldn't have hesitated to kill you back then. Then we wouldn't be in this mess."

The words gutted Eric, guilt resurfacing. He closed his eyes, hoping he could stop seeing Garret and Elena's torn and bloodied bodies, their lifeless eyes staring up at him. But it was the prince who was responsible for their deaths, not Eric. It was Cithrel who was the monster here. Something dark in Eric bubbled to the surface.

"Why don't you kill me now then?" Eric's voice was quiet.

Cithrel's fury froze. "What did you just say?"

"Why did you hesitate to kill me? And what's stopping you from killing me now?" He glared up at prince, clambering to his feet, his head throbbing with pain.

"If that Marking ever comes off your arm, I will." The grim promise hung in the air as Cithrel marched out of sight.

All the rage left Eric when the prince did, and he slumped back down. It was dark by the time Eric found the will to get up and try to find his back to his room. Cithrel never came back for him. Luckily, or not, no one bothered him as he trudged through the halls. When he arrived at his rooms, his door was wide open and he wasn't surprised to see Hinni waiting, as patiently as ever, a smile on her lips.

She let him eat in silence and was quick to go once he was done. He was running on fumes when he climbed into the aether-imbued tub and sunk into the near-boiling water. Looking down at himself, he felt more dirty than before and even more powerless in the Fae world.

He was getting whiplash from spending time with Cithrel. The prince was cold enough to freeze hell half the time, but every now and then he'd show Eric a thread of kindness. He didn't know what to make of it, other than the fact that he really did not like to be touched. Eric understood that feeling, even though it meant he sympathized with Cithrel, a man who had choked him twice now.

Once his skin had begun to wrinkle, Eric dragged himself out of the water and towelled off. He was exhausted and ready to collapse when he

noticed a single piece of thick paper on the table. It was folded just once with moonlight streaming down on it. Eric stood there and stared at it across the room, an uneasy feeling growing. He knew it wasn't there before and he didn't hear anyone entering or leaving his room.

A heartbeat later, Eric held the paper and unfolded it with shaking hands.

I gave you my offer. Give me your answer by the new moon.

The short letter wasn't signed but Eric knew who it was from. The crown prince. The note fell from Eric's hand, his eyes going to the nearest window. The thin crescent shape of the moon glowed back down at Eric. That meant he had a little less than a week to give Solonar an answer.

He knew he couldn't agree to the prince's offer, but he had a feeling refusing the offer would lead to the same end if he accepted anyways. Eric's hands balled into fists, the thick stationary crumpling. It felt like the palace walls were closing in on him.

Just then, the note itself sparked and burst into flames. He jumped back from the note on the floor and watched the paper turn to ash in a matter of seconds. Eric ran a hand through his wet curls, trying to calm himself down and think straight.

He still had no idea what happened in the library today, and he hadn't even been able to read that strange book. As soon as he touched it, the pages had possessed him. Thinking back, the pages themselves were scorched and black. He couldn't read them even if he wanted to, unless that was all in his mind. There was no way to know unless he went back to the library and found that book again.

Eric shook his head. There was no way he was ready for that. He turned his head to look back at the enchanted wall where the door of his room lay beneath. With only a week left, he didn't have a choice. Squaring his shoulders, he moved to sit down in front of where the door should be. He had less than a week to find a way to control his magic and break the enchantment. Otherwise, he didn't stand a chance against the crown prince.

Chapter Eight

Five days had already passed since Eric tried to summon his magic and break the enchantment on his door, but he was no closer to understanding his Marking or its connection to the aether. The only progress he was making was how far he got during his morning runs before he wanted to pass out and the amount of push-ups and sit-ups he could manage. It wasn't like the Fae had a gym for him to use—supernatural beings didn't need to work out to maintain their appearances, not the way Eric did. Still, all of the nights he was spending awake were catching up to him, and it didn't escape Hinni's notice. Which meant it wouldn't escape Cithrel's notice, either.

"You're still having trouble sleeping, Eric?" she asked, her black eyes somehow pitying even further. "Have the tonics not been helping?"

"Looks that way." It wasn't a total lie. Even when he did try to sleep for a couple hours each night after failing, his thoughts ran rampant and kept him up. "Those tonics haven't been sitting well.... They make me sick." That was a total lie, and he felt a little guilty telling it to Hinni, of all Fae. The concern in her eyes made his guilt writhe in his stomach.

He took another bite of this morning's meal. Today was a colorful array of vegetables with salted honey-glazed bread, some smoked meat, and some fruit spreads. He wolfed the meat down as soon as he got to the table.

"It's alright, though," he amended. "I think it's getting better... slowly."

She sighed as Eric took another bite. "You should let me inquire with the prince commander about a serum for you, then."

He paused before swallowing his mouthful. "I don't want to interrupt his court duties."

"Did something happen?" Eric froze until Hinni continued. "When you were with the crown prince?"

Oh, that's what she meant. He was being paranoid for nothing. There was no way Cithrel would have told anyone what happened between the two of them in the library, not when there weren't any witnesses. If that ancient librarian saw anything, he'd kept his mouth shut.

"Nothing you haven't heard already." He smirked at Hinni. "Looking for some good gossip amongst the other Fae?"

She gave him a knowing smile. "You're very charming, Eric, but no. I'm not looking for some good gossip. I just worry about you."

At that, Eric's smile fell. She really did care about Eric. She was telling the truth. Remorse gnawed at his insides knowing he was lying to her, who at this point felt like his only friend. He managed a weak smile. "I know you do, Hinni, and thank you for that."

He choked down the rest of his meal until Hinni was gone, leaving him alone with Malor. The stoic knight spoke to Eric even less after what happened in the gardens than before, but he never took those smoldering green eyes off of Eric. After a few days of trying to start some kind of conversation with the knight, Eric gave up and lived with the weighty silence.

Eric headed outside, Malor in tow, for his morning run. There were bigger things for him to worry about—like finding a way to use his magic and having a chance at defending himself against the crown prince. Two days was all the time Eric had to use the aether that flowed through his blood.

As he and Malor rounded another corner along the walled pathway outside the palace, Eric was almost out of breath. Once he managed to call on his Marking, then he had to come up with a way to protect himself from Solonar.

The raven-haired prince's note only said that he wanted Eric's answer by the new moon. He didn't say where or how he would get that answer, or what he would do once he had it. Eric's heart rate galloped from his run and at the thought of what the crown prince planned to do with him.

Sweat dripped down his face by the time he finished his run, his damp curls stuck to the back of his neck. While Eric started back toward his wing of the palace to cool down, a creeping sensation crawled up his back, the kind of feeling that he was being watched. He spun around, but Malor was the only other being with him in the courtyards. That must have been the sixth or seventh time he got that sensation since being in the palace. Someone was watching him, he was sure of it.

After that, the day went by in a blur of unsuccessful studying and idle conversation with Hinni. By the time he was alone for the night the sun was low enough that the sky was painted a sea of violet and honey. The Imperial Gardens below were empty, half the flowers already closed for the night.

Thinking about the atrocities of this city was a luxury he didn't have as he strode over to the enchanted door of his room. He knelt in front of the wall that held his gilded prison doors and closed his eyes. The only progress made in the last five days was the familiar sting that ran up his arm. Anything past that was more than he could manage so far. But that would change tonight.

He hoped.

One long exhale later and every fear, every insecurity, everything else fell away from him. All that was in Eric's mind was calling out to the aether running through his veins. The singular thought resonated through his body, beckoning his slumbering magic to wake.

A shiver trailed down his spine as the familiar burn ran up his arm, leaving goose bumps in its wake, but nothing happened. His face contorted but he kept his eyes shut tight. The same thought ran through him, more forceful this time, and the sensation of burning skin intensified. But still nothing. No grotesque vines and thorns grew from his own bone and blood, no scent of death and rot in the air, no magic.

It went on like this for hours with no success, sitting through what felt like cooking his own skin over and over. His shoulders slumped as he pulled away from the wall, his breathing heavy. "Shit."

What the hell was he going to do tomorrow night when the crown prince came to get his answer? He looked down at his Marking with contempt. It didn't matter if he was blessed by aether or whatever the empress said if he couldn't use his magic.

"*Shit*," he swore again.

Anger warred with helplessness for dominance as Eric felt himself spiralling. There was no damn way he was going to be powerless against the crown prince and his sick agenda. The Fae were not a people to be trusted, let alone the future emperor. His teeth ground together the longer he looked at his Marking. His anger won.

Eric dragged his nails over his Marking and tore at it over and over and over again. He ignored the sting as red welts formed on his arm as he clawed. If this Mark wasn't going to help him, then he didn't want it anymore. Any reminder of this stained and dark world only made it worse. He refused to look at a symbol of the Fae, the symbol of his captors.

Blood welled as he kept raking his skin and his temper rose and rose until it felt like all he could see was red. Whether it was his blood or rancor, he didn't know.

Abruptly, heat ran its way up his arm and filled his chest, swelling with a burning rage. His breath came as quick as his heartbeat. He pressed both of his palms against the wall, his knuckles whitening as his fingers splayed wide. The singular thought of wrath intensified the searing sensation in his body.

It was already late into the night, and so dark in his room, but he was sure the world seemed to fall into black and white. Then he felt it. The same sensation he had had when he was with Cithrel, the smell of worms feasting on carcasses filling his lungs as his Mark seared deep with an intense burning. The empowering feeling filled him, but one minute it was there and the next it was gone. When he looked up, the gilded doors of his room stared back. The enchantment was broken.

Eric stared slack-jawed at the doors, half-convinced he was seeing things after not sleeping for so long. He reached a tentative hand out and ran his fingers across gold lacquered roots embossed on the door. The wood grain was smooth to the touch. He did it.

Eric let loose a nervous laugh and clambered to his feet. He wrapped his hands around the handles and pushed. He blinked again in giddy disbelief when the door swung open the way any door normally would.

Everything else fell away from him as he stared into the empty and dim aether-lit hallway. He forgot about the blood dripping down his forearm, about the anger that had corrupted him moments ago, or the sleep deprivation that was stronger than ever. As if in a trance, Eric blindly put one foot in front of the other until he was standing in the hallway in the middle of the night.

He didn't know how long he stood in that hallway for until he heard the sound of far-off footsteps headed his way. The fog in Eric's brain abruptly cleared and he was thrust back into reality like being punched in the stomach.

He had done it. He called on his magic and used it to break the enchantment, but that didn't mean he was free to go. This was the palace and it would be crawling with guards who wanted nothing more than to have their blood-soaked nails wrapped around Eric's neck.

The door to Eric's room closed with a soft thud a moment later with him on the inside. The impulse to run was just a momentary lapse of common sense. Now he needed to sleep and get whatever rest he could scrape together before tomorrow night. Before Solonar came for answers.

Morning came with an uncaring vengeance, bright sunlight burning Eric's eyelids and forcing him awake. Everything was draining today—breakfast, his agonizing run, even his afternoon nap somehow left him feeling groggy and even more tired when he awoke.

The dreary haze was lifted with a sudden excruciating jolt when he bolted upright in bed that evening to see Solonar standing in his darkly-lit doorway. He wasn't asleep, he couldn't after his midday nap, but he'd been laying there waiting for this inevitable meeting. It wasn't a surprise but he still dreaded it.

Eric slid out of bed and bowed to greet the heir to the throne. "Good evening, Crown Prince. What can I do for you tonight?"

The crown prince was dressed in all black, with a form-fitting coat. Hanging off his shoulders was a long raven cloak, with touches of red detailing. Ruby studs lining his ears managed to find whatever light a stray lamp cast and gleamed, which only accentuated his high, hollowed cheekbones. The coat opened to reveal his skin-tight shirt and sleek trousers underneath. Solonar's pupils thinned to slits as he sized Eric up.

He flashed a grin and held out his hand by way of greeting. "Since you're awake in the middle of the night, I assume you received my note. Don't be demure."

The prince crossed the threshold into Eric's room with the grace of a reaper, ready to claim its freshest soul. Eric pressed himself closer to the wall opposite Solonar. He didn't dare glance towards the door, but hope died in his periphery as the door vanished behind the enchantment.

"I did, Crown Prince."

"Then you know I'm here for your answer to my generous proposal. I have to be honest, little human, I'm not used to waiting so long, well, for anything, really. You're quite interesting. To think, a treasure like you was hidden away deep within the Adlar estate."

Eric bit his tongue to not recoil at the mention of that Fae mansion of nightmares. He refused to go back there, to that white-eyed devil. "You flatter me, Crown Prince."

Solonar pinned Eric with his gaze, the grin falling from his lips. The prince took several steps towards Eric, blocking his path. "I'm done waiting, human. Give me your answer."

Eric went still as his heart thundered, with only the table between them. "While it's a flattering, and tempting offer, I don't wish to tempt the aether by defying its wishes for me." Bullshit, all of it, every single word, but he knew he'd rather put his life in the hands of the empress over the crown prince. "I will obey the empress and remain Marked within the palace. I'm very sorry, Crown Prince."

The smile on Solonar's face was wiped clean the way a sandcastle is swept away by the ocean, instant and crushing. Left in its wake was the gaze of a hungry beast, barely tempered fury in its amber eyes.

"You're sorry," Solonar repeated, his velvet voice low. "You say that, but I can see the lies in your eyes. Yet another reason why you humans are so disgusting. You lack respect, consumed as you are by your selfish desires. It's why the aether abandoned you millennia ago, damning you to live in the severed world."

The crown prince moved even closer to Eric. Now he was barely out of reach. Eric's blood roared in his veins, but he kept deathly still. Solonar was almost, *almost*, far enough from the doorway. His only chance was to use his magic or get to Cithrel, wherever he was.

"But," Solonar cut through Eric's rampant thoughts, "if you say you're so sorry, human, then you can let the aether bless someone else."

Eric stopped breathing, stopped moving. His words were slow and flat. "What do you mean by that?"

"It will have to choose someone else if you're dead." Solonar's words crackled through the air, electric. They buzzed in Eric's ears.

He bolted for the space where the door hid, not waiting a second longer, and pressed both palms up against the wall. He threw himself and his magic at the wall, needing it to open, demanding it. Like the heavens opening, the enchantment shattered and revealed the door. Eric had a fraction of a second to scream Cithrel's name. His cry was cut off when he felt nails like razors gouge his neck before grabbing the back of his shirt. Eric's eyes went wide from the sharp sting as Solonar caught him with ease and threw him to the ground.

In response, Solonar bent down until they were eye level, his hair forming a dark curtain around his face. "Now why would you do that? Just die quietly like the weak, selfish thing you are."

"Go to hell," Eric hissed.

He welcomed the anger that bubbled to the surface and putrid vines erupted all around Eric. The rotted plants swarmed Solonar with the hunger of a disease and coiled around his limbs.

Then, with crushing force, the raven-haired prince was brought to his knees by Eric's magic. Solonar's flames erupted, lighting the dark room with garish shadows, but more and more thorns surged all around Solonar and snuffed out his light.

Eric backpedalled from the crown prince and scrambled to his feet before he ran for the door. Just as he flung himself into the hall, he heard the sound of Solonar's bones snapping and crunching under the hold of Eric's magic. His roar of pain and anger filled the night air, but Eric was halfway down the hall already.

He winced at the burn running up his entire arm, his anger now swallowed whole by his mortal fear. "Cithrel!" he screamed again as he ran.

But there was no answer in the night, no sound of anyone rousing or coming to his cries for help. Eric bit the inside of his cheek as he stormed down the stairs, frantic to put as much space as possible between him and the murderous prince.

Solonar must have been behind this. He must have made sure this wing of the palace was unguarded and all but abandoned. Even Cithrel must have been sent away somewhere, leaving Eric isolated and vulnerable. Except, with magic Eric wasn't vulnerable, he could fight and escape.

He careened around a corner and propelled himself down the cold and abandoned stairs. Through labored breaths he ran faster, spitting out blood after biting down on his cheek. Where was Cithrel? He had screamed for him twice and silence was his only response. That Fae bastard was supposed to protect him.

Eric jumped the last few steps and skidded across the dark marble floors of the main halls. Upstairs had gone silent where Solonar was and he didn't know if that was a good thing or not. Not that he could afford to think about the crown prince when the halls were almost pitch black. All the aether

fuelled lights had been snuffed out and without any moonlight Eric was practically blind, forced to rely on his memory to guide him.

Panic surged in his chest the longer it took him to find the nearest set of stained-glass doors that led outside. Eric let out a sharp exhale when he burst through the doors. His head whipped around as he scanned outside for any sign of guards. There wasn't a soul around. His heart leapt in his chest as he started towards the Imperial Gardens that backed onto the Wilder Woods. Where was Cithrel? Was Solonar following him? Could this actually work, could he get away. Hope and fear swelled and twisted together in his chest.

Gulping down breaths, every inhale at this point was a lick of flame down his throat. Eric's legs shook with each step, threatening to give out, as he reached the Imperial Gardens when the night erupted into an explosion of flames.

A heat wave blasted Eric's face as he turned in horror to see Solonar descending into the gardens from the window of what used to be Eric's room in the palace. Glass and cinder showered around the crown prince, the earth cracked and burst under his feet.

Eric turned and ran, bolting towards the shadows of the Wilder Woods.

"You're not as dumb as you look, selfish human," Solonar called behind Eric. His words carried in the air and Eric knew he was close behind. "At least I'll be able to savor killing you and ripping that Marking from your flayed flesh and bones."

The way he spoke was enough to send a chill through down Eric's spine. He didn't slow down, flying deeper into the darkened woods. Then that same crawling feeling of being watched came back.

Solonar's voice echoed in the wind. "Even though you're a human, and a whore slave at that, I do feel a small ounce of pity for what I'm about to do to you."

Before Eric could focus his thoughts and try to call his magic, the smell of smoke filled the air. A second later, hissing blue flames surrounded him. Cobalt light shone and danced amidst the shadows of the forest, painting a macaber and haunting picture for Eric to be trapped in. He cursed.

Then he was sprinting again, in whatever direction put distance between him and Solonar's flames. His atrophied body showed itself as his muscles

already ached in protest. He pushed himself to go faster, fighting the weakness seeping into his limbs. Even with that, smoke filled his lungs.

"I can see why my brother was so reluctant to go and leave you unattended," the prince's gleeful tone chimed from the night air. "His instincts were right about you. He shouldn't have left you alone. You did your best, though. You have a lot of fight in you if you were willing to try and kill me. I have to admit it's entertaining."

Eric called out to the magic slumbering inside him, demanded it. He refused to let that monster snuff him out like this. He was going to use this damn aether in his blood and fight. A ripple of pain surged through his nerves. His muscles trembled under the answering magic coming to him.

"I can't wait to rip you apart," Solonar called.

Eric skidded to a halt as thorns burst through the ground and surrounded him.

The blue flames faded to black as his vision altered like it always did. He stepped towards the crown prince's fires behind him, thorns emerging from each step he took. Then he thrust out his hand and a new ripple of grotesque black thorns poured out, a dark glow ebbing from his palm.

The thorns chittered and hissed like living beings as they threw themselves on the flames, snuffing them out. It was enough to give Eric an opening. Without hesitating he sprinted through his small pathway. He made it all of fifty feet before the crash of lightning filled the air. Earth sprayed his face as the ground exploded under the pressure of how fast Solonar moved. Eric was flung back several feet and narrowly avoided cracking his head on a nearby tree. When he scurried to his feet, the crown prince was already in front of Eric, blocking his escape.

Solonar moved so fast that Eric heard the crunch of his arm snapping before he felt the shock of pain. He let out a yelp before biting down on his lip hard enough to draw blood. This would not be where he died! Determined, his teeth ground together as he forced himself back to his feet.

Vines as wet and dark as oil expelled from Eric's body and formed an impenetrable wall a second before Solonar's flames engulfed him. When the flames broke, Eric burst into a sprint. He stumbled the first few steps, nostrils flaring with each huffed breath, trying not to let cradling his broken arm hinder his balance.

"You, rip me apart?" Solonar breathed, his words seethed with pleasure. Then Eric felt the force of a thousand whips across his back as Solonar sent him careening through the air. The sound of wood splintering filled his ears as more dirt showered around them. Eric's back slammed against a tree before he slumped to the ground. "How are you going to do that when you can't even move?"

Eric bared his bloodstained teeth at Solonar, unable to do anything else as the crown prince approached him. His necrotic thorns slithered and coiled around him, but Solonar burned them to ash just as soon as they appeared. Eric was too spent and was losing too much blood to keep calling on his cursed magic.

Solonar let out a peel of elated laughter. "Poor little bird with a broken wing," he said, bending over Eric's broken body. "You'll never be able to fly away now."

"Fuck you." Eric spit blood onto the crown prince's face. He couldn't breathe, or even feel his limbs.

The crown prince's feline eyes flashed then. "What a mouth on you. It makes me envious of Lord Aimar, to have such a little sex slave. Shall I see just how good your expert lips are, Eric? It might be my last chance."

Eric had a thousand awful things to say to the crown prince, but his body was failing him. The sharp smell of cinder and smoke filled Eric's already weak lungs. All he could do was take shuddering breaths that grew shallower and shallower by the second. He was losing consciousness....

Solonar's smile flickered to something else as Eric's body slumped, but Eric kept his eyes glued on the crown prince. The crown prince bathed himself in his flames, but the rotted thorns were faster. Possessed by his magic, Eric's hazel eyes faded to wholly black ones that fixated on Solonar.

The raven-haired prince was still standing, his legs planted wide and his shoulders hung forward. His cloak was burned and torn, billowing awkwardly around him. Droplets of golden blood stained his black clothing.

Eric's inhuman eyes tracked Solonar's movements as he stalked back to Eric. In a flash his fine fingers were around Eric's throat, squeezing out whatever breath he had left. The smell of Solonar's honeysuckle blood filled his nostrils, muddling with the smell of ash.

Again, the thorns reacted and moved of their own volition, protecting their host. They wound themselves around Solonar's throat, wrists, and legs

before they pulled in all directions.

Solonar swallowed himself in intense cerulean flames, melting away the thorns before they could dismember him. He staggered back out of range from Eric's possessed body. Eric's eyes fluttered as he came back to his senses. He'd lost consciousness for a moment, but somehow he was still alive—and Solonar was covered in his own golden Fae blood.

"I won't accept it," the crown prince growled through exposed canines. "How dare you breathe with that Marking on you! What is so *divinely* special about you? Why did he choose *you*? You're impossibly weak, clinging to your short life so desperately. How can it be you, a human?"

A tortured look crossed the crown prince's face, his pupils thinning until they were almost invisible. "If I can't kill you, then my fire will. I refuse to let a *thing* like you disgrace the Imperial Family."

He was aware of the crown prince's voice talking to him, or maybe he was yelling. But either way, Eric couldn't seem to hear any more. Dirt pressed against his skin, prodding his limbs. In resignation, his eyes grew heavy. The last thing he saw was the billowing of Solonar's cape.

Except the cape was a deep emerald. It wasn't the crown prince, but Cithrel, wielding dual blades that were illuminated in the firelight. The Prince of Blades charged through the night, a look of death on his face.

Chapter Nine

Eric's mind went in and out of consciousness after he saw Cithrel charge towards him like a supernatural killing machine. His back was broken and he couldn't move, couldn't breathe. The haze of his vision faded to black and all he could hear were the sounds of metal clashing with the heat of roaring fires against his face. Then nothing.

The next time he woke up he couldn't breathe. His chest refused to rise and fall—*he was suffocating*. Then Eric felt something soft pressed against his lips. It was warm. Out of instinct, or hallucination, he leaned into the feeling, his body starved for oxygen. An abrupt blaze of light burned through his eyelids. It hurt, everything hurt. God, he wanted it to stop.

"He's awake again," a voice barked. "Call for the princess! Now!"

The thundering voice rattled off orders and it felt like wherever Eric was, it was in chaos. He struggled and failed to open his eyes, but eventually the pain was all-consuming. The agony burned through him as if he was being scorched and yet he felt so cold he could have been drowning.

A skin-crawling scream filled the room. Some detached part of his brain realized they were his own screams. It was awful and unrelenting. His body convulsed as wave after wave after wave of pain wracked his body. His eyelids still refused to open under the blinding light and his heart pounded so fast and hard in his chest he thought it would explode.

Another scream tore from his chest as the horror—that this was surely hell—filled his mind. Tears streamed down his face as he thrashed, desperate for the agony to end, except his body wouldn't or couldn't move. Was it restraints or was he broken? He didn't know.

Then, cool, soft fingertips touched his forehead and the turmoil, the pain, the fear that pumped through his veins all fell away. "Rest now, Eric," a calm and lilting female voice whispered.

That voice reminded him of the music department that was next door to his study room in college. He studied there almost every day and he would hear one student from time to time, that one student who played piano for hours on end. He always thought their music was beautiful, enough that he would stop and just listen to their melodies.

Eric's pulse slowed as his eyelids relaxed, fresh tears rolling down his cheeks. "Rest," the hushed voice repeated.

The world melted away in a swirl of light and shadows and Eric free-fell into sleep.

A bird chirped off in the distance. He took a breath and felt his sides ache in response. He groaned as his eyelids fluttered open, slow and pained. Filtered light bathed the room around him in a golden hue as he sat up and looked around. It was definitely not his room, unless it had magically tripled in size.

High ceilings made the room look even larger with its window-lined walls. Through the doorway he spotted a long hallway that led to a sunken sitting room. Pale stones made up the floors and walls with smoothed oak veined along the stones in a strange yet wondrous design.

That was when Eric went still with terror. Sitting at his bedside was Cithrel, leaning back in his chair with his eyes closed, his normally tightly-braided hair fallen all around his face. He looked like a damn angel asleep like that in the beams of sunlight, despite the fact that his lips were fixed in a permanent pout and his arms were tightly crossed. Then those gray-blue eyes opened and stared directly at Eric.

The sudden movement startled him and he jerked backwards, sucking in a sharp breath. Flashes of the previous night ran through his mind against his will. Visions of Solonar choking the life from him, of the crown prince shattering Eric's spine, of smoke filling his lungs and suffocating him. A fraction later Cithrel stood over Eric, a tentative hand pressed against his back.

"Don't try to move," Cithrel said, suddenly at Eric's side as his calloused hands rubbed Eric's back.

Eric clamped a hand over his mouth to stifle coughs that cut like razor blades, too afraid to move as Cithrel held him. The last time the prince had touched Eric, he had promised to kill him once his Marking was gone. Eric's body stiffened, the churn in his stomach icy and acidic.

Cithrel's eyes went wide, the blue shining in the daylight, as if he was seeing something for the first time. Eric had never seen that kind of expression on the prince before. His hand fell away from his face, falling into his lap, where he felt a sickening wetness on his palm.

He frowned down at his hand. The world seemed to slow when he saw it covered in blood. Oh. That's what Cithrel was gaping at. Eric's blood.

Eric reached up to touch his lips and when he pulled away, blood clung to his fingertips. Before he could slump over, though, Cithrel's steady touch gripped his shoulders, keeping him upright. Then everything moved fast, as if trying to make up for the time it lost moments ago.

"Malor," Cithrel snapped. Worried eyes never left Eric as he searched for any other injuries.

Sir Malor appeared out of thin air. "Yes, Prince Commander."

"Bring my sister, immediately."

Eric saw Malor's eyes flash bright jade and then he spun on his heel and was out of the room before Eric could blink. Eric's throat stung, the taste of copper in his mouth. It was strange, though. As the world spun, it was Cithrel who seemed to be the steady center. He felt like he was dying, back in the woods, suffocating as the crown prince squeezed the life from him. Smells of smoke and cinders filled his nose and throat, sending him into hysterics. Another fit of coughing overtook him, each inhale slicing away at his throat. The metallic taste of blood in his mouth worsened.

"She'll be here soon," the prince said. "Just try to calm down."

The words didn't reach Eric, though, as his mind was a jumble of frantic noise. He was broken, left for dead, so how was anything possible right now? How was he alive, or able to move again?

"I don't want to move you right now, Eric," Cithrel said, quiet. "So try to calm down. My brother is not permitted here. The empress is...." He chewed on his words for a split second. "Dealing with him. We're in my chambers. You're safe."

His words were like a nail being hammered in, one swing at a time. Everything was true because it was a Fae saying it, but it didn't register at first. Solonar had failed to kill Eric. The realization was enough to settle his raging heartbeat. Followed by a twinge of resignation.

He closed his eyes tight, trying to ignore everything else and fight through the pain that blinded him. He just needed to grit his way through this and it wouldn't be so bad. If even the cold-hearted Prince of Blades was being this gentle with him, then it must be safe right now. Cithrel wasn't Solonar.

Then, gradually, Eric felt his heart start to beat a little slower. He kept his eyes shut until he heard Malor returning with the princess.

"Blood again," Cithrel said as soon as she entered.

Eric could barely get any air into his lungs, so instead he clutched the bedding in his fists. Cithrel said *again*, which meant he must be in pretty bad shape. His pulse hammered in his ears.

"Let me see to him then, brother," Lyari said, her tone gentle.

Eric opened his eyes and saw the embodiment of an oasis. Today, Lyari wore an extravagant silver dress that hugged her waist and hung off her shoulders, her chain veil matching her dress. A translucent cloak billowed behind her with every step she took. He couldn't believe he was being treated by the future High Priestess. It would have been an honor for any high-born Fae, never mind Eric.

She approached Eric, still half behind the fourth prince, then waited. When no one moved, the blind princess placed her hand on Cithrel's shoulder. "I can't treat him if you don't move, brother."

Cithrel hesitated, his hand still on Eric, his mind warring with indecision. But eventually he let go. The prince fell back in the chair, his eyes darkened and fixed on Eric. There it was again, that look, the look of guilt and worry. Except it didn't make sense for Cithrel to be looking at Eric that way.

With shallow and pained breaths, Eric looked back at the princess, whose chain veil shifted and revealed clouded pools of deep evergreen irises with no pupils at all. Since her deep brown hair had been pinned away from her face, he saw all the greenery that grew from her. Small plants wound their way through her hair and wrapped around her pointed ears and neck like jewelry.

"I'm sorry about what the crown prince did to you," she whispered to Eric as she cupped his face. "Please allow me to apologize on my brother's behalf and heal you."

It was too painful to breathe, let alone say something, so he gave a weak nod in response. She gave a small smile and lifted her other hand so that she held his face in her hands. With one small inhale, she went still.

Eric sensed her magic before he saw it. The scent of a garden filled the air as she concentrated. An aroma of daisies, lavender, marigold, and grass

filled the room. As her magic oozed out, the vines that wound around her neck grew and unfurled themselves.

He watched as they wound their way along her arms until they crawled across Eric's face. He stiffened under the touch of the plants moving on their own, surprised at how warm they were. They wrapped around his neck as if they could choke him any second. His nails dug deeper into the bedding, his muscles rigid and aching.

The cold, smooth feeling of the vines poised around his throat reminded Eric of Lord Aimar's touch. Images of Aimar's clawed hands on Eric's neck flashed through his mind. He bit down on his lip hard and fought to swallow back the rising bile.

It was hard to breathe as blood saturated his tongue. After a moment, though, the searing pain that scorched his throat began to fade away, replaced with a relieving cool sensation. The horrific memories of Adlar estate faded as the pain dwindled. Slowly, his death grip on the bedding loosened as his shoulders slumped.

He let out a long exhale of relaxation as he met Lyari's murky gaze. Relief flooded him as air swelled in his chest. She smiled back at Eric, her perplexing gaze distant, as the plants she controlled began to withdraw.

"Thank you, Your Highness," Eric said, his voice dry.

"You should be more comfortable now, but your body still needs time to fully rest and heal." She rose to her feet, her warm touch falling away from Eric's arms. "As a human, you're much more fragile."

"Has she reached a decision?" Cithrel interrupted. He still kept his hooded blue eyes on Eric but there was something else behind his words, something that made Eric shiver.

Lyari shook her head. "You'll know when I do, brother." Then she turned to face Eric again. The way she managed to look directly at him was always unsettling. "Don't push yourself. Your health is important."

"I'll watch over him," Cithrel interjected, surprising both Lyari and Eric.

Eric blinked, not expecting the prince to say such a thing. He couldn't make sense of it—the fourth prince of Alonetha, who threatened him days ago, was now going to play nurse at his bedside.

"Then take care. Both of you."

Eric watched as Lyari turned and all but glided out of the room, leaving him alone with Cithrel. The prince was still looking at Eric, his face a

startling mix of emotions. They stared at each other in silence until it was more unbearable than talking, but just as Eric opened his mouth to speak Cithrel interrupted.

"I'm sorry."

"What?" Eric blurted, completely taken off guard.

"I'm sorry for what my brother did to you. I should have known better than to trust him." Cithrel finally looked away from Eric, his blue eyes stormy. He struggled with his words while also stumbling over each and every one. "This happened because of me—because—I didn't do my duty properly. The crown prince won't hurt you again. You have my word, Eric."

Cithrel looked at him as he said his name, his voice softening as he said it. Eric swallowed back the strange feeling that squirmed in his chest seeing the prince look at him that way.

"Thank you." He fidgeted with his nails, willing himself to look at anything other than a vulnerable Fae prince. "For saving me. I would have died that night."

The room fell silent, which Eric quickly realized was even worse than staring into the mesmerizing arctic blue of Cithrel's eyes. Sitting back up, Eric rubbed at his throat. The only proof of his lingering injuries was the residual tinny taste of iron in his mouth. That and the smell of caked-on dirt, sweat, and blood that clung to his skin.

"I need to get this stench off me," Eric said awkwardly, filling the silence.

Throwing back the covers, he moved to get out of bed when the world tilted of its own accord. Just as he was about to topple to the ground, Cithrel was there, holding Eric close, too close.

"Thanks," he mumbled, righting himself. As Eric moved to twist out of Cithrel's touch, it registered that he didn't know where anything was, since he was in the prince's bedroom. "How do I get back to my room?"

"The bathroom is over there." Cithrel pointed at a nearby doorway before he let go of Eric's arm. He also ignored Eric's actual question.

"Oka-a-ay." Eric dragged his words. "But how do I get back to my room?"

Cithrel flicked his gaze to Eric, his expression carefully guarded now. "You'll be staying with me for the time being."

Before Eric could process exactly what the prince was saying, Cithrel's strong hands were on Eric's back pushing him towards the bathroom. He stumbled into a wood-laden bathroom even more expansive than the one in his room, and turned to say something to Cithrel. But the door was already shut.

Eric ran both hands through his knotted curls, his breath rushing out of his lungs. As he stripped down and let the aether-imbued tub fill, he eyed himself in the mirror. His reflection looked like absolute hell. There were dark purple bags under his eyes, with the ghosts of countless cuts and bruises peppered across his skin. Even his Marking looked darker and more garish than usual. He reminded himself he was lucky to be alive as his gaze fell on all the scars that remained from Adlar estate and Lord Aimar.

He sunk into the near-boiling waters and breathed in the steam that surrounded him, letting his battered body soak. Lyari was right. He still needed a lot of rest if he wanted to even think of being able to go on morning runs again.

A sobering thought popped into his head, unwanted. If he was staying with Cithrel, did that mean the prince was going to be protecting him full-time again instead of Sir Malor? His temples throbbed the longer he thought of the strange arrangement he now found himself in.

Eric winced and swore, rubbing absently at his forehead. Everything was getting messy, fast. The crown prince had just tried to kill him and now Cithrel doted on him like a frantic nanny. Just what was happening to him? He found his tired hazel eyes staring at his Marking, knowing it was the root of it all.

It was why he was so hopelessly twisted up in the Imperial Family's lives. It was better than being tortured and used by Lord Aimar, but he found his chances of freedom getting smaller and smaller.

When Eric left the bathroom, his body at least feeling a little less sore, he wasn't happy or surprised to see Cithrel still there, silently and patiently waiting for him.

"We should discuss some things."

"Right." Eric felt mechanical as he shifted in the bathroom doorway, uncomfortable.

He was in nothing but a towel and the prince wanted to have a conversation. The presence of his scars that covered his body weighed

heavily on his skin, like a beacon that told everyone he was a sex slave regularly beaten and tortured. He was hideous.

"Once you've eaten and had a chance to rest, of course," Cithrel added, his words flat.

Eric felt the prince's eyes on his exposed chest and felt his heart pounding in response. He stood there lamely, as Cithrel rose from his chair and strode out of the room without another word. Not another breath was let out until he was sure the prince closed the door behind him. The ground rushed up to meet Eric as he slumped to the floor, his insides hollowed.

He sat there, lifeless on the wood floors, as his mind rolled through one awful memory after another. Each thrust, every flash of red hair that hung in his face, the same malevolent look in the lord's wholly white eyes. He relived each cut of Aimar's nails gouging his flesh and what the poison-covered whip felt like as it cracked across his back and split his skin.

It wasn't until Hinni shook him by the shoulders that he came back to reality. "Eric, are you alright? I called you several times, but you didn't hear me or anything."

Eric flinched away from her touch before he came to his senses. "I—I have to get dressed. I have to do something."

"Alright, alright." Hinni's hand squeezed Eric's shoulder as she helped him to his feet. "Just take it slowly. You're still recovering."

"Right."

Whether coincidence or not, there was some loose clothing for Eric to change into just outside the bathroom that he hadn't noticed earlier. A minute later he emerged from the bathroom in a fresh change of clothes and a hunger in his stomach. How long had it been since he ate anything?

"Take your time, Eric." Hinni followed him like a ghost towards the settee next to the fireplace where a plate of fresh food waited. "You've been through a lot. The princess recommended that you get as much rest as possible. So you should stay away from your morning runs for a while."

"I understand, Hinni." Eric held up his hand and took a tentative bite of the food. "I just need a minute."

"Of course."

Great. Just when he was starting to get some of his strength back, it felt like he was back to square one. The food had no taste as Eric ate everything

on his plate. Even after Hinni inspected his superficial injuries, he still couldn't shake this empty feeling that was beginning to swallow him whole.

"The fourth prince is waiting for you in the sitting area." Hinni collected Eric's tray and stood in the doorway, a reassuring smile on her face. "When you're ready, of course. He said for you to take your time."

Eric blinked, and nodded to Hinni with a blank expression. No matter how he looked at it, Cithrel was acting different ever since Eric woke up. It was like he was an entirely different person. There was no loophole he could come up with that skirted the truth, so the prince must have meant it. He was showing Eric kindness. Well, he didn't want to scorn that kindness by ignoring Cithrel all together.

He ran one final hand through his hair, blowing out a long breath before he moved towards the hallway to where Cithrel waited for him. He stopped in his tracks when he spotted the prince, his eyes widening.

Cithrel stood at yet another unlit fireplace, his arms crossed with his face twisted in thought. He wore a plain shirt that hung off one of his shoulders and exposed his sunny marble skin. Not that it mattered that he had a shirt on, since the fabric was so thin Eric could see every line of the prince's muscled body. Every. Single. Muscle. To top it all off, Cithrel's platinum hair still hung loose around him, which accentuated his hard jawline and complex sapphire eyes. Christ, he was attractive.

"Sit." Cithrel gestured, his eyes lifting at the sound of Eric's footsteps.

Eric obeyed and sat down, his lips a thin line. The prince studied Eric and didn't seem to miss the way Eric winced as he fell into the plush pale divan opposite the extinguished fireplace. His expression hardened, but there was no way to know what the prince was thinking.

"How much does it hurt?" Cithrel's voice was low, guarded.

"I'm alright." Eric rubbed at his neck. "Thank you again, for everything you've done for me."

Cithrel lifted his chin and moved so he stood over Eric. "You're very fragile."

"I'm sorry." Eric kept his face even.

"You don't need to apologize, Eric." Cithrel loosed a lengthy breath. "What my brother did wasn't your fault. You were chosen by the aether. You're Marked. The crown prince knew what he was doing when he tried to kill you. He should and *will* be punished."

The prince's chest was heaving after he finished talking, but he held Eric's stare. His words were the bare truth, Eric felt it. He swallowed. "I understand."

"After today, you'll be my personal attendant," Cithrel soldiered on, his words giving Eric whiplash. "It's the best way to keep you safe."

"Sorry, I'm not sure I understand." Eric felt a knot forming in his stomach. "I'll be your attendant? Won't that make me an even bigger target?"

"All eyes are going to be on you no matter what as long as you're Marked. At least this way, I can keep you close." He arched a brow at Eric. "Unless you want to keep experiencing attempts on your life."

His fingers felt numb as he squeezed them together to keep from trembling. If he was going to be at Cithrel's side for the foreseeable future, that meant he would be appearing in court often. Court, where Lord Aimar and Baroness Olaera operated often. The tightness in his chest worsened.

"No." Eric's gaze dulled. "I don't want that."

"Then you should try to get more rest." Cithrel gaged Eric's reaction, but didn't comment on whatever he saw. "We have to meet with Archduke Laen tomorrow morning."

"Sure." Eric was in a daze as he rose from the divan and headed to where he guessed was the door leading out of here.

"Your room is at the other end of the hallway." Cithrel jarred Eric from his jumbled and disastrous thoughts.

His bleary hazel eyes focused on Cithrel and with a sinking feeling he saw the prince was serious. He really was staying in Cithrel's wing of the palace, in his rooms. There was a traitorous flutter to his stomach before he chased the thought away.

"I see," was all he could manage to get out.

"I was almost too late this time." Cithrel uncrossed his arms, which made it clear how much burden he carried on his shoulders over what happened. "I don't want there to be a next time."

The way the prince spoke made it clear that there was some deeper meaning behind his words, but Eric didn't know what. The angel-faced prince, it seemed, had wounds of his own that ran deep.

Hinni's words echoed in his mind then. The prince was more gentle than he let on. This was the first time Eric understood what she meant.

"I understand." Eric lifted his chin to meet Cithrel's strained demeanour. "Truly, thank you for saving my life. And the princess for treating me. It's the most anyone has done for me for as long as I can remember."

Cithrel's blue eyes thawed at Eric's words, fading to a soft gray. Loose strands of blond hair framed his stern expression. It looked like he wanted to say something, but then thought better of it as his jaw set. He looked at Eric a moment longer than Eric thought normal before he turned his back to him.

Cithrel faced the fireplace but said over his shoulder, "Get some rest. I'll see you in the morning."

"I will."

Eric held his breath until the door to his own room closed behind him. Only then did his shoulders slump and he acknowledged the crawling feeling of serpents on his skin. He took his time pulling his shirt off before he buried himself under the covers.

Tomorrow, he had to meet the archduke. A high-born Fae almost as old and powerful as the empress with a personality that rivalled Cithrel's. At least until now. Now, the prince felt different.

It made him wonder how much more there was to the prince that he kept hidden away. As he let the exhaustion sink into him and lull him to sleep, he took some comfort knowing that Cithrel wasn't as venomous as he thought. The prince wasn't just a monster anymore, and Eric wondered just how much this palace could be changing him.

Chapter Ten

The air in the palace halls was stifling as Eric trailed behind Cithrel in silence. He didn't know what he expected this morning when Hinni brought breakfast, but maybe the most uncomfortable uniform he had ever worn was not it. The high collar buttoned around his neck felt like it was choking him. The fresh leather boots as black as coal dug into his heels and the fitted overcoat clung to him far too much. How Cithrel wore his court uniform and imperial armor nearly every day was a mystery to Eric.

Seeing the prince's hair back in braids made Eric wish he could see Cithrel's hair down more often. Today, three braids resembling serpents twisted around the nape of his neck before falling past his shoulders. They swayed across his back and the signature emerald green of the mantle he wore. Since the prince was attending to court matters today, he wore a fitted overcoat that resembled Eric's uniform, save for the metallic adornments and the black doe symbol emblazoned over Cithrel's heart.

"How much do you know about the archduke?" Cithrel asked, pulling Eric from his daydream of the prince's overly tight uniform.

"He's the main advisor for the Imperial Army," Eric answered, his hands knotted together as he fell in step next to the prince, "and I believe he owns and oversees the majority of land used in the empire's agricultural system."

Cithrel didn't look at Eric, but he was sure he saw an approving smile on the prince's face at his answer. Eric also noticed that ever since the prince saved his life in the Wilder Woods, he had stopped addressing the prince formally. Cithrel must have noticed by now but he never corrected him.

"Right." The prince led them towards the annex where the Fae nobles met for most of their court matters. "The archduke requested a meeting to discuss military matters on our borders."

Eric's brow lifted. What the prince said was sensitive information. He wasn't sure if he was supposed to hear this meeting with the archduke. Chances were the Fae noble wouldn't want Eric there, either.

Cithrel eyed Eric as every thought crossed Eric's face. "The archduke doesn't have a say in who my attendant is and whether or not they're present for my court affairs," he reassured him.

"Of course." Eric nodded.

They stopped just outside an ornate wooden door engraved with various plant life and woodland animals. It was strange and whimsical for such dark matters to be discussed behind those doors.

"Stay quiet unless I ask for you." Cithrel pinned Eric with his stare, the cold veil of indifference falling over his face. "I assume from your time as a slave you know how to carry yourself around nobles."

When Eric nodded again, his heart rate erratic, Cithrel gave him one final assessing gaze as his lips thinned into a hard line. Then he strode through the door, with Eric flitting in silently behind him.

The archduke stood at a window looking onto the training grounds. The Fae noble carried himself with the air and dignity of someone who'd been serving in the Imperial Court for centuries, which made sense, since he controlled the empire's oldest lands. Short, dark hair framed his face and highlighted his rigid features.

The archduke turned to face the prince, his marbled golden eyes shifting past Eric as if he wasn't there. He wore a fitted asymmetrical shirt with golden buttons fastened along one side with a long dark cloak hanging from his shoulders by fastened clasps in the design of tree roots.

"Prince Commander," he greeted. "It's good to see you. I hope you're well."

"I am, Archduke Laen. You look well." Cithrel moved to sit at one of the armchairs in the sunlit room. Eric made sure he ghosted along and stationed himself behind the prince. The archduke tracked his movements, his mouth a hard line of disapproval.

"Shall we begin?" Cithrel asked.

The Fae noble's gaze lingered on Eric a breath longer before he moved to sit across from Cithrel. "Yes, Your Highness," he said and loosed a sigh. "Though I wish we were meeting under better circumstances."

Laen hesitated at his next words, his uneasy gaze shifting pointedly from Cithrel to Eric. The prince's tone hardened. "Is there a problem, Your Grace?"

"Perhaps it's better that we discuss these matters in private."

"Were you not in the Throne Room that day in court?" Cithrel's voice went cold and quiet.

"Of course, Your Highness," Laen said, almost indignant.

"Then you're aware that he's been blessed by the aether and was Marked." Eric watched the archduke pale as the prince fixed him with an apathetic gaze. "He'll be involved in these matters soon enough because of his Marking. I see no point in delaying it. Unless you have a differing opinion from the empress?"

Eric stiffened. No one ever mentioned anything about him being involved in military matters, so what was Cithrel talking about? Typical Fae, guarding truths. He would make sure to ask the prince about it later on.

"I don't, Your Highness." Laen lowered his irate gaze. "I respect the empress's wishes, whatever they may be."

"I'm relieved," Cithrel said, his voice light again. "Now let's discuss the issues along the border."

For the next two hours, Cithrel and the archduke went over the increasing raids and attacks along Laen's land. Apparently, it was happening enough that it couldn't be random attacks by untamed Fae or other supernatural beings. The archduke wanted to station military along the border for reinforced security until they could get more answers around who was behind the focused attacks.

"It stinks of the Belfiran Kingdom," Laen said, his fingers steepled. "But they wouldn't dare violate the peace treaty with Alonetha. It would be suicide."

Cithrel never asked Eric for anything, so apart from occasional disapproving glances from the Fae noble, he stood there in silence, listening and churning over his own thoughts. The prince mulled over what the archduke said for a moment. "We should inquire with a Vavarisian emissary while we reinforce our borders, but we need to be discreet. I want to avoid any unnecessary conflict until we can get more information."

"Very good, Your Highness." Archduke Laen rose from his chair the same time that Cithrel did, straightening his cloak and collar.

Cithrel moved towards the doorway, gesturing for the Fae noble to go first. "I'll send word once the details are finalized."

The archduke inclined his head to Cithrel before he gave Eric a final scornful glare. It didn't matter to the noble that Eric was Marked, he was still nothing more than a pleasure slave in the Fae's eyes. The hatred behind the bottomless yellow irises made Eric glad he was protected by the prince and the empire.

"Let's go," Cithrel said once the archduke was gone, not looking over his shoulder for Eric.

Eric jogged to keep up with the prince, who was already out the door. He chewed on his lip, unsure when he should bring up what Cithrel said earlier. When they strode outdoors, though, Eric realized it would have to wait until later because several Fae soldiers were waiting for Cithrel at the training grounds.

The summer sun beat down on them and Eric felt his attendant uniform get that much heavier on his shoulders. Every single Fae soldier bowed to Cithrel as he appeared, then every set of eyes turned their attention on Eric.

Countless stares of loathing, resentment, and apathy leveled themselves on Eric as he and the prince stood just outside the sparring ring.

"Eric," Cithrel called.

Eric snapped his mouth shut and hurried after the prince, who waited with surprising patience for Eric to tend to his clothing.

It was as automatic as breathing as Eric removed the layers of the prince's official court attire. Cithrel eyed him as Eric's fingers moved with deft precision, unfastening the mantle and overcoat before adjusting the straps underneath. He had more than enough experience over the years with dressing Lord Aimar, no matter how intricate and cruel his outfits were.

When Eric finished he stepped back from the prince, holding the neatly folded court attire in his arms. Those chilled blue eyes were focused on Eric but the prince's features gave nothing away. All he gave was a curt nod by way of thanks and he strode out into the sparring ring.

Eric watched the shift of Cithrel's muscles as he moved with nothing but a thin undershirt to cover him. He cleared his throat and banished any thoughts of the prince's body. It shouldn't matter to him what the prince's back muscles looked like, or the line of his jaw in the sunlight. He was an attendant to the person responsible for his friends' deaths. Eric worked his jaw and looked ahead.

Cithrel led his knights and soldiers through drills and training for the rest of the morning and well into the afternoon, all while the sun blazed on without so much as a gust of wind. The collar of Eric's uniform darkened with sweat as he baked under the sun. The minutes dragged into hours as Eric stood at silent attention, waiting for Cithrel to ask something of him.

That was when a Fae male named Ruven with a dead eye and burns along the side of his face snarled and spit on Eric. He still kept his mouth shut and didn't react. He could see now that one of Ruven's ears had been cut off some time ago, leaving behind scar tissue.

"Sir Ruven, come here," Cithrel commanded. Eric hadn't noticed that the prince kept his eye on Eric the entire time they'd been training, so he saw everything the Fae soldier just did to him. His gaze had frozen over to glacial. "Spar with me."

Ruven's working eye darkened and he nodded once in acknowledgment. As soon as Ruven stilled with supernatural focus, their sparring match was over. The movements were so fast it was impossible for Eric's human eyes to follow. One breath the two Fae stood opposite each other in the sparring ring; the next Cithrel stood over Ruven on his back in the dirt with a blade pressed to the knight's throat. The scarred Fae looked up at Cithrel with a fire in his eye, but made no move to get up.

The other soldiers exchanged glances with one another, but the entire arena had gone ghostly quiet. "Does anyone else wish to spar with me?"

The challenge from the Prince of Blades somehow made the training grounds go from sweltering to sub-zero in a matter of seconds. No one dared move a muscle or so much as breathe too heavily.

"Then let me make one thing clear," the prince continued. His voice bellowed as he stared each Fae in the eye. "If anyone touches or looks too long at my attendant, I won't hesitate to enforce the empress's wishes and execute swift judgement when the one who was Marked is dishonored."

Eric felt a shiver run down him at the thought of what that judgement would be. Flashes of the Black Thorn haunted him. No one wanted to end up there for disobeying the empress.

"There won't be a second warning the next time anyone touches my attendant." The words rang out in the air, each one heavier than the last.

Eric felt the aura in the air then, pressing down on him like a physical weight. Silent understanding fell on the knights and soldiers in the training grounds with the force of a deadly plague. Eric was sure the Fae weren't even breathing. The sounds of birds far off in the woods could be heard, all the while the prince stared on, his frigid gaze uncompromising.

"Everyone can run five rounds courtesy of Sir Ruven's actions." Cithrel's loud voice cut the tension in the air. "Go."

Not a single Fae so much as glanced in Eric's direction as they all started their punishment from the prince. There was a fine line between fear and respect, but Cithrel maintained the balance with needle precision. After that, Sir Ruven and every other Fae under Cithrel's command gave Eric a wide berth and avoided meeting his eyes if they could.

The prince spent the rest of the day bringing his soldiers through drill after drill before he pulled some of his knights aside to discuss the border reinforcements. "Sir Elyion, Sir Paeris, come with me."

As they spoke, Eric brought the prince his meal and a large jug of water. Eric was used to not eating all day, but in this heat it was hard not to lick his lips at the sweating jug of cold water. It was impossible not to think of how good it would be to feel the icy liquid sliding down his throat. His thoughts were interrupted though when he noticed the prince had stopped eating and was watching Eric.

Eric straightened his back and cursed himself for daydreaming. "May I get something for you, Your Highness?"

Cithrel stared, his gaze indecipherable, as a droplet of sweat rolled down the side of Eric's temple. Finally, he turned his gaze back to the map that was laid out. "It's nothing."

Eric, along with the two Fae knights, stared, baffled. "Of course, Your Highness."

"Sir Elyion, send word for Sir Tyrin to return to the palace. We'll need fresh reserves now and he's been stationed along the woods long enough." Cithrel rose to his feet as he spoke to the Fae knight. Sir Elyion nodded, his opaque gray eyes sharpening as he gathered the paperwork. His pointed features accentuated his long ears and stood out against silken red hair pulled back into a knot.

Elyion stood with his fist over his heart before he strode out of the training grounds. Cithrel turned to face Sir Paeris, whose long black hair was tied back. "Sir Paeris, you'll lead the reinforcements heading to the archduke's land. Take whatever soldiers you deem fit to outfit your unit."

Paeris bowed, flashing long sharpened teeth. "Yes, Prince Commander." The knight's gray skin looked almost translucent in the sunlight as he cast Eric a quick glance. "How long do I have to form my unit?"

"As soon as Sir Tyrin sends word back."

Sir Paeris saluted Cithrel before he turned and headed toward the other Fae soldiers who were stretching or grappling amongst one another. Eric's shoulders relaxed as the Fae knight finally left. Paeris reminded him of the bedtime stories his brother used to tell about monsters that fed on human blood at night. Seeing those fangs and sickly discolored skin, Paeris looked more like a vampire than a high-born Fae. It made Eric wonder of the existence of hybrid Faes.

"Eric," Cithrel said, drawing Eric's attention.

"Yes, Your Highness?" He made sure to address the prince formally as long as he wore the attendant uniform in public. Cithrel eyed him, a flicker of impatience on his face as he waited for Eric to notice his surroundings.

Shit. He was so lost in thought about the unsettling appearance of Sir Paeris that he didn't notice Cithrel had dismissed the rest of the Fae in the training grounds and they were alone now. The sun was on its way down and the heat was finally letting up.

Eric wrung his hands behind his back, his nerves frayed. He had forgotten where he was as an attendant multiple times that day. If he were attending Lord Aimar, he could look forward to a restless night of forced pleasure and beatings afterwards.

When he looked back up, the prince was staring at him again. It wasn't his usual arctic glare that gave anyone pneumonia if they stared back too long. No, this was different. The way Cithrel's eyes met Eric's now made heat swirl in Eric's stomach and crawl its way up to his face.

"Is there another meeting to attend?" Eric asked, desperate to break the silence any way possible.

"No," Cithrel said, uncrossing his arms. "That's all for today."

He marched past Eric before he paused, his shoulders pressed together. Cithrel looked tense as he said over his shoulder quietly, "It's been a while since you ate or drank anything, right?"

Eric's lips parted in surprise. "It's nothing I haven't endured before."

The tension along the prince's shoulders seemed to worsen at Eric's answer. "Let's go," was all he said before they left the training grounds.

Neither one of them said anything else as they walked through now-abandoned hallways of the palace. At least until Cithrel came to an abrupt halt, bringing Eric up short behind him. Peering around the prince's broad shoulders, he paled as the Fae blocking their path spoke.

"Lord Aimar," Cithrel said. "Is there something you need to say?"

"Just my greetings, Prince Cithrel." Lord Aimar grinned. Then his all-white gaze fell on Eric and narrowed in a smirk. "It's good to see you again, Eric."

Eric's blood thickened at the sound of Aimar's voice purring his name. The countless times he heard his name called that way was like an old poison that lingered in his veins, eating away at him. He wanted to scream at the Fae lord, or punch him, or anything, but he couldn't. His throat tightened as his whole body shut down, broken by years of torture.

When Eric didn't answer Lord Aimar, Cithrel stepped in front of his attendant, his presence forming a physical barrier between the two. "If that's all, then, I'll be on my way. Perhaps I'll see you in Court." Cithrel glanced back at Eric. "Come."

"Yes, Your Highness." Eric murmured, his hazel eyes withdrawn and glassy.

As they passed, though, Lord Aimar's hand snaked out and wrapped around Eric's wrist. Eric flinched at the touch but went still. Every survival instinct told him to wait patiently for Aimar's next move. Years of torment danced in his mind. The sound of the whip cracking across his back rang through his thoughts.

"It's quite rude to ignore a noble's greeting, pet," he whispered in Eric's ear, leaning close enough Eric felt the warmth of his breath. "I hope you're not this disrespectful to the prince."

His touch, his words, they were all disgusting. Hatred seeped into Eric's bones, every nerve yelling at him to kill him, but stronger than that hate was fear. It was so strong it ate away at every other piece of him, devoured him.

Eric sank further into his haunting thoughts as a shadow loomed over him. Cithrel was at Eric's side as he towered over the Fae lord with a gaze that resembled a servant of Death, eager to bring his master a fresh soul. Shallow blue eyes gazed down at the lord with a gnawing hunger to kill.

"Are you that desperate to lose your arm, Lord Aimar?" Cithrel lifted his brows, his voice steady.

In a flash, Lord Aimar ripped his arm away from Eric, falling back a step. The white-eyed devil looked unsteady enough that his legs might give out. Those frightening all-white eyes bulged, filled with terror. His hands clawed at his sides, gripping his cloak before he was able to answer.

"I'm very sorry to have offended you, Prince Cithrel," Lord Aimar choked out.

"And *I* am getting tired of giving out warnings today." Cithrel stepped closer to the lord. The scent of citrus and crisp air filled the hallways as a blade manifested in the prince's grip. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't have your head, Lord Aimar."

The Fae noble's entire body trembled as he lowered his head. The act of submission was instant under the hardened words of the prince. Eric stared, unable to look away from the exchange, and unsure if what he was seeing was real. Lord Aimar's hands clenched into fists until his knuckles turned white.

"I assure you, Your Highness, you won't regret sparing me." Aimar kept his head bowed with his shoulders pulled in. "As the Imperial Merchant, the resources I have are exceptional and near irreplaceable."

There was a blinding sense of satisfaction seeing his tormentor reduced to begging in front of him. A sharp singe of heat ran up Eric's arm the longer he looked at the intricate plait work Lord Aimar wore to match his complicated court outfit. He had to bite down on his tongue to avoid making a noise from the pain.

"*Near* irreplaceable, Lord Aimar," Cithrel emphasized. He flicked his wrist once, dismissing the blade in his hand, and the blade vanished as easily as it appeared. "I expect to see evidence of your outstanding resources within the week to justify the stay of my hand."

"Of course, Prince Cithrel." Aimar lowered his head even further but Eric saw the hideous snarl that twisted the noble's face.

Cithrel didn't acknowledge that the Fae lord had spoken and moved past him, Eric close behind him. He was grateful to leave that disaster behind him as soon as possible. The revolting feeling of eyes on his back burned into his skin for the entire length of the hallway and lingered even after they turned the corner. It wasn't until they reached the second floor that Eric realized he was on the verge of hyperventilating.

The fourth prince must have noticed—it would be hard not to hear someone gasping for breath—because he whirled on Eric and almost pushed him up against the window of the sunset-bathed wall. Eric felt the prince's cool touch as he pressed a hand to his neck. The hard cobalt gaze softened by a fraction. "Are you alright?" Cithrel asked.

"I'm fine," Eric mumbled.

Cithrel glared, his nostrils flaring. "Don't *lie* to me, Eric."

Eric let out a pained gasp. "I don't know," he realized. The tremor in his hands started. Being so close to the prince felt dangerous, and yet, it brought him comfort. He felt safe. Heat coursed through his limbs before his complexion turned scarlet. The pounding of his heart ached, which meant being pressed against this wall inches away from Cithrel was wrong.

"I'll be fine," Eric asserted, pushing past Cithrel with the thread of self-awareness he still possessed. "I just need to eat something is all."

Cithrel didn't answer Eric and let him lead the rest of the way back to their now-shared rooms.

Shit. Everything was going to shit. What the hell was Eric even doing? He had no right to have any conflicting thoughts about the prince. That Fae bastard was the reason why his only friends were dead and he was responsible for him being imprisoned and driven half-mad.

But there were those penetrating blue eyes that seemed to read every thought Eric had, good or bad. Now that he had his Marking it was even more complicated. Cithrel had attacked him one day and then protected him vehemently the next. The shame, the hate, and the want ran rampant through Eric's mind. He didn't know what he was supposed to do, or how he could even begin to think about escaping again.

Eric found his hand absently rubbing where Cithrel's hands left dark bruising days ago when Hinni greeted them at the door to their shared rooms.

"Good evening, Eric," she greeted.

Eric spied the large wooden jug of water and bit back a sob. God, he just wanted something to drink and eat. He was exhausted. "Hey, Hinni."

As if every Fae could read Eric's thoughts, Hinni supplied a cup of water. He didn't hesitate to drink back the sweet ice-cold liquid. It was so satisfying he didn't notice the prince slip past him through the doorway and disappear into his room.

"What kind of blessing did you get from the aether, Hinni? The ability to know just what I need?" Eric joked between cups of water.

Hinni's black eyes glinted with a knowing grin. "The prince commander called for me to have your meal ready upon your return, Eric."

Eric froze with the cup at his mouth. "Oh."

"And to answer your question, the aether gifted me with the ability to commune with nature." When Eric tilted his head in question she clarified. "I can't speak with it the way a Priestess of Alonetha can, but I can understand how the trees, the wind, the streams, and even how the animals feel. What they desire. What they value as living beings."

Eric eyed his meal and sat in front of the hot food. Steamed vegetables with what looked like a kind of baked bird filled the tray of food, with a honeyed bun on the side. That explanation actually made a lot of sense for how understanding Hinni was, despite being one of the Fae. It would be hard to be apathetic when you could feel what any living thing felt. Eric wondered, though, how Hinni was just a servant for the prince when she had such a seemingly powerful magic.

"That's pretty amazing," he finally said after a thoughtful bite.

"It's a gift from the aether that I treasure," Hinni said in agreement. "But it's something that, as a low-born, could be exploited. The prince commander made sure that nothing ever happened to me though."

When Hinni gave Eric a smile, he saw the years of pain behind her black gaze. It was the same kind of look Eric recognized in himself. She had clearly lived through less kind masters before she started serving Cithrel.

"I'm starting to see what you mean," Eric said. It was the first time he allowed himself to admit out loud that the prince wasn't a complete monster. The problem was how conflicted that admission made him feel.

Hinni didn't press the conversation with Cithrel any further and the rest of his meal with her was light-hearted. They talked about all the ways she was able to communicate with the wildlife that surrounded the palace now and how strange it had been to understand flowers when she was a child.

The lightness in Eric's chest lingered after the meal and after he bathed, effectively washing away the dark spots of the day he had. He still had a faint quirk to his mouth when he padded out to the sitting room and found Cithrel sitting there, waiting.

The prince must have just bathed as well since his long blond hair was loose and darkened with moisture. The smell of lavender and pine hung in the air the closer Eric got. Cithrel was barely dressed again, with just a wide-open undershirt and loose pants to cover his bare skin. This time Eric made sure not to gape at the prince's muscled body.

"Are you feeling better?" Cithrel asked, his tentative voice doing nothing to ease the tense silence.

"Much better." Eric rubbed the back of his neck. "Hinni said you arranged to have my meal ready ahead of time. Thanks for that."

Cithrel gave a grunt in response. When he let the already frail conversation die off, Eric dipped his head before he turned to leave.

"If that's all, then I suppose I'll see you tomorrow morning. Good night." Eric walked through the cringing silence and made it to his bedroom door when Cithrel finally answered him.

"Good night, Eric."

Eric looked away before he turned red and closed his door behind him. Each word the prince spoke was softer than the last, his own name like velvet on Cithrel's lips. He kept hearing the prince's voice in his mind, repeating Eric's name over and over.

Eric didn't get much sleep that night.

Chapter Eleven

The days began to bleed together as Eric fell into a routine with the prince. After the first day as Cithrel's attendant, there wasn't another incident, from any soldier or noble. Thankfully, he hadn't seen the lord that haunted his dreams since that day in the halls. Now anyone that passed him and the prince commander showed them nothing but respect. Whether they wanted to or not.

The only problem he had now was him getting nowhere fast with his research in the library. Almost every night he scoured through the palace history books, under the watchful and cryptic eye of Cithrel, but couldn't find anything else about his Marking. He didn't know how he was chosen, how it worked, or how he could learn to control it.

After that night in the Wilder Woods with Solonar he was unable to summon his magic. The Marking glared back at him, taunting him. It was maddening to have this so-called blessing with no damn way to use it.

A few weeks later, an imperial missive broke the routine. "Do you know why the empress summoned me this morning?" Eric asked the question for maybe the third or fourth time.

"That's for her to explain," Cithrel deflected for the third or fourth time.

Eric exhaled through his nose. Of course. Whatever weird energy and tension that was going on between the two of them, it wasn't enough to get a straight answer from a Fae.

As they walked towards the empress's private courtyard, though, Eric felt Cithrel's eyes stealing glances at him. Their steps echoed on the stone floors, filling the silence that fell between them. The prince was content to let Eric squirm.

Eric found that his gaze drifted to the prince in their silence. The usually braided blond hair was now pulled back into a simple knot. It exposed what looked like a vicious pattern of scars along the nape of Cithrel's neck. They must have been decades old, but were still prominent against his otherwise flawless skin. The thought of something causing so much damage that not even a high-born Fae with imperial blood in his veins could heal terrified Eric. The pain would have been unimaginable.

"Good morning, Your Majesty," Cithrel called, snapping Eric's thoughts back to the present.

The empress's private courtyard was as extravagant as the Imperial Gardens. Flowers and greenery grew wild, save for the smoothed dirt path. At the center of it all was the empress, settled into a chair rooted to the ground. Ornate engravings of roots and branches decorated it and the small table and other chairs.

"It's good to see you again, Eric Becker," the empress called from her chair. She ignored her son's greeting. "You have my apologies on behalf of my son for his actions."

Behind her stood the two same attendants Eric recognized from the Throne Room, along with one other Fae. There was an energy that emanated from the male Fae warrior that rivalled the violence of untamed nature. He wore the armor of the Imperial Knights, but his features were hidden under the hood of his cloak.

Eric averted his eyes from the mysterious knight and bowed to the empress. "You honor me, Your Imperial Majesty, but there is no need for your apologies. Least of all to me."

"Least of all the one chosen and blessed by the aether?" She arched an elegant brow.

She held out her hand for him to take a seat in the chair made from contorted tree roots. Sitting across from her, she still radiated beauty as her hair formed a crown of loose braids, stray strands falling around her thin frame. The hard purple and silver tinges of her eyes were highlighted by the pale gold summer dress that draped over her shoulders and plunged down the middle. A single gold chain sat around her throat.

"Cithrel, dear." She flicked her fingers without looking at her fourth son. "There's no need for you to stay. He'll be fine with Sir Saelihn and I."

Cithrel hesitated a moment, his steeled blue gaze shifting towards the hooded Fae that stood behind his mother. Sir Saelihn dipped his chin ever so slightly, so that if Eric wasn't looking he wouldn't have noticed. Finally, Cithrel said, "Yes, Your Majesty."

He gave Eric one final dark gaze before he turned on his heel and stormed out, his shoulders pulled in tight with tension.

"So," the Empress Nithroel chimed. "Have you been enjoying the library?"

Eric pulled his gaze from Cithrel's back and stiffened at the ancient lilt in her voice. "Yes," he said slowly, unsure of his next words.

"But?" The empress drummed her fingers on her chair. The silver in her eyes shimmered with pitiless attention.

She was practically purring as Eric swallowed back his nerves. "But I haven't been able to find anything about my Marking or how it could have happened. I don't know why I was chosen or how to even control it. I don't know what it is, Your Majesty."

"I see."

Her lips spread into a satiated smile as she reached for her cup of tea. Eric didn't dare speak, and the knotted feeling in his gut burned. Whatever the empress was leading up to felt like some kind of trap. The smile was still on her lips when she set her teacup back down and folded her hands in her lap. Primordial power thrummed behind her air of calm as the corner of her mouth twitched.

"I'm sure I can find what you're looking for," she said.

"But?" He repeated her earlier question.

The empress chuckled. "But, I will have something in return."

There it was. Not even a negotiation but a definitive demand backed by her unbound power. He couldn't help but glance at the hooded knight behind her, who had gone ethereally still. "What can I give you, Your Majesty?"

"You're aware that as the High Priestess, it is my duty to lead the ritual of the Imperial Floral Rite."

The High Priestess, known as the Lady of the Woods, was one of the most honored titles a Fae could be given. Eric knew it was almost exclusively given to female members of the Imperial Family, which meant Princess Lyari was the heir to that title. The ground itself felt unsteady, as if shifting under his feet and threatening to consume him. "I am aware, Your Majesty."

"I will give you access to what you seek," she said and leaned forward in her ornate chair. Her thin fingers clawed the arm of her chair. "And you will accept your title as the Marked One."

An earthquake could have happened right then and Eric wouldn't notice. The world fell away at the empress's words. It was one thing for him to be chosen to have magic but to be granted a title, that would make him nobility

and an official member of the Imperial Court. His hands went limp at his sides as he drifted into a void. That was what she wanted, to trap him deeper within the palace walls, to chain him to this world.

"You were chosen by the aether, Eric. You have been blessed with the greatest gift among the Fae. You need to accept your title, become the Marked. It is rightfully yours. Do that, and I will make sure you find what you're looking for."

Nithroel Alonetha rested back in her chair, a satisfied quirk to her mouth. The iridescent glow of silver and purple was mesmerizing, but there were centuries of unrelenting hunger and knowledge behind that gaze. She had Eric cornered with her deal and she knew it. If he wanted to learn about his Marking and how to use this magic, control it, he had to sink deeper into the Alonethan court and the parasitic nobles that all wanted him dead. He had to force himself further into the darkness of this world if he ever wanted a chance to be free again. But how far was too far before he wouldn't be able to return?

Eric gave Sir Saelihn another sidelong glance and saw no trace of emotion under that hood. If the empress's personal guard's chest wasn't rising and falling, Eric could have sworn he was carved of Grecian midnight marble itself. Something about him was alluring and unsettling, like the unknown depths of the ocean.

"You must know this will cause more turmoil within the palace walls, Your Majesty." Eric processed his words as he spoke. "Especially after the crown prince already made an attempt on my life."

Eric's brow knitted. The prince, indeed, the entire Imperial Family, would have known about the title that came with being Marked from the start. Cithrel had to have known this conversation was coming and he didn't warn Eric at all. How long had he kept that knowledge from him? How long was he going to let Eric flounder and search pointlessly for answers until the empress made him this deal?

"The crown prince has received his punishment for betraying my wishes, and by extension, the empire." She flicked her fingers toward Eric in a serpentine gesture. "Once you are bestowed your title, Eric Becker, your Marking will be recognized by the entire court and by the Alonethan Empire. The nobles, or any Fae for that matter, will have no right to refute it."

Eric eyed the scorched design on his forearm and couldn't help the next words that spilled out. "How long have you known about this title, Your Majesty?" He turned over his arm to study the entire Marking. "Ever since you saw this Mark on me?"

"Surely you don't need me to answer that for you." She lifted her chin, a smirk forming.

That meant yes. She had known, Cithrel, the entire Imperial Family, and all nobles in attendance that day in the Throne Room knew that Eric would be given this title. It was why Solonar didn't hesitate to try to kill Eric.

"Why didn't he tell me?" Eric whispered to himself. He didn't see the contented expression on the empress's face falter, overhearing what he said. The glint in her silver-ringed eyes dulled and exposed the millennia-old wisdom.

"You'll have to start asking the right questions if you want the right answers, Eric." She drummed her fingers on the arm of her chair before she stopped all together. "I won't keep you any longer. My son is likely waiting for his attendant to be returned to him."

She didn't bother asking if Eric accepted. He had no choice but to agree. Instead, he rose from his chair and bowed before leaving the private courtyard that felt more like an interrogation. As Nithroel said, Cithrel was waiting for Eric, his posture rigid as he paced along the dirt path. At the sound of Eric's footsteps, familiar blue eyes stared down at him with the same unreadable expression as usual.

Eric set his jaw, irritation inching into his voice. "Did you know the whole time why the empress summoned me?"

Something flickered behind the depths of his gaze, but all he said was, "Yes."

He knew the truth before Cithrel said it, but the confirmation still stung. His cheeks flushed and he hated that he cared at all about the prince not being honest with him. Why would he? He was a Fae, he didn't owe Eric anything. He needed to stay focused now more than ever. Sinking further into the web of the palace would lead to his death if he wasn't careful.

"I'm sure you have a lot of meetings today. We shouldn't linger."

He wasn't sure but he thought he saw Cithrel flinch at Eric's quick dismissal. Satisfaction and ecstasy and something else swelled and eddied in his chest as the two of them made their way to the next meeting.

A week passed faster than any other day in the Fae world, probably because Eric didn't want this night to come. The night he would officially become the Marked One. The night Eric would be hopelessly tied to this world.

"Are you ready?" Cithrel asked, breaking their tenuous silence.

Eric chewed on the inside of his cheek, his nerves a mess. "It doesn't really matter if I am, does it?" Not if he wanted to learn more about this Mark and the power that lived within it. Within him.

"No, no, it doesn't," Cithrel admitted, his tone cold. "I'll be at your side as much as I can be tonight."

The prince made an effort to comfort Eric, no matter how awkward and stiff his words were. But it did reassure him. A little. After dinner, they both sat across from each other in the sitting area, waiting for time to run out before the Rite and his title ceremony.

Eric was dreading it. "Your entire family will be there tonight, won't they?" He didn't say it, but the prince knew what Eric meant. Solonar would be there.

Cithrel's eyes hardened. Then as quick as it had fallen, the mask of indifference was back in place. "No one can refute your title. To do so would be to defy the empress and the empire itself."

The prince's jaw worked as he spoke, unhappy with his own words. It did about as much to settle Eric's volatile nerves. There would be too many nightmares for him to face tonight—the crown prince, Lord Aimar, and countless other Fae who wanted him dead.

"Then I should probably get ready." He needed to get up, to move, to do anything to distract himself.

"Hinni will attend to you." Cithrel's voice was quiet.

Eric paused, his face crumpled in confusion. "Shouldn't she help you?"

"I'll be fine." He gave a dismissive wave, but he wouldn't meet the question in Eric's hazel eyes. "Let her help you. It would make her happy."

Eric just nodded, unsure what exactly was happening. The prince turned on his heel and vanished down the opposite hall, leaving Eric with emotional whiplash.

There wasn't much time for him to decipher what Cithrel's intentions were because Hinni materialized in Eric's doorway, her hands knitted together in her lap. He was relieved that she took over everything, a

whirlwind of precision and perfection. It wasn't until the second or third time Hinni spoke that Eric realized she was talking to him.

"The prince commander is waiting for you." She squeezed his arm once more.

"We wouldn't want him to wait, now, would we?" He did his best to keep his tone light but the edge of fear tainted every syllable.

Cithrel stood, the perfect picture of desire. The charcoal corseted jacket hugged every ridge of his muscles and accentuated the primal promise the prince would give if those clothes came off. Black leather boots and trousers clung to his battle-hardened body that made the emerald cloak almost shine as it hung from his shoulders. The most brilliant of all was the blackened coronet upon his pale blond head that sat as if it was destined to be there.

"You look striking," Eric blurted, mesmerized.

"You—" Cithrel cleared his throat, his blue eyes shifted. "You look captivating, Eric." Heat flooded Eric's cheek at the compliment. It did wonderful and cruel things to him.

"Then shall we?"

The air felt too hot all of a sudden and clung to Eric as if it were ready to melt him. It made his heart pound and race as they walked in silence. He failed to calm his heart when they reached the gardens, where Cithrel held his arm out for Eric. The gesture was an oasis and a toxic trap, one that Eric decided to take.

When they stepped out into the courtyard now bathed in night, Eric was only half-surprised to see the dull glow of flowers illuminating their path. The hushed whispers about him filled the night air as they made their way down the path together. It took most of his concentration to keep his face composed. No matter how many insults they hissed, he refused to let the Fae know it ate away at him.

When the path gave way to the expanse of forest before them, Eric couldn't decide who held his attention more. The empress and the princess stood in the clearing, their hands open at their sides, a look of serenity mirrored between them. Long white robes hugged and flowed around their near-perfect Fae bodies interwoven with luminescent flowers and a laurel of greenery draped from their brows. The flora and fauna were even more effervescent than the glowing gardens around them.

Cithrel brought them to a halt along the edge of the dimly lit courtyard, and Eric noted they were as far removed from the crowd of nobility as they could be.

Lyari stared off into the crowd, until her blind eyes fell on Cithrel, where they lingered for a moment, and then finally rested on Eric. It was strange gazing back at her, like she was all at once hollowed and rotted and yet vibrant with life. It unnerved him.

Then the sound of footsteps could be heard, growing louder with each crunch of dirt under boot. Eric turned to follow the sound with the rest of the crowd and his heart fell.

Solonar stepped through the crowd, a dull glow to his skin, dimmed only by his raven black hair that hung loose. It was as if his entire body had been set ablaze with fire, shining from within the Prince of Light himself.

The crown prince stopped before his sister and mother, taking the time to make a meaningful bow of his head to the Lady of the Woods and her heir. When he lifted his head and walked away—the brightness of his skin fading before snuffing out entirely—Eric felt his heart begin to pound, his body ramping into a panic.

Solonar strode towards where he and Cithrel stood, his feline attention on Eric. For a brief moment, they shared a cryptic stare. The crown prince gave him a meaningful look and then it was gone and replaced with a menacing leer. As he neared, Eric could see his eyes were highlighted with what looked like smeared charcoal and bronze, further illuminating the amber hue of Solonar's eyes and matching his rare stone piercings.

Eric's skin crawled as the crown prince stopped and stood on the other side of Eric. Cithrel's grip on Eric tightened and he felt a wave of unease fill the air around him. Eric thought he was going to be sick as his head swam.

"What do you want?" Cithrel bit out.

Solonar's brow lifted innocently. "I'm here to watch our High Priestess and her heir perform the Floral Rite. Is that not allowed?"

Cithrel's teeth ground together but he said nothing, his presence looming.

Eric felt the crown prince's eyes on him but said nothing. When the empress began her chanting, Solonar was already gone. The feeling of relief was soured by the sensation of something unearthly seeping into his bones.

When the chanting doubled, his attention was brought back to the two Fae who now danced together. As they chanted in a language Eric couldn't understand, the trees and plants and flowers seemed to respond. The longer they danced, the more it felt like the enchanted forest was alive. The sound of leaves rustling in the wind echoed, branches swayed, and the scent of flowers filled the air. The empress and the princess began to dance faster now, their chants turned to half-screams. Around them, the glow of greenery flashed into shades of silver, then crimson, and finally emerald. The wind began to howl through the trees, chanting along with the two Fae women.

Eric's heart palpitated the louder and more fearsome the sounds and lights became, until the world fell silent. Like turning off a switch, everything in the courtyard became muted. Not even his ears rang.

Then slowly his own breathing and everything around them hummed with a new sense of vigor. As if fresh life had been breathed into the earth around them.

When the empress and Lyari fell still, so did the rest of nature. The world went quiet for one heartbeat, then another, and several more. Until finally, Nithroel spread her arms and everyone felt like they were allowed to breathe again.

"May the aether flow through you." The crowd repeated the empress's words in a chant.

A moment later, the crowd turned to head back inside the palace towards the brightly-lit aether lamps. Near where Eric and Cithrel came from were six gigantic double doors, all opened wide and spilling the light from the Great Room into the edges of the courtyard.

The surreal and heady lightness in Eric's chest dropped and hardened as they left behind the ritual and entered the palace once more. The weight of his title pressed down on him like the weight of every bad memory he couldn't be rid of.

The Great Room expanded before Eric, showing off simplistic stone architecture and primeval oil paintings that covered the walls. Black, gold, and emerald draped the rest of the room—imperial colors. In the aether light of the chandeliers, it made the entire space shimmer.

The room mulled with alcohol and decadence as the scoffs and derisive voices came flooding back. The nobles knew what was going to happen

after the Floral Rite and they made it clear they were unhappy about it.

A human was going to become the Marked One. A slave to receive such a rare and honored title was a tragedy in itself. An abomination. That was what Eric was.

One of the empress's attendants appeared at Cithrel's side, pulling Eric back to the impending present. After several hushed words into the prince's ear, she flitted off back into the throng of bodies and vanished, her leaf-strewn hair flowing behind her.

"We have to be at the empress's side now, Eric," Cithrel began, his lips forming a hard line. "It will be over with soon."

This was it. The moment the empress shackled him with the most dangerous monsters. The lights in the room were too bright, his clothes too tight. His limbs were stiff as he let Cithrel lead them through the crowd to the edge of the stairs where Nithroel and her children waited.

"Are you ready, Eric?" The question was meaningless, but she asked it anyway. Maybe out of a sense of cruelty.

"Yes, Your Majesty." He wasn't.

She inclined her head to him, the dazzling smile serene before she spread her arms, palms up. The Great Room shivered and quaked under the power of the empress as her magic worked its way through the crowd. It wound its way through everyone's body and arrested their attention, demanded it. Every Fae in the room quieted and turned in unison towards the grand stairs where the Imperial Family stood, where Eric also stood.

"Eric Becker has been chosen and blessed by the aether. He has been Marked." Her voice was gentle but carried throughout the entire Great Room. "It is time he is recognized and honored by the aether's blessing."

She turned to face Eric and all eyes fixated on him at the same time. He froze, as if time had turned its back on him. "From this moment on, Eric Becker, you bear the title of the Marked One. Carry this honor for the rest of your life."

The words were simple, meaningless on their own, but spoken to him in this room, full of nobility, they were binding. A resounding burn charged up Eric's arm where his Marking was and sliced into his heart. His eyes went wide and his lips parted in silent anguish as his insides were chained to the title bestowed upon him.

Then, it was over.

Eric's shoulders slumped and he huffed a ragged breath, clutching his Marking. The room fell back into its idle conversation and drink one breath later, content to ignore Eric's existence, even though he was now the Marked One.

Cithrel was at his side then. "I have to go for a moment." He looked like he wanted to put his arm around Eric, touch him, comfort him, but he kept his hands at his sides clenched tight. "Sir Malor will be watching. I'll be back soon, Eric. I promise."

Eric managed a nod, but felt anything but safe with Cithrel leaving him after that. He was still unsteady on his feet and his skin felt weathered and frayed.

Eric didn't waste any time putting as much space between himself and the rest of Cithrel's family. He didn't want to be near Solonar for a second longer, or any of them for that matter. Shrinking back from the swarm of nobles, he cast his eyes off towards the gardens through several opened doors. He caught sight of Archduke Laen in conversation with another noble and when their eyes met, he was rewarded with an ailing scowl. Not that he expected much else from such an old Fae noble.

What he wasn't expecting was the set of garish all-white eyes gazing at him with the pleasantness of a viper. Standing next to the archduke was Lord Aimar.

Chapter Twelve

Aimar approached in a jacket with interwoven chains threaded across his chest instead of simple buttons and a pair of trousers that stitched up along the sides of his legs. His black pointed boots shone in the aether light of the Great Room.

"I've trained you well, I see," he mocked as he came to stand before Eric. His normally ruffled hair was slicked back tonight, accentuating the shaved sides of his head and his pointed ears.

"I'm unsure what you mean, my lord." Eric straightened, his limbs taut with alarm.

"You put all those years as my pet to good use. Is the prince commander between your legs yet?"

Eric's cheeks burned at the accusation. Something about the lord made him feel powerless; every sentence managed to bite. Aimar rocked on his heels with a hand in his pocket, knowing his words hit their mark.

Eric jerked his chin back to Aimar. He was a Fae bastard and he refused to give the red-haired devil any more satisfaction. With his best performance possible, he gave a disinterested snort.

"Think whatever you like, Fae lord." Eric flicked a nonchalant hand. "Though I have to admit it's much nicer attending to a prince than a lord. It's hardly a significant title, lord, now that I've been given one of my own."

Aimar seethed, a low growl rumbling in his chest. Eric grimaced seeing his canines. He knew how much it stung when they drew blood from a simple nip. The Fae lord stomped closer to Eric, a crazed look in his eyes similar to that of a wraith.

"How nice that you have the Imperial Family's favor now," he sneered. "But you don't really, not the entire family that is. I wonder how long you can last, how long you'll be able to stand it. They will grow bored of you, your prince included. When that happens, you'll be my pet again."

Lord Aimar stepped close enough that Eric felt his breath. His eyes gleamed, the way a predator's eyes shine in the light when they've seized their prey. Memories of the whip across Eric's back filled his mind, while the scent of the lord's magic poisoned him. His hands trembled at his sides.

"It's annoying really," Aimar hissed into Eric's ear. "After all my hard work to keep you to myself, you were taken from me on a whim. I can't wait for you to come back to me."

His smile was more malice than joy. The only way someone like the lord felt joy was through suffering. A mixture of rage and panic muddled in Eric's chest as he stood helpless. He didn't know how to use his magic properly and Cithrel was nowhere to be seen. Swallowing down his fear, he opened his mouth to speak but no words came out.

The hammering of his heart ached, pinning him in place. Eric wanted to move, scream, do anything, but his body stood frozen. He was back on the estate again, helpless and trapped by this monster.

Lord Aimar's disturbing grin stretched across his face, revealing all his teeth. His clawed hands reached out to snare Eric.

"Ah, there you are," a velveteen voice cooed next to Eric's ear.

Someone draped their arm across Eric's shoulder before Aimar could get his hands on Eric. The touch was warm, calming even. At least it would have been comforting if Eric didn't shiver at the familiar voice, his blood like ice in his veins. At the same time, Lord Aimar's eyes went wide, his hand hanging limp in the air inches away from Eric.

"I've been looking for you." Solonar smiled at Eric.

Amber cat eyes looked down at Eric with such affection that anyone looking would think they were madly in love. Eric hardened his jaw, weathering a fresh wave of terror that washed over him. It was impossible to decide which was worse, being alone with Lord Aimar or trapped in the crown prince's arms. A gentle squeeze at his back made him flinch, coming back to himself. He managed a meek smile as he looked up at Solonar.

"Greetings, Crown Prince," Eric said, his voice hoarse. "I hope you've been well."

"I am, now that I've found you," he purred.

Instead of swoon, the words made him cringe. He still felt the burn of smoke in his lungs from that night in the woods with the crown prince. The night he tried to kill Eric. Seeing him this close, the charcoal and bronze that colored his eyes made him more dazzling than usual.

Eric knew Solonar was punished for trying to kill him, but the crown prince looked perfectly fine. The miserable feeling that his punishment was hardly anything at all plagued him with a bitterness he couldn't shake.

The crown prince, watching Eric's thoughts spiral, pulled Eric in closer to his side, his hand curling around Eric's shoulder. Then Solonar's satisfied look withered and his pupils thinned to slits as his attention turned to Lord Aimar.

"Oh my, Lord Aimar," the crown prince began. His tone was light, with a bone-splitting tension in his undertone, the monster within barely restrained. "I was so enamored with Eric that I didn't notice you until now."

"That's quite alright, Crown Prince," Lord Aimar said with a pained look, managing a smile. "He is the Marked One, after all."

Solonar blinked, feigning ignorance. "Oh, I thought you might be unaware of Eric's title." He raised a brow. "Otherwise, why else would you be pawing at him like he was still your slave? Or was it *pet*, that you preferred, Lord Aimar?"

The smug grin smeared on the crown prince's face was a look Eric didn't know he could love. Almost as satisfying as seeing the lord's face turn scarlet at the humiliation. Solonar must have overheard their conversation from the beginning. He looked up at the crown prince again, seeing his gaze fixated on Lord Aimar.

Seeing his focus, Eric wondered why Solonar followed him all night, why his reprimand was still unknown, and why the crown prince was suddenly being gentle. Either way, he was glad that the black-haired prince's silver tongue was on his side.

"Apologies, Crown Prince." Aimar fumbled for an excuse. "Allow me to offer my congratulations to the Marked One."

Solonar's brow arched with a faintly amused look. "Then by all means. Don't let my presence stop you."

He extended his arm that wasn't draped over Eric towards Lord Aimar in an invitation to speak. The pleasant smile on his face mocked Aimar even further. In contrast, Aimar looked inches away from bursting a blood vessel. His whitened eyes flared through his smile. It was a look Eric had been forced to placate at the cost of his own body.

Turning his attention to Eric, Aimar dipped his head in greeting. Eric inclined his head in acknowledgment, keeping quiet. "Congratulations on such an honor, Marked One. You are truly blessed."

Eric formed a satisfied smile, seeing Aimar forced into this situation. It served that bastard right to be like this. He only wished the devil would pay

more for what he did. A shred of his pride was rejuvenated, so much that he forgot his body pressed against Solonar's.

"Thank you, Lord Aimar."

Lost in the moment, Eric found himself smiling at Solonar, who smiled back at him. It was hard to know if the crown prince's smile was genuine behind those old yellow cat-like eyes. The moment came to a sudden end, though, when Cithrel jerked Eric away from Solonar and Aimar.

"You must have a death wish," Cithrel growled at Solonar, loud enough that nearby Fae nobles turned their attention to the four of them. "After what you did, you have the nerve to even touch him."

Eric's breath caught as the angel-faced prince's sudden grip on his arm squeezed a little too tight. Out of reflex, he wrenched his arm away from Cithrel. Everyone, most of all Cithrel, looked back in surprise.

Eric's heart raced, realizing that several faces turned to him in the Great Room. His eyes darted around the room, as if he might find an escape, only to catch the second prince, Luthais gazing at him.

When he looked back, Cithrel's eyes had darkened and hollowed. The prince opened his mouth to speak but decided against it. He always seemed to be at a loss for words when Eric wished he would speak. The crown prince, on the other hand, looked more than pleased.

"Well, I clearly don't want to be on your bad side, little brother, so I'll take my leave." His words were abruptly soft again, earnest almost. "Before I do, though, congratulations on your title, Marked One."

Solonar made a show of bowing to Eric, his silken black hair falling around him as he did. When he rose, he smirked at Eric and strode off into the throng of nobility, his red and gold cloak swaying behind him. Just as he was about to vanish in the crowd, he called out, "I'll see you around, Marked One."

With that, he left. The bewildered look on Eric's face melted away when he looked back at Cithrel. He was fuming. Lord Aimar at least had the sense to disappear while everything was happening. After all, the last time Cithrel had threatened to end his life.

"Are you alright?" Cithrel asked, voice low. His touch was delicate as he did a once-over on Eric's arm. The prince's grip had left red marks on Eric's wrist.

"I'm fine." The room was starting to feel too big and he was feeling too small. "Nothing happened."

"He had no right to come near you."

"Which one?" Eric blurted.

"Both of them." There was a savage edge to his reply. "We don't have to stay here anymore. We can leave."

Eric was about to say that he wanted nothing more than to leave when Luthais approached them, blocking their exit. His formal attire matched his brothers'. The main difference was that all of his facial piercings were gone, replaced with simple black studs in either ear and an obsidian chain across his collar.

"May I also offer my congratulations?"

Luthais cast a mischievous look at Eric, much to the dismay of Cithrel. It was then that Eric noticed the black piercing in Luthais's tongue, which flicked with his words. The Second Prince stood out from the rest of his family, whether it was the way he carried himself or how he acted, but it was strikingly human. Eric wondered if it bothered Luthais having an unusual resemblance to his mother. Their silver hair made them unmistakably related.

Placing a hand over his chest in modesty, the second prince's fingers drummed on his chest. "It brings me the utmost pleasure to congratulate you, Marked One. The title suits you well."

In one fluid motion, he threw out his arms in a flourish and with what sounded like the snap of fingers, two glasses of wine were in his hands, one of which was extended to Eric. His normally purple eyes flashed to blue and looked exactly like Cithrel's.

He reached to take the glass but Cithrel was faster, his hand on his brother's arm. "Don't."

Luthais's brows rose. Then he threw a hand over his face as if he might faint. "Truly, woe is me, dear brother! To think you would treat me as a scoundrel! I merely wished to toast with our honored guest. I am wounded you think so little of me."

Dramatic outbursts like this must be normal because none of the other nobles seemed bothered by Luthais's performance, or lack of. With a final withering look, Cithrel released Luthais's arm.

In truth, Eric couldn't remember the last time he had a drink, and the younger, foolish part of him just wanted to forget his problems for a second and enjoy the wine. Eric took the glass before the siblings had a chance to start another argument. "Thank you, Your Highness."

"To the Marked One!" Luthais said with a cry and before Eric could react, Luthais hooked his arm around Eric's and tipped both their glasses back. The mischievous prince shot Eric a coquettish wink as they downed their drinks.

He didn't let go until both of their glasses were empty and Eric's throat had warmed along with his cheeks. It reminded him of all those nights at clubs and house parties years ago. He couldn't remember when the last time was he had a drink. True to fashion, Luthais bumped his shoulder and pointed with the glass in his hand across the ballroom.

"Look at the archduke, lovely," Luthais snickered. "He looks ready to explode."

The tips of the archduke's ears were slowly turning red as the scowl he gave Eric earlier deepened. Eric stifled a laugh seeing the old Fae noble look even more miserable.

"Poor thing can't bring himself to come over here and talk to us." Luthais swirled his glass as he spoke and bubbling liquor refilled their glasses.

"I'd rather he didn't." Eric took another sip of his drink, enjoying the sweet burn of it. "The archduke can't stand the sight of me, let alone acknowledge my new title."

"I think that makes you all the nicer to have around then, lovely." Luthais grinned back at Eric, pulling them closer together.

"That might be the nicest thing I've heard," Eric said.

"Hmm." Luthais nodded. "Tonight? Well, the nobles can be stingy with words. What with the truth influencing us and all." He waved an arbitrary hand in the air.

"In at least five years."

Luthais's smile faltered. The brothers looked at Eric, the three of them silent. Cithrel was about to say something, his eyes softening as he reached a hand to Eric, when Luthais squeezed his arm around Eric tighter.

"Then I'm happy I said it, lovely." The honesty in Luthais pinned him, a knot in his stomach. He wasn't sure if he should cry or hug him.

Eric watched the blue in Cithrel's gaze freeze over like a natural disaster. "That's enough. Go throw yourself at some drunk nobles," Cithrel said, reaching for Luthais's arm that had wrapped itself around Eric, his new prized possession.

"I'm afraid I've already found my *drunk* of the night," he said, clucking his tongue as he dodged Cithrel's reach with ease. Then he swept Eric away with a twirl into the crowd of dancers.

"You bastard," Cithrel snarled, chasing after them.

Those ice-cold blue eyes that drove fear into Eric's bones looked more like a waterfall. It was strange how everything in the room moved like it was all made of water. Even his skin seemed to dance on its own. His body felt light as he spun with Luthais.

Then they were dancing, Luthais leading and supporting Eric with little effort. "I'm sorry to do this, Eric, but you are just too fascinating for me to sit back and watch. So I put a little extra something in your drink. Do your best to enjoy yourself, lovely."

He flashed Eric a devilish wink while they spun through the crowd. As the second prince spoke, his silver hair fell from its braid, shifting and changing to slicked-back black hair. His eyes stayed the same shade of vibrant blue. Eric looked at him, dazzled by the way he used his magic. His aura was strange enough he couldn't place its scent.

"Pretty," he chuckled, reaching to poke Luthais's cheek.

In response, the Prince of Masks burst into laughter, an endearing smile on his lips as he twirled Eric away before scooping him back up in his arms. "If I'm not careful, I might be in trouble."

Eric's entire body sang after that drink. Even the feel of the air on his skin was thrilling. All he wanted to do was dance and *feel* everything. He grinned at Luthais. "I think you're my favorite prince tonight."

"You're going to make me blush, lovely."

Luthais's violet eyes flickered through several colors at once before falling back to purple. He held Eric close to him as they danced among the crowd. The night itself blurred as he twirled through the ballroom. Was someone yelling, or laughing? It all sounded the same.

The wind whipped past Eric's face and tousled his brown curls and he realized Luthais had whisked him away—they had escaped the palace

altogether. The night air crawled all over his skin and gooseflesh rose on his arms.

Ahh, he thought, smiling. This reminds me of home.

Without a worry, he tipped his head back and drank in the air, letting Luthais drag him along as they stole away in the night. Eric was so busy enjoying the peace and quiet that he thought he imagined what Luthais said next.

"I think those two will have an uphill battle with you, lovely. I wonder who will find you first?"

Chapter Thirteen

"How much further do we have to go?" Eric whined.

Luthais, whose eyes glimmered with amusement, chuckled in his ear. They had been walking for what felt like hours.

"It's only been a few minutes, lovely." The silver-haired prince's arm was securely hooked around Eric's waist, supporting the majority of his weight. It was probably for the best since his legs felt a lot less reliable than normal.

"It's only a little bit further." When Eric's legs went limp and Luthais just barely avoided dropping him, he added, "I'm starting to think I gave you too much to drink."

"Boop." Eric pushed his finger into Luthais's nose. He frowned then. "Hey, Luth-ahh, ayeeee. Ugh, your name's too hard to say."

"You have my regrets," he snorted.

"I'll just call you Lu."

Eric tried to turn and look at the second prince, but his legs buckled on their own again. Luthais caught him, the grip around his waist firmer. Eric let out a peel of laughter.

"It'll be our little secret," Luthais said.

Now that they were this close, Eric watched Luthais's eyes dance through a myriad of colors. It was like watching a supernova. The scent of clay muddled with the evening breeze. Eric beamed. "Pretty."

Luthais looked down at the helpless and heavy-lidded human in his arms for a moment, his expression unreadable. As if snapping himself out of a trance he put a heavy hand over his face, followed by a long, exasperated groan. When he looked back down at Eric, he had his signature devilish smile.

"I think I have to be very careful with you."

Eric's brows pulled together and lifted. "Hmm?"

Luthais continued walking, supporting his weight but more gently this time, careful not to drag him. "I'm very curious, Eric, how it is someone like you survived all this time? In the Adlar estate, of all places."

"Hmm," Eric said in answer again.

Eric's eyelids fell shut on him again, the effort to keep them open fading. The idea of a soft bed with an oversized blanket seemed like the most appealing thing. His insides sizzled, his skin just barely containing the electricity of liquor in his veins. It made every step tingle and reverberate.

"When are we gonna be there?" The words dribbled out slurred. "You said it'd only be a bit."

"You'll have to open your eyes, lovely," Luthais teased, his tone light.

The groan Eric let out drawled and mixed with their footsteps on the stone walkways. Slowly and reluctantly, he looked back into the night air and glanced around the quiet streets around them. With an almost alien clarity, he realized they had long since left behind the palace.

The same whimsical houses that seemed to grow with the earth, their roofs and walls covered in tree roots, others with rare and colorful flowers, lined the street in front of Eric. The packed earth and stone streets led to a house that was considerably larger than the rest around them, but not enough to look out of place.

The wood door had carvings of lavender around it and was reinforced with stone edging. There was no actual handle, since everything seemed to use magic to open anything outside the palace. The house was lined with windows shaped by roots and thick, twisting thorns, as if it claimed the building as its own. Just like the rest of the city, the building looked plain but efficient, while the plant life that grew around it filled it with intricate detail. Flowers burst from the ground and lined the perimeter of the house as well as the short walkway leading to the door.

The Adlar estate used to dredge up fear every time Eric had to go through its doors, but this house put him at ease. The feeling of finishing a long journey warmed his insides. Eric looked back up at Luthais, who had shifted his appearance again. This time with the face of a woman with a soft jawline and hair the color of ink cascading past her shoulders in waves. Just the tips of her ears pointed out from her locks.

She answered Eric's mesmerized gaze with a wink, with pale cherry eyes that dulled to a gray in the center. "We're here," Luthais chirped in a distinctly lighter voice. "Shall we?"

Eric nodded to her, his gaze drifting down the quiet streets as Luthais turned her attention to getting Eric through the door. He had all but given up on being able to stand on his own, let alone walk. As Luthais tugged him

through the entryway he saw Solonar stalking down the far end of the street.

"Hey!" Eric tried to call out to the crown prince but his words came out in a yawning hush.

His black hair was pulled back from his face for the first time since Eric had seen him. Concentration laced the raven-haired prince's features, as if he was searching for something and had been unsuccessful up until this point. It might have even been a look of desperation, like he was afraid he might never find what he lost again.

The crown prince paused and Eric thought he might have heard him. Just as he went to call out to him, louder this time, slender fingers with long, black-painted nails clamped over his mouth.

"Let's get you inside before *someone* sees," Luthais emphasized in her silvery voice.

The last thing Eric saw of Solonar was his face etched with concentration as he shook his head once, convincing himself of something and then storming down the street. He wondered what the crown prince could be so eager to find.

Wow. Eric wasn't sure if he said that out loud or not, but it didn't matter as he stared in wonder at the inside of the house.

Sleek wooden beams and stretching planks of wood floors spanned the inside of the house. Whorls and designs of vines wound their way around the beams above them and plain stone ran up the winding stairs in the far corner of the open-concept space. Divans were arranged to form a separate sitting area from a hulking stone table with cushioned redwood chairs. Even in the emptiness, the space was alluring, promising sophistication and depravity. He wondered how much this place must have cost if it wasn't part of the palace.

"Ah," Luthais sighed, sinking into the nearest red divan after letting Eric fall onto the black divan next to her. "I'm going to be honest with you, lovely, that was a bit tiresome."

"Hmm," he answered, his lids already solidly shut.

He heard a chuckle that sounded far off before he fell into a deep sleep. He did not wake again until many hours later. When he did, a particular kink in his neck made itself known.

Wincing, he rubbed at his neck and sat up, wondering if he slept the wrong way last night. His eyes widened, as his body went still, realizing that there were several things wrong. For starters, he was nowhere near the palace or Cithrel's private chambers where he should be. Second, he was shirtless in a bed that was not his. Third, and worst of all, there was a black-haired Fae woman fast asleep next to him and she was stark naked.

The night came back to him in painful bursts then. He remembered fleeing the palace drunk with Luthais to this hidden house. The last thing he remembered was falling asleep next to Luthais while he was a female Fae.

His breath caught. He did not know why they were both naked in bed together and a horrible feeling crawled over his skin. His hand shook as he glanced beneath the blanket. Then he shifted forward, half-expecting his back to be aching. When it didn't hurt, he let out a shuddering exhale of relief. He put his hands in his face, trying to tell himself to calm down, when he felt Luthais stir next to him.

"I was going to ask how you're feeling this morning, but I can see I already have my answer."

She turned over, resting her head on her hand with her entire body exposed to him. Blushing, Eric looked away. He had no interest in her, but it still felt wrong to look at her like that.

"Oh, I see." Luthais's soft voice purred before it deepened to baritone. "Is this more to your liking?"

The scent of protea flowers filled the bedroom as Luthais's magic manifested. Eric knew he should keep looking away, but the way Luthais used magic was too tempting to ignore. Peeking over his shoulder, Luthais was indeed no longer a woman, but he wasn't back in his original form. Instead of silver, blond hair fell around him and blue eyes stared up at him from the bed, full of seduction. He flashed Eric an uncharacteristic smile.

Air rushed out of Eric's chest and heat colored his face. It was the same Fae angel he was used to being next to, dreamed about. Luthais looked almost exactly like Cithrel, except they weren't the eyes Eric knew. He knew he shouldn't have looked. Eric shifted to get out of bed, but instead, the second prince pulled Eric back down and into his arms. His touch was gentle enough not to hurt Eric, but firm enough to keep him in the second prince's embrace.

A fresh wave of protea scent filled the air. Luthais had shifted his appearance again. This time amber cat-eyes winked at Eric and raven hair fell around him. "Or is this better?"

Eric's lips wordlessly parted for a moment, staring at the familiar deep honey gaze. Then, as if catching himself, his mouth snapped shut. He took too long as he saw Luthais studying his reactions. His face felt flushed. He cursed himself as the silence dragged on.

"I'm learning a lot about you this morning, lovely," Luthais chimed.

"Apologies, Your Highness," Eric managed to bite out as he untangled himself from Luthais's arms.

"We're back to formalities, I see." Luthais pouted, his arms now crossed over his bare chest. "After the *night* we had."

Eric's sun-kissed and freckled skin drained of color. He was unable to find words. He didn't remember anything about being with Luthais last night. Dread started to churn in his stomach, growing and creating a lump in his throat.

"Try not to look so devastated." Luthais threw a hand to his forehead. "Or you'll hurt my feelings."

"You mean, we didn't...." Eric trailed off, not wanting to finish his sentence, afraid that it might make it true somehow.

Luthais watched him as he floundered about, then finally huffed. "No, lovely. I prefer my *acquaintances* to be willing and awake for such things," he clarified.

Eric let out a long sigh of relief, falling back against his pillow. Now that his fear was wearing off, he took in his surroundings. Eyeing the pile of clothing next to his side of the bed, he frowned.

"Ah," Luthais answered, catching Eric's expression. "When I tried to change you out of your formal attire and into softer clothes, you suddenly came back to life and thrashed as if I was trying to murder you. It was all I could do to get you into bed."

Eric bit down on his lip, wishing he could sink into the bed and disappear. Slowly, he reached for the clothes and slipped them on. The trousers were soft but a little too big on him, hanging loosely at his hips. When he slid on the tunic, if it could even be called that, he did his best to adjust the sleeveless shirt to cover his chest while its exposed sides plunged down his torso.

Eric bowed his head, huffing out a breath. "The fourth prince is going to be furious."

"Likely, but it'll be a nice change from his usual frigidity. Besides, lovely, you're the Marked One now. That does carry some weight."

Eric chewed over Luthais's words, unsure how good it was to have a title now. When he didn't answer, Luthais added, "You can stay here with me as long as you like. That is, until you're dragged back to the palace."

The words were out of his mouth before he could think better of it. "I'd like that."

Luthais studied Eric's expression at his quick reply. "Of course, lovely." Then sitting up he added, "I don't blame you for trying to escape."

Eric slowly turned to face Luthais, his heart thumping erratically in his chest. "I—" he began, then shook his head, searching for words. "I just wanted it to stop. All of it. I didn't want any more of us to keep suffering. I wanted to be more than a pet."

His head fell in his hands and he was all too aware of the scars that lined his back, chest, and arms. Reminders of everywhere Aimar had touched him. Luthais was quiet, letting Eric grieve for a moment before he spoke. This was different—being with a Fae, a member of the Imperial Family at that, who spoke the whole truth so easily and earnestly. He was different from his siblings.

A bottle brushed against Eric's arm. "You can be free here, at least." As Luthais spoke, Eric eyed the liquid inside. Shimmering emerald specks swirled amongst the alcohol. "It's infused with aether dust."

Eric's body stiffened hearing those words. Aether dust was used to enhance magical abilities. The knights of the Alonethan Empire generally kept finite amounts with them as a last resort. It could be manipulated for other uses, though, one of which was close to a narcotic.

"It can help you forget," Luthais's quiet voice offered. He gazed off, lost in his own complicated thoughts as his brow furrowed. "At least for a bit."

He shouldn't take the bottle. Instead, he should head straight back to the palace. Cithrel would probably think Eric was trying to escape again if he didn't come back. But when he looked at the bottle again, the urge to be dumb and ignore his problems took hold, drowning out his other thoughts. Even if it was a mistake, he wanted it to be his choice.

He took the bottle from Luthais and brought the sloshing liquid up to his lips and drank. The liquor burned Eric's throat, some of it trickling down the sides of his mouth and dribbling off his chin. When his stomach curled, he ripped the bottle away, letting it fall from his grip. The constant thud of his heart rang in his ears.

Eric felt its presence then. The aether that slumbered in his veins stirred, its power reacting to the aether dust. There was no way for him to control it.

No. Please don't. Eric clutched himself tighter, begging the magic to go back to sleep. *Stop.*

Then, as if the world itself grew calm, everything ebbed and settled around him. The swelling of his magic settled and the thumping of his heart slowed. He let out an audible exhale.

"I'm sorry about this, Your Highness," he said, looking away from him. As he spoke, his body began to feel light, one worry at a time lifting from him. "Thank you—for letting me stay here."

Luthais gave him an assessing gaze before sliding out of bed. A second later, he was clothed in a short black tunic that cut off above his midriff and undone trousers with several rips throughout them, exposing his lower abdomen and thighs. He looked like he could strip at any given moment. The second prince stretched out his hand to Eric.

"Lu is fine." He shot Eric a wry smile, waiting.

Giving into the charm of Luthais and the burn of alcohol that filled his stomach, he took Luthais's hand. "If that's your wish, Your Highness." He smirked. "Lu."

Luthais didn't hide the bright smile that could have blinded anyone subjected to it as they headed downstairs. The familiar red velvet divan sprawled before them. More empty bottles scattered the floor and the dim atmosphere gave Eric the impression that he was glad he didn't remember this part of the night.

Eric slid onto the black plush divan in the corner as Luthais vanished into the other room. When he came out a moment later with two glasses, Eric reached for his cup. Luthais plunked down on the red divan, stretching out his limbs. Filled with courage that he didn't have a moment ago, Eric blurted out the first thing that came to his mind.

"I'm going to be punished somehow when I get back, aren't I?" he asked, genuinely curious rather than upset.

Luthais smiled, half-dangling off the divan. When he stretched it made him look like a bird unfurling its wings. "Didn't you hear me earlier? You're special now." His voice was soft. "It's much harder for the Marked One, even if they're human, to be faulted."

"I'm not that special," Eric slurred, dismissing the thought with a wave. The aether dust-infused alcohol made him feel light. Almost free. Then, as if remembering something important, he poked at his own cheeks. "Aimar is obsessed with my freckles, though."

Luthais's eyes pitted to black hearing Aimar's name. He weighed his next words carefully. "He never should have been granted the title of lord in the first place. I detest nobles like him."

Eric's eyes sharpened, his head clearing the alcoholic fog. "You mean nobles that torture and kill their slaves, their *pets*, for enjoyment?"

The words were out before he could think better. Eric was glad he was drugged right now, or his heart might have given out. Luthais didn't say anything, but his hollowed black eyes regarded Eric. They stared at each other in silence for a moment before Luthais's guarded expression softened and his eyes reverted to soft purple. "Yes, those kinds of nobles." He raised his chin to give him a lopsided grin. "And I must admit, those freckles and hazel eyes are to die for, lovely."

Luthais's words comforted him and twisted inside him all at once. They knew about Fae like Aimar, yet they didn't do anything to stop them. His stomach burned and his head swam but somehow he felt good, his body tingling with warmth. With lids growing heavy, he let his head fall back against the plush divan. Thoughts of Lord Aimar drifted away as easily as they came. Staring at the high wood-beam ceiling, his body tensed. The small piece of his mind that clung to logic shouted at him that he needed to be careful, but all he wanted was to feel good.

"Don't do anything unsavory to me, Lu." He mumbled it like a joke, feeling his consciousness floating away.

"I wouldn't dream of it," Luthais chuckled, his voice far off.

As his body's singular desire for release drowned out other thoughts, time seemed to blur. One minute he lounged on the divan, the next, a male Fae writhed on top of him, his chest bare and glistening with some kind of alcohol.

Oh right. Luthais brought some “friends” over at some point. The majority of them were curious and eager to spend time with the Marked One. The room filled with the smell of perfumes and drinks. Eric was listening to muffled moans and sighs of pleasure, though he didn't know where they came from, when the Fae on top of him jerked Eric's chin back to look at him.

Gold eyes with flecks that moved like air under water gazed down at him. When he smiled, all of his teeth were as fine as razors. "Pay attention to me, Marked One. I won't let you regret it." Then his tongue was inside Eric's mouth, tasting him.

Eric felt the sharp-toothed Fae toy with his nipple while he began to slowly stroke Eric. He twitched under the alluring Fae's knowing touch, and his body responded and hardened. How long had it been since he was touched by someone without being enthralled first? Or without being beaten afterwards? He couldn't remember.

As he groaned, leaning into the Fae's touch, black fuzzy spots danced at the edges of his vision. Everything became a mix of ecstasy and release as his senses blended. Eric didn't want to hate himself for having this small moment of release, so he gave into the drugs coursing through his veins. Part of his chest twisted at the disappointment that this wasn't the Fae he really wanted. The gold eyes weren't the deep blue he dreamed about losing himself in. It was for the best that he didn't get involved with the fourth prince—it would only make everything that much more complicated. So he sank into the plush divan and let the unknown Fae crawl all over and dominate him.

He didn't know how much time passed when he could think and see clearly—minutes, hours, days maybe. The last thing he remembered was tipping his head back with a groan of pleasure. Now, though, every muscle of his body was at once relaxed and aching.

"Lu," Eric groaned, "I feel a little dizzy."

"Oh my," the prince's voice hummed. "You're awake again, lovely."

Luthais perched on the deep red velveteen couch, looking like a prince holding court. Metallic chains and piercings decorated his face. All around him were various Fae, each one more exposed than the last. Several were stark naked and dripping with longing, their eyes shining eagerly. The

prince's shirt was undone, his entire chest exposed. His trousers hung low and highlighted the lines of his pelvic muscles. Eric's bleary gaze lingered.

"You're up again a lot faster than I thought." He flashed a smile, his eyes winking to a milky gold color to match the mead in his glass. "Now that you're awake, care to join me, Marked One?"

Eric took one look at the writhing pile of Fae, both male and female, and the glass of liquor. His stomach twisted. "No thanks," he said weakly.

"Of course." Luthais arched a mischievous brow. "I forgot about your tastes."

With a long sigh, the Fae prince untangled himself from the mess of bodies, all of whom whined and groaned in protest at his departure. Luthais left the top of his pants undone and kept his shirt wide open. He held the glass of mead in his hand loosely, looking as if it could just as easily spill as fall out of his grip. His voice was quiet when he spoke.

"Now what's this about being dizzy?" He pressed the back of his hand to Eric's forehead.

Orchid-colored eyes peered down at him, evaluating Eric with a studious gaze. For whatever reason, Eric didn't flinch at Luthais's touch. The prince frowned the longer his hand rested there.

"How long have you had this fever, lovely?" he asked.

The way he sounded, Eric almost swore it was his brother, Bryce. A pang of homesickness overwhelmed him. It felt strange to hear a Fae, after all these years, speak to him with a voice full of concern and treat him like a person.

Eric batted his hand away with feeble strength, biting back his rising emotions. "I'm fine."

Luthais let his hand fall away, his gaze bordering on pity and something else. Then, without a word, he lifted the glass in his hand to his lips, emptying it all at once. When he looked back down, the same dashing crooked grin was back in place, erasing any emotions.

"Of course you're not fine. If I let you be, one of two Fae will surely have my head."

Eric swayed to his feet, the blood rushing to his head. His lips moved but all that came out was, "Wha—?"

He tipped forward against his will and plummeted towards the ground. Not a second later, Luthais held him upright, Eric's body collapsed in his

stiff arms. "What am I going to do with you, lovely?" he breathed into Eric's curls.

"Hmm," he groaned as his voice refused to form words. "Sorry."

He managed to get the words out just as a loud bang reverberated throughout the depraved house. The sounds of sex quickly silenced themselves as Cithrel charged into the room. When he spotted Eric, collapsed into Luthais's arms, both practically shirtless and their trousers undone, Cithrel's eyes darkened like a brewing storm.

"Oh, you got here first, little brother," Luthais started. "I guess that answers my questi—"

Cithrel punched his brother clean across his jaw and sent him hurtling towards a divan.

"Don't you ever *touch* him," Cithrel's voice roared. "He's *mine*."

Before Eric could crumple, Cithrel was there, supporting him with startling care. A warmth spread throughout Eric's chest and then pooled deliciously in his stomach at hearing Cithrel's words.

He could hear the other Fae in the house frantic and scrambling to leave. Cithrel didn't say anything as he ushered Eric out of Luthais's hidden house and out onto the street. As they left, he was aware of how little Cithrel was wearing. Was it already the next day? How much time had passed? Was Cithrel looking for him this entire time? A selfish part of him hoped so.

Light from the sun filtering through the trees hurt his eyes and Eric's steps faltered. Cithrel supported his weight and pressed him tight against his chest. While they stood there for a moment, Fae filtered out into the streets from the house behind them but Luthais never appeared. The longer Eric felt the ridges of the prince's muscles, the more it seemed to stir the uninhibited desires in his body.

Cithrel's smooth skin and firm jaw tempted him. Eric was half hard when he reached up to knot his hands together around Cithrel's neck. Leaning in without a word, he nuzzled his face into the prince's neck. His tongue moved to kiss the prince's collarbone and lick it, before he was swiftly pulled away.

"What's wrong?" Eric asked, his mind hazy.

"I—" Cithrel's mouth opened to answer, but the usual surety in his features was nowhere to be seen.

Cithrel looked down at him, his blue eyes guarded. Then, he whisked Eric into his arms and began striding through the city back towards the palace. His eyes couldn't focus on anything they passed as Cithrel dashed through the city streets, deftly weaving through the crowds.

It wasn't until they reached the palace gates that Eric recognized Sir Elyion's red hair. Their eyes met for a moment before Elyion looked away with a strange expression. Cithrel moved through the palace as fast as he could, at least while Eric writhed in his arms, struggling in vain to unfasten the rest of the prince's light shirt.

In three bounds Cithrel was up the stairs to his private living quarters and the door closed behind him with a resounding slam. Eric's face was flushed and his breath hot as he reached up for the prince, eager to feel his lips again. All Eric wanted was to touch him again, like the last time. He wanted more of Cithrel.

Cithrel took Eric's face in his hands, searching his eyes for an answer. There was an almost pained expression on his face. Eric just stared back, his heavy-lidded hazel eyes full of wanting. He didn't want to fight the growing attraction he had for him. He didn't want to pretend that he didn't want his captor, because right now it was all he could think about. With a huff, the prince seemed to find his answer.

At first, Cithrel stood there frozen under Eric's hungry touch. But when he looked back up, he kissed Eric.

Chapter Fourteen

Cithrel's lips were soft on Eric's, gentle even. Eric melted into the prince's body even more so than before, wanting to feel every inch of him. Cithrel's hand knotted into Eric's curls while his tongue explored his mouth. This was the first time that the prince didn't flinch away from Eric's touch.

With ragged breaths, Eric felt his face and entire body heating. Goose bumps ran up his arms as a moan, deep and hungry, came from the prince's mouth. Their hips ground together, pressing his erection against Cithrel's groin. The motion was enough to stir the prince, whose kisses grew hungrier and more ferocious. All Eric could think about was having the prince inside him.

Cithrel pulled back for a moment, his eyes unguarded in the dimly lit bedroom, like a thunderous ocean that suddenly calmed. Cithrel wanted Eric and Eric wasn't stopping him.

For so many years, it ate away at Eric. Being Aimar's sex slave and being trapped in this city, in this horrific place that had no business existing in the modern world. How many people did he watch die in this city? How many times was Eric tortured, beaten, and violated? This was his chance to avenge Garret and Elena for what Cithrel did to them. He could kill the angel-faced prince right now and watch his Fae blood spill all over the floor.

Instead, his body ached and throbbed for Cithrel's touch, wanted to be fucked by the prince. Loathing and desire warred in him as Cithrel's tongue explored Eric's mouth, his jaw, his throat.

Eric's breath caught as the prince's hands found his bare skin in the dark. He felt Cithrel's hand unknot itself from Eric's hair and slide underneath the open sides of his tunic before running down Eric's back. It sent a shiver down his spine and left a trail of fire wherever Cithrel's fingertips touched. Eric watched Cithrel as the prince's hands no doubt felt the scar tissue from the whippings and beatings on Eric's back.

When Cithrel pulled away to look at Eric again, it was like looking into a mirror. The prince's eyes were soft, the blue in them endless, as he searched Eric's expression for an answer to a question he didn't ask. Somehow, the vulnerability and resignation in Eric's eyes matched the

prince's. Eric looked back at a scared and lonely Fae, not the cruel Prince of Blades. Cithrel looked into Eric's gaze and saw the fear, the pain, the loneliness, and his fathomless blue eyes shared his feelings. The prince had an entrenched and scarred past that was surfacing for the first time in front of Eric. Seeing him exposed severed whatever control Eric held onto.

Cithrel's hand withdrew from the bare skin of Eric's back through his tunic and pressed his palm against the wall their bodies leaned against. He waited for a sign from Eric to stop, or to continue.

With a small moan, Eric leaned forward and closed the space between them. His lips grazed Cithrel's, barely a touch. Then, with whatever restraint that was there now broken, Cithrel pulled Eric into him, his arms snaring Eric. The smoldering between their bodies began to intensify, like a flame freshly stoked.

As Cithrel ground his hardened body into Eric's, he all but shredded the revealing tunic off of Eric. A pounding heartbeat later, Eric clawed at Cithrel's own tunic, fumbling to untie the string at his throat without looking. Their grinding paused as he watched the prince draw away and pull off his own tunic.

Then they were moving. Cithrel's hands ran along Eric's skin, as if they were long deprived of touch. The prince guided them from the entryway and down the hall towards his bedroom. Eric's thoughts hazed, lost in his heady need for Cithrel.

"On the bed," the prince's husky voice commanded.

Eric's body was ablaze as he was all too eager to obey the command. As he slid onto the bed, he shifted out of his tightened trousers. His erection pulsed, starved for attention. His body twisted into a seductive pose as he watched the prince undo his trousers in front of Eric. He stood at the edge of the bed, not taking his eyes off Eric. His pants slid past his hips, exposing first his muscles that shaped into a V and then his shaft.

Eric's face flushed even further, turning scarlet in wicked delight. The room sweltered, as he felt a bead of sweat run down his back. He didn't remember Cithrel's room being so hot without a fire going. He couldn't take his eyes off of the prince either way as the bed groaned under Cithrel's weight.

The prince leaned forward to grab Eric by his legs before dragging him to the edge of the bed. Eric panted in anticipation, splaying his legs for

Cithrel. He balanced himself above Eric, sucking on his own fingers for a moment. His fingers grazed along Eric's abdomen before trailing down to his backside. Bottomless eyes regarded Eric's rosy expression as he hovered over him.

Then, Eric's body burst into an inferno. Images flashed through Eric's mind as he looked up at Cithrel. Elena's broken body on the ground, torn apart and disemboweled. The thud of Garret's body falling lifeless to the ground. A forest floor decorated with corpses and standing among them, with indifference, was Cithrel.

Fear bubbled to the surface and a scream tore from Eric's throat as the Marking on his arm smoldered. It glowed and seared as if it burned deeper into his skin. The fire erupted in his veins, running up along his arm before spreading to his whole body. Cinder assaulted Eric's senses as his eyes bulged wide. His knuckles whitened over the sheets he gripped.

His body jerked forward and forced him to meet the frigid heartless eyes of the prince. No, he was a murderer. Eric's fear and grief and pain moved and melded into fury. The color in the room drained from his vision, the aether in his veins charging with life.

Eric's hands shot out and gripped Cithrel's, his fingers digging into the prince's muscles. Glowering, his nostrils flared as waves of fire rolled through his body. His magic was alive and painful and furious.

The prince's mouth moved but Eric heard nothing. All he could see was the Fae prince responsible for so many deaths. To the Alonethan Empire, Cithrel was a war hero. But that didn't make him less of a killer. The sound of Eric's blood pumping filled his ears as his mind took a turn towards a singular thought.

I'll kill him.

As soon as he thought it, the world around him fell silent. Then, slowly, he heard the unmistakable slithering of rotted tree roots. Following the stabbing pain in his palms, Eric watched as the blackened roots with hooked barbs spilled from his palms and scraped across the floor of their own volition.

Eric looked at the prince's arctic eyes with the same empty gaze he'd always been looked at as a slave. Like a single match being lit, a burst of red hued Eric's vision. Then his skull felt like it was being dipped in lava. As if an unknown weight pressed down on him from above, he felt heavy.

Then, with a single, earth-shattering step, Eric punched his other fist into the air as he would an uppercut. Gangrenous thorns materialized and burst through the floor at Cithrel's feet and slammed into the prince. Cithrel was thrown into the air, his preternatural body cracking the stone wall on impact. The prince toppled forward from the hit and landed crouched on his feet. His calculating apathetic gaze that Eric hated was leveled on him.

Everything moved quickly then. The prince darted around the room with unnatural speed, except now that Eric controlled his magic, so could he. When Cithrel's arm lashed out to grab hold of Eric, he saw it coming and dodged with the same preternatural speed as the prince. Cithrel's gaze darkened and he flashed around the room, impossibly faster this time, faster than even Eric could follow.

Eric didn't miss the scent of citrus and glint of light as a thin blade materialized in Cithrel's grip. He vaulted towards Eric, his sword poised towards Eric's neck. As he flew through the air, putrid roots with spikes skidded and flung themselves at the Fae prince. The prince's sword cut through the air, its strike slicing through the thorns and he hurtled towards where Eric stood.

I'm dead. Realization gripped Eric.

Cithrel's sword swung again, but it didn't slash across Eric's throat. Instead, it cut through the air above his head. All at once, the weight Eric felt pressing down on him vanished, and the red hue to his vision faded. He saw that Cithrel was inches away from him but he wasn't on top of him yet. This was his opening. He could kill the Prince of Blades. The heat of aether thrumming in his body taunted him, but Eric couldn't help but hesitate.

That wavering half-breath was enough for Eric's opportunity to become a killer to pass. Then Cithrel slammed into him and the force left Eric gasping as he was thrown back onto the bed. Somehow, not only was he not beheaded, but Cithrel cushioned his fall so Eric's head didn't crash into the massive stone headboard.

The fire inside him sputtered and went out. Then his ribs bloomed in agony from the fall, even if it was onto a mattress. His mouth gaped, huffing for air and finding none. The feeling of being winded wracked him as his body still burned with heat.

Eric didn't notice Cithrel cradling him until he heard a wheezing breath come from the prince. He glanced around them, regretting his actions that

led to this, choosing to blame the aether dust in his drinks. A single thick, jagged crack ran down the headboard, originating from where Cithrel's head had crushed into it.

Looking up at the Fae prince, Eric's face contorted and he felt ill. He couldn't get the murder scenes out of his head. When his breathing returned to him, Eric disentangled himself from Cithrel's limbs, all too aware of the fact that he was naked right now. When he stepped out of bed, though, his head swam and his knees buckled.

Without hesitation, Cithrel moved and caught him. Eric's cheeks heated. It was starting to feel like a habit he needed to break. Before he could react, though, Cithrel's hand slid up from Eric's arm to his forehead.

"You're burning up. Badly."

Eric struggled to pull away from Cithrel's touch again. "I'm fine."

He wasn't. He couldn't think straight and he desperately needed rest. At least to get the drugs and alcohol out of his system. Eric moved to put his clothes back on, grimacing at how revealing the clothes were that Luthais gave him. It was fine, as long as he didn't have to stay naked in front of the prince.

"Where are you going?"

Eric paused. "To sleep in the sitting area." He didn't turn around.

They both waited in the silence, neither one giving in at first. Finally, Eric heard the bed creak, followed by padded footsteps. He turned to see Cithrel slide his trousers back on and make his way to the fireplace. Without a word, he kindled the fire. It wasn't until Eric had to meet the prince's eyes that he regretted staying.

"You're sick. It will be warmer by the fire." Cithrel's voice was husky. His mouth quirked but Eric couldn't read what that meant.

Eric's chest twinged, seeing the guarded expression back on Cithrel's face. Whatever moment of vulnerability the prince had shown Eric was long gone.

"I'm fine," Eric repeated, his voice sluggish. He turned to leave but the throbbing at his temples worsened and his steps faltered.

Cithrel was already at his side. "You're not fine."

Too tired to argue, Eric let the prince guide him to the divan in front of the fireplace and set him down. Eric noticed Cithrel was being gentle with him, and this wasn't the first time he was like this, either. After what had

just happened between them, it was hard to decide how he felt about the prince. A moment later, a blanket draped over Eric. He knew he was burning up but his entire body felt cold, so he curled into the warmth of the blanket. Throwing a hand over his face, he blocked out any light so that the darkness could comfort him.

He wasn't sure when he fell asleep, but when Elena's grizzled corpse suddenly gaped and screamed at him, Eric bolted upright from the couch in a cold sweat. It took him a moment to realize it was just a dream, seeing the dim light from the crackling fireplace.

Sleep took him again. The fever dreams continued, first Aimar chaining him to the bed while shoving objects inside him, then Garret's head on a spike calling him a traitor.

As the dreams went on, he felt his tunic and hair sticking to him with sweat. He wasn't sure if he was awake or not because, as he had the thought, he felt his hair being brushed away from his damp forehead. A minute later, the stifling tunic was gone. With a sigh of relief, the fevered visions floated away.

The sound of someone's throat clearing jarred Eric awake. His muscles ached as he stirred, rising from the divan slowly, the blanket sliding off his bare and ruined chest. He was still feverish but not as bad as before. When he sat up and opened his eyes, he saw Sir Elyion standing in the doorway.

Eric blinked, making a face at Elyion. He didn't understand why the knight was here until it dawned on him that he was in the prince's bedroom. When he looked around the divan, he stilled. There was an arm draped over his shoulder.

Dread filled him and dulled every nerve, remembering what he thought was a dream, and slowly, he turned. Cithrel was also shirtless with his trousers undone and blinking sleep out of his eyes. His hair had little fluffs where his braids had matted from sleep. The prince had watched over Eric last night. His cheeks reddened at the thought, while he told himself it was shame and nothing else.

When Sir Elyion cleared his throat again, this time louder, Eric and Cithrel both looked at him. Eric saw the knight's grayed eyes give him a questioning look but said nothing. Eric's face flushed and this time all he felt was shame.

"Prince Commander," he said.

"What is it, Sir Elyion?" Cithrel asked, his voice thick with sleep.

By now, the knights and soldiers were used to Eric being around for military discussions, so Elyion continued without hesitation, even if they were in a questionable state. "Sir Paeris and the reinforcements to the border patrol were ambushed."

Eric turned to Cithrel, whose eyes now snapped into focus. "Is that all?" he asked, his voice foreboding.

"The invaders raided and burned a nearby village." Elyion paused, casting a quick glance at Eric. "They knew Sir Paeris was coming."

"A traitor in the empire," Cithrel clarified.

"Yes, Prince Commander."

The confirmation sent a tremor through Eric. He couldn't imagine someone opposing the Alonethan family, let alone betraying the empire. It meant there could be more powerful kingdoms outside the empire's borders. How many other hidden worlds were out there? Eric was sure he didn't want to know the answer to that question. He didn't want to imagine the countless lives taken like his across the hidden worlds.

"Summon Elasuin," Cithrel answered, pulling away from Eric as if he didn't exist and stood. "Sir Tyrin as well, if he's returned. I'll join you shortly."

Sir Elyion gave him one quick nod before striding out of the doorway. Eric watched as the prince dug through his dresser until he found a cream tunic and pulled it over his head. As the scent of citrus filled the air and stung Eric's lungs, Cithrel's magic shone around him for a brief moment. Then the light dulled and he wore his Commander's silver armor, an emerald cape hanging from simple pauldrons.

"Shall I attend to you, Your Highness?" Eric broke the silence as Cithrel moved to leave.

He stopped, turning to look at Eric. "Did you forget that you have a fever?" The hard edge to his gaze softened a fraction as he heard his own tone. "Stay here and let Hinni attend to you."

The words stung Eric and he wasn't sure why. "Then I'll leave you to your affairs, Your Highness."

Cithrel kept walking, then stopped again. This time he didn't turn around. "You could have killed me if you wanted to."

Eric froze. So the prince knew he was going to kill him. Taking a steadying breath, he lifted his chin. "I could have."

The Prince was quiet but then said, "Why didn't you?"

It was a fair question, uncomfortably honest, even for a Fae. Part of Eric was ashamed for being consumed by his anger and another part of him argued he should have killed Cithrel when he had the chance. He knew the answer though—it was pure luck that kept the Fae prince alive. Eric wasn't in control of anything. He'd hesitated and that was all it took.

"I'm not a murderer," Eric said.

He didn't know if the half-true words hurt Cithrel. He hoped they did, but the prince never turned around before he strode out of the room. Eric didn't relax until he heard the soft thud of the door in the entryway close behind Cithrel.

Eric was happy to leave Cithrel's bedroom and go back to his own room. When he spotted Malor in the hall, he managed a nod before disappearing into his room. Malor's green eyes glowed bright for a second and dulled again. He stayed statuesque as ever.

Like hell Eric was going to do what Cithrel said, like Eric was his own personal pet. The prince's dismissal and command piqued him and made it easy enough to ignore the fever that still plagued him. He had made a deal with the empress to become the Marked One. His end of their deal was done; now it was time to find the answers the empress promised him. If he could learn how to use the aether flowing through his blood, then maybe he could use it to get out of this world and back to his old life—back to freedom.

As he dressed, he thought of Bryce. Was he still looking for him? He was training to become a police officer the last time Eric saw him, after all. He knew Bryce would be great at his job, but that wouldn't make him bulletproof. Was Bryce still okay?

Tears welled in Eric's eyes as all the horrible scenarios involving something happening to his brother played in his mind. He was the only family Eric had left. If something happened to his brother, he didn't know what he would do.

Eric sniffled, willing the tears not to fall. He had to keep hoping that Bryce was alright. He forced his thoughts to drift to happier places. Maybe

Bryce and Amelia decided to have kids. A small smile played on Eric's lips as he pulled on a jacket over his tunic. The idea of being an uncle was nice.

Then his smile faded as a hole in his chest filled with that longing, even after five years. If he couldn't escape this world of sadistic monsters, he'd never see his brother or whatever family he might have again. Eric reached for a pair of calf-length leather boots and slipped them on. All the more reason for him to finally get answers about his Marking.

Eric was halfway down the stairs, Malor trailing him like a silent apparition, when he began studying the Marking on his arm. The aether chose to bless him with magic for some reason, but not a single soul in this forsaken place would say why.

The vacant halls of the palace yawned before Eric, the air gone cool as if removed from the rest of the world. The doors to the library spanned before him, waiting. The wood practically breathed in anticipation with the knowledge that Eric was desperate for. Eric pushed the grand doors open.

Chapter Fifteen

The eeriness of the library hadn't improved since the last time Eric was here. With the doors opened wide to reveal the grandeur of the Imperial Library, he was once again the only soul in sight, which made the tingling feeling of being watched that much more unnerving. If there was never anyone in this place, then how was the library maintained, especially with so many ancient texts? Even if it was run purely with aether, there had to at least be one or two Fae that supplied the aether.

Eric's thoughts wandered against his will to the last time he came here with Cithrel and swore he saw a Fae. A shiver ran down his spine and he told himself it was from his encounter with Cithrel last night, and this morning, and not the withered phantom library Fae.

As if the thought alone was capable of summoning him, the old Fae Eric thought he imagined appeared before him. He stood hunched with fuzzy eyes and a permanent-looking snarl.

Eric stood frozen and wide-eyed, unsure if he was hallucinating. He all but forgot about Malor's presence until he saw the knight bow his head to the librarian Fae.

"What do you want, creature?" The librarian asked in a raspy voice.

The way he said creature didn't bother Eric, mostly because it sounded like he addressed everyone that way. A ragged black cloak hung from his shoulders with three onyx straps that fastened the cloak to the rest of his body.

Eric cleared his throat. "With the empress's permission, I would like access to the rest of the library."

The aged librarian's foggy eyes fell to Eric's arm where his Marking lurked. "You're *that* creature. I thought so, since I can smell the rotted aether practically dripping off you." His breath seeped from him in a slow ominous exhale. "Follow me."

With that, he flicked two fingers at Eric, beckoning him. The Fae didn't make noise as he walked through the library, maintaining an eerie silence. The only sound was Eric's footsteps, which felt louder than normal in the quiet.

The librarian led him past shelves and shelves of the library, passing books he'd never seen before. Some smelled of ichor, oozing down the shelf, and others gave off the scent of metals or of animal furs. They passed an entire shelf that had no smell at all. Instead, the taste of dirt and vomit filled his mouth. Eric was quick to leave that shelf behind.

Finally, the wilted Fae stopped in front of a bare wall. They must have walked for several minutes before they got to this wall and there was nothing. Eric's brows pulled together and he wondered if perhaps this Fae was still completely sane.

"The Unseen," the librarian whispered, his answer to why they stood at an empty wall.

Eric looked from the librarian, aware of how close Malor now seemed to linger behind him, to the wall. It hurt his eyes to look directly at the wall, as if it didn't want to be looked at, as if whatever was behind the wall was *alive*.

The Fae pressed a hand to the wall, decidedly not waiting for Eric's acknowledgment, his skin stretched across his bones. The scent of ink assaulted Eric, who clapped a hand over his nose and mouth to avoid gagging, as the librarian's magic filled the air. The wall shuddered and cracked, sending a shower of dust over them all.

Eric watched as the wall then became immaterial, as if it was never there in the first place, although the dust remained. Now an alcove presented itself, barred off by thick twisted metal. It reminded him of what the Black Thorn dungeons were like. This place was indeed alive. It lived and breathed, or rather, whatever books laying behind its metal gates did.

"They will call to you, creature." The librarian's warning pulled Eric's attention. "Mind which ones you answer."

With that he drifted away, leaving Eric and Malor alone in front of the warped metallic gates. He stepped towards the gates, feeling the air pulse in the rhythm of a heartbeat. It pounded in his ears, disjointed from his own heart's thumping.

He swallowed the lump in his throat, telling himself that he would be fine. He was with Malor, he would be safe—he hoped. As he reached to touch the metal, his hand unsteady, the alcove itself seemed to yawn and groan, awakened by Eric's presence.

The metal shrieked as it bent and withdrew into the wall, allowing Eric to enter. At the same time, a pulse went through the air as the Unseen books awoke, eager to welcome Eric.

There was no smell or taste as he walked into the darkened alcove. Instead, he felt things as he passed books. Feelings of triumph, anticipation, rage, mourning, all coursed through him as he ventured inside the Unseen section. It was so unlike other aether Eric had sensed before.

Then the voices started.

Disgusting.

Come closer. I want to see your eyes. Show them to me.

I can make you stronger. Just give me some of your blood.

Let me help you. All you have to do is touch me.

Dozens of voices began to fill the silence, raking against Eric's mind. He stumbled a step, his hand reaching out to hold himself upright. He was inches away from touching a book when Malor's hand darted out and gripped Eric, keeping him upright.

Malor looked at him, grim, a dew of sweat at the Fae's brow. It looked like the books had an even stronger effect on Fae, physically and mentally draining the knight. Malor's glowing eyes flickered, as if the glow might go out completely. The hammering in Eric's chest sped at the sight of his own knight plagued with nerves.

Eric looked back at the book he almost touched. Its spine was cracked and dust-covered, its faded cover yellow. A wave of sadness washed over Eric then, pleading with him to join the book, so it would not be alone. It begged him to stay and never leave.

Eric took a step back, pulling his hand tight against his own chest. Malor drifted back behind Eric, a soft exhale escaping the Fae. The Unseen section wanted to claim Eric, he felt it now, the rare emotional auras that tried to tempt him. This place was dangerous.

Collecting himself, he brushed stray curls from his face and continued further into the alcove. He needed answers to what lived inside him, why the Marking appeared on his arm and how he could use it to his advantage.

Another book called to him.

Give me your skin. With my power you won't need a body.

Stay and rest. You must be tired.

Follow me.

The last voice stopped Eric dead. It was the same voice he heard the night he tried to escape—when everything turned into an even darker nightmare. Its low melodious voice called for him. It called to him again, louder than all the other books.

Eric moved, desperate to find the source of that voice, and went further into the Unseen section. He veered around corner after corner until the voice brought him to a shelf with a single book on it.

The book was at least twelve inches thick, with a charred blackened cover. It gave Eric the same feeling as the last time he touched that burnt book Cithrel had brought him months ago. His magic had been uncontrollable then and almost drove him insane.

He stared at the hulking book. It waited for him to pick it up. Eric stood there, motionless, his breath filling the stagnant air. His fingers curled into fists at his side and he knew he had to do this. If he didn't, he would never be able to control his magic, or protect himself, or ever be able to leave this world of horrors.

Eric took a step forward, then another and another, until he stood inches away from the book. It would be so easy to pick it up and leave. Still, he had a feeling all he had to do was touch it for something to happen.

The air pulsed again. The Unseen section grew impatient and beckoned Eric. He exhaled, and touched the book.

Midnight spikes exploded from Eric's palms, sending the room into darkness. Barbed vines showered the room, caging off Eric and the book from Malor and the rest of the library. The only sound he heard was the slithering and writhing of decaying thorns around him, scraping along the stone floor. Then, everything fell soundless, except for a single voice.

You are my vessel. The thorns shuddered and coiled around Eric. Eric took the book in his hands but it felt like they weren't his own hands, like someone else was controlling him. The cover rippled under his grip.

A wish for a wish. The thorns coiled around Eric's wrists and ankles before wrapping themselves around his neck. His eyes bulged in fear as droplets of blood welled where the thorns broke his skin.

Bear my crown before another may wear it. Eric's hazel eyes burned to black, devouring the color from everything in sight.

A weight pressed down on Eric's skull, as if something had been placed there. Then, with a thirst for power, red danced at the edges of his sight. He

felt the aether inside him roaring and ravenous, the thorns that embedded into his flesh now settled.

He looked down at his curled hands, his nails pointed into claws. They looked like they'd been dipped in tar, blackened at their tips. The thrumming of his heart was steady as he drew a straight line in the air. The thorns parted and made a clear path for Eric.

Malor stood opposite Eric, his eyes wide in disbelief. Eric took a step and the stone floors shook. The entire Unseen section seemed to tremble, their aether receding and withdrawing within themselves.

They were afraid of Eric.

Except he wasn't quite Eric anymore—he was more than that. He was a memory given renewed life. He was the embodiment of past desires. He bore the power of a predecessor. He was a vessel, a wish, and a crown. Eric wore the symbol of the dead emperor. Part of him had become the emperor.

"Move." Eric's mouth moved but a disembodied voice spoke.

Malor retreated, stunned into obedience. Eric regarded him with disinterest as he strode past. The fetid thorns dragged behind him, a sable mantle that rivalled the empress's glory. A blackened and burnt iron-spiked crown hovered above Eric's head. He carried the mysterious book in his clawed hand, the charred vines wrapping around it and Eric's wrist.

Everything seemed so clear to him now as he made his way through the alcove. As the aether, *his* aether, flowed through his veins, he felt the presence of the past emperor. This was why no one could harm Eric. The emperor had chosen *him*. Volodar chose to bless Eric and give Eric his power.

The aether sung through every one of Eric's nerves as clear as day and as pure as the human blood in his veins. It could give him his freedom.

When Eric reached the edge of the alcove, the rest of the Imperial Library spanned in front of him and he spotted the ancient Fae librarian.

"The parasite in the creature wakes," he breathed, with a disapproving look on his face.

Eric turned to face the librarian, levelling his unblinking red-tinged black eyes on the Fae. "Hello, old friend." The disembodied voice greeted him as Eric's face remained even. "I ask that you watch over this one."

"Your body rots and you still command others," sneered the librarian, but the smile that cracked his dry lips was genuine. "I will help this

creature."

"Thank you, old friend," Eric's double voice said. "I cannot stay long. This one's body was not created to sustain aether. I do not wish to harm him."

"Go back to sleep then, parasite," the old Fae chided. "The rest of them can't keep fixing the creature when he breaks."

Eric's body gazed down at the librarian for a moment, the ghost of a smile on his lips. Then the parasite that was the emperor went back to sleep.

The blackened and spiked crown floating over Eric's head melted in thin air as the thorns festering in his skin deteriorated into dust. Simultaneously, black and red eyes reverted back to hazel ones as Eric sucked in a gasping breath, coming back to himself.

He clutched at his chest, checking to make sure each heartbeat and breath was his own. The massive book that was in his hand clattered to the ground and Eric recoiled from it. His head swam as the last few minutes of memory flooded through him. That was him, but also not him. He pressed his hands to his face, feeling his cheeks to make sure his face was in fact still his.

Eric's body shook with the realization. He should have died all those months ago when he escaped with Garret and Elena. The only reason he was alive was because Volodar had intervened.

The realization made his stomach knot. His life was spared by the emperor, but at what cost? He couldn't think how he could possibly leave this place now. His face fell in his hands as his body crumpled.

Every member of the Imperial Family had kept him in the dark. Cithrel barred him from the library this whole time, to keep the truth from him. His thoughts raced now. It was why Solonar helped Eric make his escape and tried to kill him. For all of their truths they were nothing but liars. That meant every Fae and noble in the palace knew what Eric was except for Eric.

A laugh bordering on hysteria bubbled from Eric. He should have thanked the crown prince for trying to kill him. Everything the Imperial Family did for him now made sense. He'd been an idiot not to suspect something like this. He was a fool.

"Come with me, creature." The librarian's voice cut through Eric's panic.

Tears welled in Eric's eyes as he looked at the Fae. "What am I?" His voice was barely audible.

"What is your name, creature?"

"Eric Becker."

"Then you are Eric Becker, creature." Eric's lip quivered, somehow finding this withering librarian's words comforting. The Fae continued. "Come with me."

Eric trailed behind the librarian with quaking steps as they moved away from the Unseen section. A few moments later, the air rustled behind Eric. Malor materialized behind him. His presence now just felt like a reminder that Cithrel was protecting the Marked One, not Eric. The thought gutted him and he didn't know why. He felt stupid for thinking otherwise even after what happened last night between them.

The librarian brought Eric to an open space on the stone floor of the library. Sun filtered through windows and shone on a tiny plant. Two leaves sprouted through the stone. The whole thing couldn't have been more than an inch tall. Eric looked at the shriveled Fae with knitted brows.

"The day news of a human bearing the Marking filled the palace," the librarian rasped, "this seedling tree sprouted."

Eric blinked. "What does that mean?"

"It means, creature," the old Fae clucked, irritated, "that you are Eric." He jabbed a knotted finger at Eric's arm. "Seedlings only sprout in the library when aether blesses someone. Someone like you."

Eric opened his mouth to ask the librarian a million questions when Saelihn appeared in front of them. The empress's knight eyed the librarian before turning his attention to Eric.

"The empress has requested your immediate presence in her private courtyard."

Eric's bewildered face glowered then. After what just happened to him in the library, of course the empress wanted to see him. She'd known all along what would happen once he came here. The Fae woman was playing with him like a toy.

"I'll be there shortly," he managed.

When Saelihn vanished, Eric turned back to the librarian and the seedling. "Go, creature," the librarian breathed.

Eric looked at him, his stomach curling. He was unsure of so many things, but the old Fae was right. He needed to obey the empress. He was still little more than a prisoner here, even with his title.

"I don't want to keep the empress waiting." With his mind unravelling, he strode out of the library and headed towards the empress.

The world was hazy with jumbled and disjointed thoughts the entire walk through the palace and up to the private courtyard he had been to once before. The High Priestess and Empress of Alonetha was seated in her white chair made from roots and vines, alabaster flowers blooming in some spots. A matching chair sat across from the empress, empty.

Behind her stood Saelihn, who looked like he had never left her side in the first place, and her two petit Fae servants, silent as ever. Eric still couldn't make out the Fae knight's face, only his deep merlot eyes. Whenever he met the knight's eyes, he had the uncontrollable urge to look away. Eric wondered if that was part of Sir Saelihn's aether.

"Good evening, Eric Becker," the Fae woman welcomed. "I'm sorry to call on you so suddenly."

"It's an honor, Your Majesty." Eric dipped his head in a bow.

The Fae empress leaned back in her seat, her legs crossed. Tonight she was draped in a fitted wine-colored dress that hugged her thin frame. The dress exposed her soft collarbone and delicate shoulders before a slit ran down from her waist, revealing long slender legs.

She beckoned with a lazy gesture. "Come, sit."

The empress gave him a wry smile as he seated himself across from her, wishing he choose lighter clothing. The charcoal jacket buttoned all the way to Eric's throat. He had liked it this morning because it showed off his jawline, but now it suffocated him. Equally, his fitted dark trousers now felt constricting.

"You wished to speak with me, Your Majesty?"

"I believe you know why I summoned you."

Eric squirmed in his chair, not wanting to meet her eyes. "I do, Your Majesty."

With one flick of her wrist, the empress's silver-ringed violet eyes sparked. The air filled with the scent of fresh rain and the taste of earth coated Eric's tongue as the empress's aether pulsed in the air. Saelihn's body, along with everyone else in the courtyard that was painted in the purples

and blues of dusk, froze. Except for Eric and the empress. His breath hitched.

She brought her inhuman gaze back to Eric, the thin silver chains that hung from her twisting braids swaying around her face. He was struck every time by the otherworldly presence of the empress, even more so when he watched her use her magic with such ease.

"That's better," she sighed, reclining. "Now we can talk peacefully, Eric."

Eric cleared his throat. "Of course."

"Seeing Sir Malor trailing behind you and not my son, I assume you're aware of the border invasions."

"I was with the prince when Sir Elyion gave him the news."

The empress's lips spread into a knowing smile. "I see." She reached for a silver-clad cup of tea, its steam wafting into the air. "Then I assume you know that Cithrel will likely have to leave the palace to deal with the invasion."

"I suspected that would be the case." Eric hadn't actually thought about it until now, but it only made sense. The trouble was he didn't know how he felt about Cithrel leaving. Things were so complicated between them right now.

Her voice was even when she asked the next question. "Are you afraid without his presence?"

Eric stayed quiet while he took the time to consider her words. So much had happened today, with the prince and with the aether in his body. He knew now he was chosen by the previous emperor to receive his aether and everyone around him had hidden the truth. It made him furious, but it also made him feel alone. It made him scared.

"Yes."

"Are you afraid of him?" the empress pressed.

They both knew who she referred to, and it wasn't Cithrel. Absently, he rubbed at his Marking. "Yes."

He watched as the smile waned on the empress's face, hearing his words. "I see." She looked genuinely pained, or concerned, he wasn't sure which. She set her teacup down before sitting back in the waxen chair.

"Then I have no choice but to have you train under Elasuin."

The world fell away from Eric. "Pardon?" He must not have heard her right.

Elasuin Aloneth was the third prince and the commander of the Imperial Guard. Cithrel was a Commander, but he fought on the frontlines alongside his knights and the Imperial Army. Elasuin, despite his barely bridled fury, stayed within the palace walls to train the strongest knights to protect the Imperial Family and the palace. The rumours that revolved around Elasuin were garish enough that the Prince of Dreams was better known as the Prince of Nightmares.

"I thought leaving you in Cithrel's care would help you control the Marking, but that's no longer possible. My children appear to be little more than wild animals. If you can't work with the crown prince, then Elasuin seems to be your only option."

He felt the tenuous thread of his life beginning to fray. What could he say to that? If it wasn't Elasuin, then it was Solonar, and he didn't want to be anywhere near him. Eric worked to keep his voice even. "If that's what you think is best, Your Majesty."

The empress gave him a sideways look. "Cithrel also requested that Hinni attend to you in his absence." When he said nothing, she added, "It seems my son is concerned about your health, Eric Becker."

His cheeks flushed before he realized it. "He's very generous."

She drummed her fingers on her chair. "It appears he is."

With that, she lifted her hand and made a small fist. As her hand fell back onto the arm of the whitened chair, a second later, Sir Saelihn stood before him with his face finally revealed. Eric gaped as he looked up into deep crimson eyes that roared like hellfire. Jet black hair fell loosely around Saelihn's face before the tips faded to silver. Most striking, though, was the blackened scar-tissue that cut across his jaw in a jagged line. The scar should have looked hideous, but Saelihn's bow lips and long lashes somehow made him look captivating.

"Saelihn, dear," the empress called. "In Cithrel's absence, you should consider the Marked One an extension of myself."

Saelihn moved so quickly, Eric saw only a blur and then the elite knight was back at the empress's side, his hood drawn again. Saelihn dipped his head towards the empress before he resumed his statuesque position. Eric

wondered if he could learn to move that quickly, to defend himself. Maybe, if he could survive Elasuin.

"My apologies for interrupting your day, Eric Becker." She inclined her head towards him. So the empress wasn't going to talk about what happened in the library after all, then. She was choosing to ignore the fact that he knew what she had kept from him.

When Eric pushed himself out of his chair, he was half-surprised when the empress spoke again. She always seemed to do that. "Good luck."

He was going to need all the luck he could get. Tomorrow, he began training with the Prince of Nightmares.

Chapter Sixteen

Crack.

The heat of the sun weighed heavily on Eric's shoulders. The faint summer breeze did little to help as sweat dewed at his brow before trickling down his smooth jaw. Far off, the sound of bird wings flapping through the wisteria trees filled the air.

Eric closed his eyes, trying to concentrate on clearing his thoughts as he puffed heavy breaths through his nostrils. Again, he mentally reached within his mind, called to his magic to summon it. The sound of dirt crunching under boots alerted Eric. His eyes shot open and he wrapped his fingers around his sword hilt laying in the dirt next to him.

Crack.

The sweltering summer scenery tilted as Eric was thrown to the ground, again. Dust filled his throat, sending him into a coughing fit. The sword was flung from Eric's grip, again, skittering away from him and across the dirt of the training grounds. Pushing himself onto his knees, he saw dust swirl around him as a shadow materialized behind him.

The taste of dust clung to his tongue as Eric gritted his teeth and threw out his arm. The veins that ran along his Marking bulged in an effort to call the scorched magic sealed in his body. There was no answer.

Crack.

Eric was thrown back down to the dirt of the training grounds. Air rushed from his chest as his body slammed into the earth, dirt caking his clothes and scraping at his exposed skin. He rolled onto his back with a long, pained groan. His shoulder protested as he reached to unbuckle the metallic chest plate and gritted his teeth as his fingernails scraped against the engraved branches on it. When the buckles released, he let out a gasp before taking a wheezing breath.

This was how every day had gone for Eric for the past three weeks. Cithrel had left to deal with the border skirmishes and attacks their empire was now facing. Neither one of them talked about what happened between them before the bastard left Eric behind.

Not that there was anything for them to talk about. Eric got drunk and high on aether dust before he tried to fuck and then attack the fourth prince.

“Complicated” was an understatement for the awkward situation he was going to be in with Cithrel when he eventually returned. He was sure the Marking was the only reason he was still alive after committing another crime against the Imperial Family.

Eric was slow to his feet, mostly due to the fresh bruising and persistent twinge in his back from falling on his ass repeatedly. He had suffered the most in the first week, when he still had a fever and Elasuin insisted Eric learned to fight through the pain. Eric learned on the first day that the nickname Prince of Nightmares was well-earned. Elasuin was a beast.

"You're getting better, Eric Becker," Rhistel offered from the edge of the training grounds.

The youngest prince always sat on the sidelines, watching Eric fail to call on his magic, only barely defending himself against Elasuin. He was also the only one to respectfully call Eric by his name. Rhistel seemed to be like and unlike his parents all at once. Rhistel's black eyes gleamed like the deceased emperor, but when the light caught his eyes, they reflected violet, which was unmistakably from the empress. Parted ash-blond hair fell in his eyes and hung to his shoulder blades. Rhistel's eyes shimmered as he looked down at Eric with a sympathetic smile that bordered on pity.

Eric nodded from the ground, too tired to try and say anything. The hauntingly familiar sound of earth crunching under boots made Eric roll to his side to get up. Elasuin stalked across the packed dirt towards Eric, a permanent scowl on his face.

"Don't compliment him, Rhistel." Elasuin stood over Eric, voice taut. "He's learned almost nothing."

It seemed like the youngest prince was the only being immune to Elasuin's savagery, though Eric never had much time to think about it since he was busy being pummeled by the third prince.

With a grunt, Elasuin's face contorted into a snarl and he thrust his blade at Eric. Eric rolled out of the way and Elasuin's sword grated on the chest plate Eric had removed seconds ago. Shit. He shouldn't have taken off his chest plate. The commander of the Imperial Guard decided when Eric was allowed to stop.

Eric clambered to his feet and stumbled back a few steps as he found his footing. Elasuin was already in front of him with inhuman speed when Eric

looked up. Malicious green eyes glared back. Eric's muscles tensed as he reached into his mind for his magic.

Crack.

The butt of Elasuin's sword slammed into the back of Eric's legs, sending him tumbling to the ground again. Eric coughed, winded for what felt like the hundredth time. The third prince stood over Eric, looking down at him as the weakling he felt like.

"Now you can stop." Elasuin spat on the ground inches from Eric's face.

Eric nodded from the ground again, a pained groan the only noise he could manage. Elasuin made a noise of disgust and stomped back over to his little brother. As Eric sat up, he rubbed at the back of his head where a lump had begun to form.

Elasuin was right. Three weeks passed and admittedly, he'd gained back some of his build he had in college—the definition of his muscles proved it—but he was still unable to summon his magic, let alone control it.

Even now he felt the knowing tingle under his bronzed skin, the aether churning in its slumber. Eric knew it was only a fragment of Volodar, nothing more than the emperor's final wish bestowed to him. His face twisted. Everything had changed so much in the last few months since he was Marked.

It was all he could do to survive and work in the Alonethan Empire. His days were spent training with Elasuin, attending to court matters at Empress Nithroel's request, and when he was able to be alone—other than Malor trailing behind him—he ventured to the library.

His dreams of being free seemed distant and extinguished. He hardly dreamed at all now and when he did, only nightmares came. It wasn't the horrific images of his murdered friends that kept him up anymore, but the ones where he was the murderer, standing over his friends' corpses with a black crown and thorns adorning him. The bags under his eyes were a testament to how much they haunted him.

As Eric buckled his chest plate back in place, his tired eyes met the hateful prince's. The Fae prince's temper simmered, jerking his head to the left, motioning for Eric to start running. With a curt nod, his brown curls falling into his face, he jogged from the training grounds.

Elasuin didn't spare Eric a second glance and turned his attention back to his little brother. Rhistel gave a meaningful wave despite Elasuin barking

commands as they began to spar.

As he ran his usual designated route, it wasn't long until he let his mind wander. It helped him ignore the burning in his limbs and lungs as he dashed along his path. Just like every other day, Eric's thoughts went to Cithrel. Much to his chagrin.

There was no communication from Cithrel since his departure, not even news to deliver to Elasuin or the empress. Eric told himself he didn't care that the angel-faced bastard was gone. He told himself he was glad Cithrel was on the front lines of the border invasions, except he wasn't. It was only when he ran that he allowed his thoughts to be honest.

Eric missed Cithrel and he hated himself for it. For missing the presence of a murderer, of the one who slayed his friends in front of him. It still plagued him that they had almost slept together, that he still thought about what might have been that night. There were countless days Eric found himself looking for the prince's presence in his private quarters. Eric never went back to his room when he was first brought to the palace. There was no point when he could break the enchantment and leave whenever he wanted. It was safer for him to be guarded in Cithrel's own wing of the palace. Other times he caught himself gazing off at the chair where Cithrel sat and ate across from him. He hoped Hinni didn't notice, but if she did she never mentioned it. Dismay marred Eric's features in between panting breaths.

Eric pushed himself faster, trying to fight the growing fatigue in his muscles. He needed to ignore those thoughts—the thoughts of wanting something other than going home—because if he allowed the thoughts to get any louder, he worried what he would become.

His feet ground into the dirt and stone path as he rounded the final corner, bringing him back around to the training grounds. Elasuin still sparred with Rhistel, the two of them moving in a blur of flashes. The only way Eric knew they fought was the clang of metal after each strike and the dust that rose in the breeze.

Gulping in air, Eric gritted his teeth and sprinted with everything he had left to the training arena. As his footsteps thundered to a stop, he doubled over and clenched at the cramp in his side. The gnawing thoughts of the Prince of Blades vanished from his mind. One heavy breath later, he saw dust-covered boots in his periphery.

Let's get this over with, Eric steeled himself.

With a grimace, Eric did his best to quiet his breathing and stood up straight to face Elasuin. The Prince of Nightmares was just as tall as Eric but his presence made Eric feel small. Elasuin's angular gaze narrowed, the tattoos that crawled up the Fae's neck poking through his training gear.

Eric made the mistake of asking Elasuin about his tattoo one day. The third prince was all too pleased to show him the tattoo and what it meant. Sprawling black tendrils marked the Fae prince's torso, then crawled up and along his back before snaring itself around the base of his neck and throat. It was a symbol of his oath to protect the Alonethan Empire and the Imperial Family, by any means necessary. Malor had to help Eric back to his room after training that day, and Eric had endured a limp for several days after. Elasuin was vicious and unbreakable.

"Let's see how long you can last today." Elasuin crooked his neck, a trace of curiosity in his rough voice. "Do your best not to react. Or better yet, fight back. Do something at least this time."

He dreaded this part of training. Eric's eyes dimmed. "Yes, Your Highness."

Rhistel watched Eric as he trailed behind Elasuin, his face pinched tight. Eric came to an abrupt halt when Elasuin stopped and turned on his heel. The third prince went entirely still, his green eyes glazed and reflecting. The worst part of Eric's training was about to begin. He cursed himself for letting his thoughts distract him on his run. It left him no time to focus, no time to collect himself for the—

Darkness slammed into him and consumed the light of day in one fell swoop. Breath rushed from his lungs as icy air bit into his skin. Winds howled against his ears too loud. The power of Elasuin's magic was an entirely unique sensation because it wasn't a specific taste or smell. It wasn't even like the Unseen section, where everything made Eric feel guilt or sadness or relief. The third prince's magic *took* all of his senses away. Or rather, stole them and made them his own. Everything that Eric smelled, tasted, felt, it was all whatever Elasuin wanted him to sense.

Then the talking started.

"Welcome back, little whore," Aimar's voice called among the winds.

Eric clenched his hands into fists, a snarl on his mouth already. "He's not here. This isn't real."

"You're not even going to say hello to your master?" The voice crawled into his ear like a roach. "Bad pet. Shall I punish you?"

Phantom fingers ran themselves along Eric's back where all his scars marked his back. Eric's knuckles whitened as he squeezed his hands tighter, willing himself not to react or give in to Elasuin's magic. The ghost touch passed through his clothing and ran along his bare skin.

Eric closed his eyes, breathing heavily through his nose. "It's not real." The voices got worse.

"Good luck, Eric," the empress's voice called.

"Hello, fragile little Eric," Solonar hushed.

Luthais chuckled softly in Eric's ear. "Come sate my curiosity, lovely."

Eric's face contorted as the voices rang out, a dull throb starting in his temples. He kept his eyes shut, biting into his lip to keep himself calm and still.

"It's not real. It's not real. It's not—"

"Why haven't you come home, Eric?"

Eric's eyes shot open and his face crumpled into a mess of agony. His brother, Bryce, looked back at Eric, his own look of pain mirrored. They looked nothing alike, except for the same cluster of freckles on their cheeks and their hazel eyes. But Bryce's jaw was firmer, with the towering confidence of a prom king or star quarterback. He was everything Eric wasn't. Now, though, Bryce looked at his brother with fresh hurt.

"Why did you leave?"

Eric's brows pulled together, his resolve fraying. His hands fell limp at his sides as he stared at the ghost of his brother. He knew his older brother wasn't real, that this was all a fabrication made by Elasuin. Still, he couldn't bring himself to ignore his brother's voice, to not look at him.

He memorized the lines of Bryce's face, for fear of forgetting what he looked like. Eric's mouth opened to speak but no words came. He didn't have an answer for his brother.

Disappointment flashed on Bryce's face. "You abandoned me. Just like mom."

Eric wobbled on his feet in the darkness, a fresh tear in his chest as guilt racked him. "No." His voice was a whisper. "No, I didn't leave you."

He gave in to the nightmare, desperate for his brother to understand, but the image of Bryce acted as if he never spoke. "I won't wait for someone

who left on their own."

"No."

Eric stumbled forward and reached a hand out to Bryce. He couldn't leave like this, not after all these years of him fighting and surviving to be free, to go home. His brother couldn't forget about him.

As Eric's fingertips brushed Bryce's shoulder, his image vanished into the dark, nothing more than smoke. His fingers grabbed at nothing, hanging dumbly in the empty air. "Come back," he begged, his voice meek.

Tears welled in Eric's eyes as he stood alone and broken in the dark.

"The only reason you're still alive," a hard voice said, cutting through the quiet, "is because of that Mark."

Slowly, Eric looked up to see Cithrel standing before him, his presence towering. The once soft blue eyes now stared back, listless. Eric's lip quivered, his reddened eyes stinging. He clawed a hand over his mouth to stop himself from screaming.

Stop it. He begged the darkness. *Stop.*

Cithrel stepped towards Eric and reached for his face. Eric didn't move, but his lips parted as he stared helpless. The fourth prince's fingers brushed against Eric's cheek, then slid down and wrapped around Eric's throat.

His eyes bulged as the Fae prince's grip slowly—as if time crawled—tightened on his neck. Eric's legs wouldn't listen and his arms refused to move. He stood frozen as the nightmare Prince choked him.

As tears spilled over and stained his dirt-covered cheeks, Eric felt it. The aether. It surged under his skin, electrified him down to his bones. Eric clung to that feeling, a beacon in the nightmare that trapped him. He would do anything to make this stop.

The phantom Cithrel vanished, along with his death grip, and Eric collapsed to the ground, gasping. The aether kept rising in him and prodded him to get back up. Eric found his footing and his steps grew faster, quicker and quicker until he was running, sprinting through the darkness towards the magic that beckoned him.

The sound of thorns and vines slithering in the darkness filled the air and he ran faster, breath quickening. His heart pounded in his chest as desperation to be free of the nightmare swelled in him.

His lips parted as he felt its presence, the presence of magic. *His* magic. He reached out, his fingers splayed and called to it.

"Help me."

The magic answered.

Thorns burst through the dark, whipping and darting through the air around him, encompassing him, the blackened spikes cutting at his skin as they went by. The wind at his ears dulled until all he heard was the coiling and writhing of vines and thorns around him. The cold air no longer reached Eric. The unending darkness was replaced by a cocoon of spikes that shielded him.

As the Marking's power caressed the edges of Eric's mind, realization hit him. The aether was going to take control again. He gave into its call so easily last time, without a second thought. He had lost himself in its embrace in the library and again with Cithrel that night. He had been so detached from himself, from his humanity. He wasn't like the Fae, he couldn't be, but he didn't know how to stop it.

Sweat formed on his brow as panic swirled with the aether. He rejected the power that welcomed itself into him, like trying to wade through a torrential current of magic. He wasn't going to be like them, he wasn't a murderer. He was Eric.

Then Eric blinked.

Elasuin blinked back at him. The summer sun and aura of the third prince beat down on him again. Sweat dripped from his neck and rolled down his tattoo-covered back. His jaw slackened. Then the grizzled Fae's knotted brows lifted, clarity filling his emerald eyes.

Eric looked over to where Rhistel was, to find him looking back with a wide grin and clapping. The Prince of Nightmares' look of surprise reflected on Eric's face. Elasuin wasn't the one who stopped the nightmare.

Eric did, with his own magic.

He looked down at his own hands, slack-jawed, eyeing the Marking etched on his forearm. After turning his hands over a few times, though, there was nothing different. The burnt Marking hadn't changed at all, yet somehow Eric felt like his blood sang with the remnants of the aether. He looked back up at Elasuin.

The prince's mouth thinned to a hard line. He appraised Eric, for once without a grimace. Then he looked away, his interest lost a breath later. Eric wasn't sure if he should follow but as he opened his mouth to speak, Elasuin cut him off.

"Tomorrow," Elasuin said over his shoulder, "the dreams will be worse." He turned his attention back to his little brother. "Rhistel. Again."

Rhistel shot Eric a hopeful smile. "See you tomorrow, Lord Becker."

When Eric smiled back and waved, Rhistel leapt to his feet, a grin on his face. He watched the youngest prince jog after his elder brother and dart for his sword. Elasuin flicked a blade in his grip, testing its weight as it cut through the air. Rhistel spun and raised his own needle-thin sword. With that Eric was dismissed.

He was slow to leave the training grounds, lost in a trance of Elasuin's words. Eric finally made it out of the nightmares. Joy fluttered in his stomach at his small victory. At least until he remembered what Elasuin promised him. The nightmares would be worse tomorrow. A shudder went through him at the thought of how the nightmares could possibly be worse.

As he roamed the palace hallways with his Malor-sized shadow, he played the fabricated nightmare over and over in his mind. Even after he got back to his rooms he was no closer to knowing exactly *how* he summoned his magic.

Malor stood at the doorway as Eric kicked off his leather boots and peeled his dirty shirt from his chest. With aching muscles, he moved like a zombie to the bathing room and dumped a vial of soothing oils into the aether-imbed tub. Moments later he sunk his beaten and bruised body into the steaming waters.

As he soaked in the hot water, his mind drifted, dazed. There wasn't anything different about the aether in his body. He had been in life-threatening danger before and begged and pleaded for the magic to come, and it hadn't. That meant Eric was different. He chewed on his lip, frowning. The steaming water had gone tepid and Eric was still no closer to what he did differently to call his magic.

Something about him was changing here, especially after living in the palace. The librarian had called him Eric, but he couldn't fight the nagging fear that at some point he would stop being himself and become something else.

An unwelcome chill seeped under his skin at the thought. He blinked away the darkening thoughts and scrubbed at his curls and his face.

The bath helped, but not nearly enough to soothe his worn-down body, which protested with every step on his way to the library and to the ancient

librarian, Gnosus. The aged Fae eventually told Eric his name after he returned for the black book.

Now dressed in a fine dark coat with shining buttons and emerald thread embroidery, Eric strode through the arching doors to the library. There were certain expectations with how he presented himself now that he was given a title, even if it drew more attention to him.

Gnosus waited for Eric among the overreaching stacks that towered around the tree sapling. He always wore the same tattered robe with three onyx straps across it. Gnosus tended to the sapling with as much care as he did the books in this library. It was already a foot taller than when Eric first saw it a month ago, its branches beginning to twist in odd spiralling patterns.

"Welcome back, creature," the Fae greeted with his usual gravelly voice.

"Hello again, Gnosus."

"It grows well." The librarian jabbed a mangled finger at the little tree.

"Like its owner."

"Oh." Did Gnosus know about Eric's training earlier today?

"Oh." Gnosus repeated. "Study well, creature." The Fae definitely knew.

"Thanks." Eric trailed off, his gaze drifting towards the giant book on the nearby table.

Who had told Gnosus about this morning, though? Just how many Fae were watching him that he didn't know about? It wasn't surprising that the empress was having Eric watched, but it didn't explain why she was giving information to the librarian. The Fae wouldn't share secrets so easily, especially one as powerful as Nithroel, unless it benefitted her in some way. As if it wasn't frightening enough to wonder how the empress benefitted from giving out her secrets, it was even worse to think about how many other members of the Aloneth family were spying on Eric and collecting their own secrets.

Solonar bathed in flames came to the forefront of his mind, a grim smile on his face. It wasn't hard to believe the crown prince spied on Eric, likely looking for the next opportunity to kill him.

Eric slumped into the carved wooden chair next to the black book. He ran a hand through his hair, pushing the curls from his face. Now wasn't the time to think about all the potential attempts on his life, or it might drive him to the edge of insanity.

Eric let his focus drift back to the black book that seemed to always sing to his blood. It was hard not to think about how much he felt like Ilphas when he read about his predecessor. He had left off at the final conquest of Ilphas, the previous Marked One, before his wish was fulfilled. Ilphas was chosen by the previous emperor, Ylyndus Aloneth, fulfilled his wish to unify the Fae and nymphs, solidifying the Alonethan Empire, while Ilphas got his wish that his name live on throughout history. Eric knew that after this was the crowning of the new Emperor, Ylyndus's first-born son, Volodar Aloneth. Eric knew that Solonar couldn't be crowned as the next emperor until whatever Eric needed to do was accomplished. Eric had no idea that there were so many Fae chosen before him and given the title of Marked One and exceptional power.

All Eric seemed to read in this book were the battles and carnage of the Fae world. It was months and months of countless wars that seemed to rage in the Fae worlds. Judging from the length of this book and how many Fae were Marked before him, it was staggering how long the Fae had been in existence, completely hidden. A prickling sensation rose at the back of his neck and trailed along his arms. They were here long before humans. Much longer.

Eric's teeth ground together. How long did they abduct and torture humans, keep them as their slaves and pets? Did it ever mean anything to them or were humans always just lesser beings, weaker beasts for them to use as their own personal tools? He shivered. From fear or anger, he didn't know.

As he flipped the pages, hours passed. Bitterness seeped into him as he read through Ilphas's victory over the slave king, Aubren Therion, and his son, Krysos. Their kingdom's cruel treatment of the nomadic nymphs had shifted the tides of the battle in favor of Alonetha and after Ilphas's support, Aubren's attempt to annex Alonetha failed. In his rage, Ilphas beheaded King Aubren. It wasn't until a young Volodar intervened that they spared the life of Krysos. Following the battle, it was noted that Ilphas bore the armor of the black doe, a symbol revered by the Alonethan Empire, to show his divine connection to the aether.

It wasn't until Eric finished reading the account of the final battle that he paused, stretching and rubbing the back of his neck. For all his anger at the bloodshed, he lost track of time, completely immersed in the brutality of the

Fae. He huffed a long sigh before he turned back to his reading. As the words on the next page sunk in, Eric paled.

Not long after the Battle of Belfir, Ilphas Raxidor succumbed to the strain of the overwhelming flow of aether bound to the Marking's power.

Eric read and re-read the pages, unsure if he translated the Fae language correctly. It had to be a mistake. If it wasn't, then that meant the Marking was toxic, eating the Marked One away like a cancer. His eyes roved over the words, scanning through the pages faster for more information. Ilphas was comparable to a deity with how in tune he was with the Marking, but it still consumed the Fae warrior.

Eric's throat burned with rising bile. The last Marked One was ripped apart and destroyed by the aether. If that's what happened to a Fae warrior, what kind of chance did Eric have? Eric's nails dug into the pages of the black book in front of him. It couldn't end like that for him. It couldn't. He still had to escape.

He needed to see his brother again, to feel the San Francisco sun on his skin. He needed to graduate college, to have a life of normalcy. There was so much Eric still needed to do and it wasn't enough that he was trapped in this hell—now its claws of death were securely wrapped around his wrist. His eyes filled with horror and venom as he looked down at the charred tattoo on his arm.

Eric vomited all over the floor. Then, suddenly, a lance of pain shot through his skull. Crying out, Eric clutched at his head, feeling it splitting apart. The pain was so sudden and sharp it blocked out all thoughts. The pressure squeezed at his temples, threatening to turn his brain liquid. Something awful was happening to him.

Until it wasn't. Calm air that carried the scent of a crackling campfire drifted around Eric. The air felt lighter, easier to breathe. His headache dulled until it was little more than a dull throb at the back of his eyes. He let out a long exhale as relief washed over him.

"There you are," a feline voice sighed, accompanied by footsteps.

Solonar's approach echoed on the stone floor of the Imperial Library with a look of ease on his face.

Chapter Seventeen

"I was worried I wouldn't find you." The crown prince tilted his head, then added under his breath, "It shouldn't happen so soon."

Eric looked up at Solonar, his brows pinched together, when the sensation of something dripping on his lip alerted him. The crown prince's tight-lipped expression fell, his fair and cool skin somehow looking even paler.

Confused, Eric followed Solonar's gaze and watched as another dark droplet of blood splattered to the ground. As the blood hit the stone floor, some of it mixed with his vomit. Eric reached up a shaking hand to his nose. His fingertips came away a deep scarlet.

Time seemed to slow for Eric. This couldn't be happening to him, not right now. His hands began to shake. He had to get out of here.

The chair scraped along the stone floor as Eric shot up, too fast. He staggered on his feet, feeling light-headed.

In a flash, the crown prince was in front of Eric, peering up at him. His slender fingers held Eric's face as he searched him for injuries. "Look at me, Eric," he said. His eyes narrowed, attention fixed on Eric's features. "It's alright. I won't hurt you. Just focus on me."

Eric did as he was commanded, mostly from the dizzying sense that flooded his better judgement. His hazel eyes fell flat as he struggled to focus on Solonar. This close he could see how smooth the prince's jaw was and the subtle arch to his brow. It was also clear how vibrant his amber eyes were. The pools of rich ochre roved over Eric, the black slitted pupils thinning and widening as they searched.

The erratic thumping in Eric's chest made his face flush and he jerked his chin away from Solonar, suddenly eager to get away. "Don't touch me," Eric breathed.

Solonar's hands dropped from Eric's face and fell to his sides, his jaw tightening. "You're not well."

"I noticed," Eric snapped, surprised at his own outburst. He added, "You don't need to concern yourself with me."

Malor materialized next to Eric then, making his presence known to the prince. The two Fae stared each other down. Malor's eyes blazed as

Solonar's jaw set and he stood his ground. Whatever words were going unspoken, they weren't friendly.

Blood dripped down Eric's face again as the two Fae stood in a stalemate of dominance. With a scoff, Eric forced his way past Solonar, unbothered that his shoulder slammed into the prince's.

Unfortunately, his head swam, probably from the blood loss, and he staggered on his feet again. Several crimson spots stained his coat, the fine emerald embroidery now looking gruesome. Before he could react, Solonar hovered over Eric, ready to catch him, but careful not to touch. The crown prince eyed him with a guarded expression.

Eric pinched one hand to his nose and held out his other, as if to say he was fine, even though his head splintered. He blinked away the sting at his temples until he felt he could see clearly. His silence was all it took for Malor to intervene.

"Crown Prince," Malor greeted, his voice hard as stone. The look in the knight's face bordered on feral. "I think it's best if the Marked One retires."

Solonar's stony expression melted into one of pure disdain at Malor's words. Eric couldn't help but picture a cat bristling when he looked at the raven-haired prince. "I am no threat." His voice hissed, only making him seem more feline. "You should know that, considering who you're protecting. I think you should be careful what you say to me next, *little soldier*."

Even with the way the prince acted, Eric didn't miss everything Solonar was saying. But why was the Fae who had tried to kill him suddenly concerned with his well-being? It didn't make sense. As soon as Eric tried to process it, though, his temples throbbed again with fresh blood trickling down his nose. He tried to convince himself the blood loss was what made his heart thump painfully in his chest and his throat feel tight.

Malor's nostrils flared as he glared at Solonar. This was the first time Eric had seen real emotion from the Fae, who was normally little more than statuesque. Still, though, the Fae warrior didn't utter another word. Even he knew better than to anger the heir to the throne.

The tinny taste of iron sat on Eric's tongue, which only made his nausea worse. The blood on his hands grew sticky, a stark contrast to how pallid his skin was becoming. He needed to get away from them and from this

place. Everything was stomach-churning right now and the smell of his vomit on the floor wasn't helping.

"Excuse me, Crown Prince," Eric choked out before striding off.

He made it all of three steps before Solonar closed the distance between them and blocked Eric's path. The prince dipped his chin, loose raven hair falling around his face, so that he met Eric's heavy-lidded gaze. He reached out a hand towards Eric, but, catching himself, he jerked his own hand away.

A wearied look laced Solonar's lean features and finally his hand clenched into a fist and fell back at his side. "Please let me stop the bleeding, Eric." His words were strained. His breath was warm on Eric's neck.

Eric's face reddened, caught off guard by the vulnerable tone. It felt like this world had turned upside-down. Clenching his jaw, he cast away the stirring thoughts, and pinched the bridge of his nose to staunch the bleeding.

Right then seemed like a good time to look anywhere but at Solonar. But when he looked over at Malor, it bothered him that the knight avoided his stare.

"Eric?"

With a steadying breath, he suddenly felt beyond tired. His bones ached and he felt unsteady on his feet. Part of him wondered how he would possibly make it back to his room. "I appreciate your concern for my well-being, but I'd prefer if Hinni saw to me back in my rooms. I wouldn't want the crown prince to dirty his hands with *human* blood."

"I—" Solonar's mouth opened to say something and then snapped shut again. Eric's pointed words had hit their mark. Good. Then all emotions washed away, replaced with a menacing smirk, though Solonar's smile showed anything but kindness.

"How considerate of you," he bit out. He stepped aside so Eric could pass, making a grand gesture with his arm. "Please, have your attendant see to you with great care. I wouldn't want anything to happen to the one blessed by the aether." The same beguiling arch to his brow lifted.

Eric fought not to roll his eyes when something caught his attention. Snaking past the sleeve of Solonar's embroidered black jacket was the edge of a tattoo. He leaned forward to get a better look, but as soon as he did,

Solonar turned on his heel. He twiddled his fingers at Eric, not looking back. "Take care, Marked One." His honeyed words hung in the air after the crown prince vanished from the library.

A frown formed on Eric's lips. He wasn't positive, having only seen it for a moment, but the tattoo looked similar to something he had seen before. The way the black marks curled on Solonar's hand was like the one sprawled across Elasuin's back and shoulders. Had he always had those tattoos like his brother?

His frown deepened when another droplet of blood splattered on the stone floor. Cursing himself, his hand flew to his face again. When would this damn nosebleed end?

"Sir Malor," Eric's muffled voice breathed, "I'll be returning to my rooms. I'm not fit to be seen."

The walk back through the palace proved tiresome. All Eric was concerned about was not vomiting anywhere else in the palace and trying to staunch his nosebleed. So he didn't notice the way Malor watched Eric the entire walk back.

It took twice as long for him to get back to his rooms, but luckily by the time he got there the bleeding had stopped, even though all of his clothes were stained with bile and blood.

"I'd like to be alone," Eric mumbled when Malor moved to follow him to his rooms. "I would appreciate it if you could ask Hinni to just leave my meal for me. Thank you."

It wasn't until he closed Cithrel's bedroom door behind him that he exhaled. He missed the prince. His presence was reassuring and it also kept his brothers at bay. Everything was much simpler when Cithrel was still at the palace. After everything he had learned in the library, it felt like he had aged years in the span of hours.

With trudging steps, he set to lighting a fire in the room. It was only the beginnings of autumn but he felt hollow and frozen. He missed the prince, but how he felt didn't matter. It seemed like the empress and Solonar and every other Imperial Fae were keeping secrets about Eric.

When the fireplace lit and crackled, its calming sound warming the expansive bedroom, he fell back onto the divan in front of the mantle. Looking at his hands, which wouldn't stop shaking, he let out an unsteady groan. He didn't want to look in a mirror right now because he knew what

he'd see. A face etched with fatigue. Eyes that were full of exhaustion, that had read, listened, and seen too much. With a vacant expression, he looked at the flames that licked the air, wondering how he'd ended up like this. He thought of what that massive book said about Ilphas. It sent a shrill pang through his mind, like scratching glass.

Eric closed his eyes and leaned back further onto the divan. As the fireplace warmed him, it reminded him of when he went camping with his brother. He scoffed to himself. As if what they did could be called camping. Bryce would always drag Eric out to go on a long hike to some remote place and insist on spending the night under the stars and next to a fire. Somehow, it was always up to Eric to remember the food for their hikes unless he felt like starving but then he wouldn't ever have to cook for them, which was fine since he was a terrible chef. Then in the morning they would go right back down whatever mountain they just went up.

Hurry up, Eric. Or we'll miss the stars. Bryce would always yell that down the mountain. Eric would almost always flip him off from twenty feet back.

His expression softened at the old memory. At first, Eric hated hiking and camping, and let Bryce know it, but eventually it grew on him. He never admitted to his brother that he was right, even though he was sure Bryce knew Eric went hiking on his own all the time now.

Used to go hiking. The smile on his lips fell. The pleasant memory fractured and instead he saw images of a Fae with bark for skin drag him off. He felt its fingers scraping on his lips, the scent of its magic filling his nose and throat, incapacitating him.

Eric bolted upright, his eyes flying open. Every palpitation ached as his breaths came fast. A shaking hand ran over his face, as if trying to wash away the whole ordeal. His own dried blood stared back at him on his hands and he cursed. He needed to wash this day off of himself.

The waters were borderline scalding but he didn't care. No matter how hot the water got, Eric swore he still saw Garret and Elena's blood stain his hands and under his fingernails. It always felt like he was trying to wash away blood but never truly felt clean. He sank into them and threw in whatever floral oils were nearby. He let the water soak into his muscles, easing the tension and aching from his training. The blood from his face and hands tinted the soothing waters a murky red. His face twisted, not

wanting to look at any more blood, or anything that reminded him of death. He closed his eyes again and kept his mind blank, determined not to think of anything. He didn't want to think, at least not for a little while.

It was minutes, maybe hours, later when he climbed out of the bath, his skin pinked, and towelled off, feeling at least a little better. The fire still heated the bedroom, thankfully, still roaring and crackling. His eyes fell on the luxurious bed when he threw on an oversized tunic. Then they wandered and lingered on the pillow.

As he collapsed onto the sprawling lavish bed instead of the divan, this was one other thing that he allowed himself when he was alone. He slept where Cithrel slept, and used the pillow he used. It should have made Eric's skin crawl to do such a thing, when he should sooner burn the bed entirely, but he didn't.

Instead, Eric breathed into the silken gray pillow, knowing that it comforted him. Tucking the pillow closer to him as he curled up in bed, he knew why it made him feel better. He couldn't stop missing him. He told himself that he didn't forgive Cithrel for all the atrocities that he'd committed, that he probably wouldn't ever forgive him. And yet, he still missed the cold and detached Fae's presence.

Before he left to deal with the invasions, Cithrel was less vacant than when they'd first met in the enchanted woods. The prince had seemed like hardened stone at first. Now, it was like something was always happening that irritated or exhausted him. The little glint in his eyes, the emotions he kept to himself. He didn't forget the countless times he caught the prince staring at him, either. In this private moment, his thoughts lingered on Cithrel's stolen glances—he liked it when the prince stared at him. A blush slowly made its way to his cheeks.

"If I knew you were this lonely, lovely, I would have come to see you sooner."

Eric's head whipped around, shame washing over him with the force of a tsunami, to see Luthais leaning in the doorway with a crooked grin. Eric threw the pillow across the room. The Prince of Masks laughed in his face as the pillow thudded on the rich wooden floors.

"Relax, Eric," he said, letting himself in and plunking down on the divan. "I just wanted to see you, that's all."

"I'm not in the mood today." After their stint in his private house, Eric didn't bother with formalities. They were close to friends after that, especially after Cithrel left. "I'm too tired."

"I can see that."

Eric shot him an accusing look. "What, are you having me spied on, too?"

Luthais leaned over the divan with an impish grin. "No, lovely, but I do have eyes and ears."

"Right." He felt his chest deflate a little. Eric wondered if the entire palace knew about what happened in the library by now.

Sobering, Luthais said, "How are you feeling?"

"Fine." A lie.

"You're not a very good liar, lovely."

Eric fell back onto the plush bed, groaning. "I feel like shit, happy?"

"No, dear, I'm not."

The air stirred around Eric and he knew where the prince would be. At least some parts of his training with Elasuin were paying off. He turned his head to see Luthais lounging on the other side of the bed, his violet gaze winking back at Eric. He reached a hand out.

"May I?"

When Eric didn't bat his hand away or move, Luthais pressed his hand on Eric's forehead. Satisfied with his findings, his hand slid to cup Eric's cheek. It didn't feel seductive or romantic, but rather a comfort. The tightness in his heart lightened just a little. He knew Luthais saw what lingered in Eric's hazel eyes. An ever-growing wound inside him—helplessness. He avoided thinking about what he had learned in the library, until it bubbled to the surface.

He gave his friend a weak smile. "Told you I was fine."

Luthais chuckled, just a little. "You're still not a very good liar, lovely."

The silence in the room grew heavy and finally, Eric couldn't bring himself to look Luthais in the eyes. He wouldn't be able to say it out loud otherwise. "How long will I have?" When the silver-haired prince didn't answer, he added, "To live?"

Saying the words stung, prodding the wound in his chest. Now that he said it out loud and acknowledged it, there was no taking it back. The

Marking was going to kill him. Probably soon. He gnawed on his lower lip, dreading the answer.

Luthais's hand fell away from Eric's cheek, which did little to calm his nerves. His voice was solemn when he spoke. "Years, maybe. Or months."

The room fell away from Eric then. If time stopped he wouldn't know because his entire world shattered into dust. The honesty of Luthais's answer lodged in Eric's heart. *Months*. It was such a horrible word it replayed in his mind, each one leaving a fresh wound. That was how long Eric had until the aether flowing in his veins killed him.

"The human body was never made to contain magic because it was never made with magic." Luthais slid off the bed, letting them both sit in the silence.

"God." Eric hadn't blinked yet, just stared at the ceiling. "Bryce. My home. My freedom." He wasn't talking to Luthais anymore, he wasn't even really aware of where he was anymore. The memories of his old life, his human life, crashed into him. "It's all gone."

As if he only just came back to reality, Eric looked over at Luthais, almost surprised to see him there. He took a long, deep breath. "I won't ever see my family again... will I?"

Luthais stared. He didn't answer. The way his eyes gleamed with pity said enough.

Tears welled and spilled down Eric's cheek, soaking into the silken pillow. He'd never be on campus again, never find out who that piano player in the next department over was, never hear that music again. He would never graduate.

His throat closed. He couldn't breathe. Eric would never grow *old*. He was going to die in this world after all.

Quietly, Luthais leaned over and pulled a heartbroken Eric into his arms, hugging him close. "It's times like this, I wish I could lie, lovely."

A sob racked Eric's chest, leaning into the second prince. When Luthais squeezed him tighter, he realized morbidly that this prince—who was seemingly rejected by his own family—was Eric's only friend. Eric didn't try to conceal his devastation that drowned him in its entirety.

After little more than five years, this world had finally done it. Alonetha had broken him.

Chapter Eighteen

When Eric finally slept—after his sobs racked his chest—he dreamed. He knew it couldn't be a nightmare because the shape at his side was so striking in the moonlight. Feeling the weight of Luthais's arm wrapped around Eric's waist as he slept told him he must be dreaming.

Solonar's head was dipped, resting against his clasped hands in the chair next to the bed. The glow from the midnight moon highlighted the crown prince's raven hair in a way that made it glisten.

Eric blinked once, twice, his eyelids heavy with sleep. As if the dream Solonar sensed Eric's groggy gaze, he looked up at him. The crown prince gave him a look of pure anguish, as if there was some decision he couldn't possibly make. The torn expression lingered a moment longer as Eric blinked again, feeling sleep ready to take him from this odd dream.

Then Solonar's hand reached out, slowly, tentatively, his fingers pausing a brush away from Eric's cheek. The inner war in Solonar's mind seemed to rage for a small eternity and a look of grit covered his features. Decision sparked in his amber eyes, which now looked at Eric with a desperation, a hunger, a need.

He cupped Eric's cheek, so lightly it could only be a caress. The touch was warm, the soft comfort settling over his body, relaxing his muscles. Eric fell back against his pillow, a small yawn escaping him.

The dream Solonar didn't say a word but his hand lingered on Eric's cheek, stroking his jawline with his thumb. A feeling of calm took hold of Eric's limbs and body. He felt back into a dreamless sleep, with the crown prince still holding Eric.

When he awoke, the dream was already melting away from his memories, the only lingering feeling a surprising calm. A wanton and guilty thought ran through his mind then. Would he still have chaotic dreams and restless nights if Cithrel was here? He couldn't remember feeling this lonely and worn out when he was with the prince.

Shaking his head, he banished the thoughts of Cithrel. He couldn't let himself get carried away like this, not over him. His nearly obsessive thoughts at the prince's absence had to stop.

With a huff, he threw the blankets off and dressed in some light training gear. It took him longer than usual to make his way to the training grounds, Malor trailing behind, silent as ever. His face felt puffy in Alonetha's summer heat.

About thirty minutes later, Eric was ready to pass out. Swollen red eyes and heavy bags made it clear he barely slept last night but Elasuin couldn't have cared less. After a feint, the Fae prince struck with the fury of a cobra and brought the flat edge of his blade across Eric's back, sending him careening to the dirt. That was his nineteenth time being thrown to the ground.

Wind rushed out of Eric's chest, leaving him wheezing. The sharp burn that ran along his back told him it was going to bruise. His own sword flew out of his grip, clattering off to the side. His wrist twisted on the ground at an awkward angle and he hugged his hand to his chest. He must have looked exceptionally pathetic today because even Rhistel winced and cringed after every hit Eric took.

"Get. Up," Elasuin fumed.

Eric suppressed the scowl at the third prince's tone. Everything felt intensified. It all seemed to set him on edge, as if he might explode or fall apart into a million pieces at any given moment. The twisting and nagging thoughts tortured him, depriving him of sleep, enough that almost any thought grated.

The Prince of Nightmares was furious. Not that he didn't blame the prince for being so incensed with him. Yesterday Eric drew on his magic with ease and today he couldn't even parry a single hit. The burn in Elasuin's eyes showed how livid it made him to see Eric backslide like this, to see someone he was personally training fail this badly.

Eric was slow getting to his feet, his movements mechanical, but he wordlessly obeyed the prince. Even with his eyes downcast, studying the dirt under his leather boots, he felt Rhistel's concerned gaze on him. He tested his wrist a few times before letting it fall at his side, ignoring the dull throb. The aching in his wrist was nothing compared to the pounding against his skull. It made every thought sluggish, cloudy.

"If you won't fight, then we'll see how long you can last today," the third prince snapped, his voice further away somehow. Eric closed his eyes,

inhaling heavily through his nose, waiting for the onslaught of nightmares. "I warned you. They will be worse than before."

Eric didn't look up or nod or give any indication that he heard Elasuin. He just stood there, still, waiting for whatever was next. He was tired—so, so tired of everything.

The world fell away to black, leaving him utterly numb. Not that it mattered to Eric, but he felt like he'd lost all sensation. The thoughts of his mortality plagued his mind, leaving him hollowed out. His shoulders sagged, and his bones stood out more than usual. There was no smell, no sound, nothing. Until the nightmares spoke.

"It's so good to see you again, pet." Aimar's voice cut through the black haze. Eric stood there, motionless, unaffected. "Why don't you look happy to see me?"

His pointed nails trailed across Eric's face until digging in at the last minute, gripping his chin too tight. A droplet of blood formed from a shallow cut on Eric's chin. His eyes were unfocused as the phantom Aimar forced Eric to look at him.

Eric's eyes stared back at the white void of Aimar's. He didn't so much as blink as his previous master's grip tightened, a cruel smile on his lips.

"Five years with me and you had such fire in your eyes," Aimar jabbed. "Yet after a few months with the Imperial Family, that flame has been snuffed out."

Eric kept silent, enduring the phantom before him. The feel of the lord's hands on him sent a pang down his spine, but he didn't move. The hatred and venom he knew so well filled Aimar's gaze to the brim.

"Why don't you come back to me, pet? Things were much better when you were with me." Lord Aimar's hand trailed down Eric's chin to his shoulder and along his arm, leaving a trail of ice on his skin. "Who other than me would find all your scars beautiful?"

A single shudder ran through Eric, but he didn't move from where he stood. The urge to look at the innumerable scars on his body was too strong, and his gaze fell to his arms. The backs of his hands were discolored in a way that looked like small clouds—from all the gardening of acidic flowers. His eyes roved past his hands and up his forearms, spotting the slashes that wrapped all the way around. Those were from all his time in chains.

As Lord Aimar's hand ran back up Eric's arm, it slid over his shoulder and grazed down his back. Eric didn't have to see the scars to feel them, to know their presence. He took one steadying breath. Then another. And another. It didn't help.

The nightmare felt too real. He felt *everything*. This time he couldn't help but flinch. He didn't have the strength to move, to pull away from his old master, even though the Fae noble was nothing more than a shadow here in his mind. He knew Aimar wasn't real, an illusion, and yet his limbs locked up.

The darkness overwhelmed him again, but just for a brief moment, until another familiar figure appeared. Eric's sigh of relief at Aimar's departure was short-lived as the next nightmare appeared.

"What have I always told you, Eric?" Solonar's cat-eyes gleamed in the blackness. "A fragile human like you should have never received the Mark. There's nothing you can do now but wait as it eats you alive."

Eric's face contorted, hearing those words. *He was right*. A fresh lick of aching ran through his chest, an old wound opening and festering. After that he felt rage.

Rage at himself, for not being strong enough to survive this brutal place he was brought to, but mostly rage at the Fae. Their twisted half-truths and godly abilities were the cause of his body failing. They decided to abduct him on a whim. The emperor decided to *use* him and there was nothing he could do about it.

"I'm no threat to you, remember?" Solonar inclined his head with a mocking smile.

Eric's top lip pulled back as his teeth gritted together. The skin of his palms tightened as he clenched his hands into fists. The anger burned hot inside him, simmering, as he glared at the nightmare prince before him.

Solonar cocked his head to the other side, the way a cat studies a bug. A taunting smile ghosted across his features. He opened his arms wide as if to hug him, a silent challenge. The magic in Eric's veins ignited as his fury peaked. Then realization struck and his rage was snuffed out entirely, replaced with panic.

Nails dug into his palms as he squeezed his hands tighter. He wasn't going to give them what they wanted. He wasn't going to kill himself faster, not for them. The surging of his power bubbled to the surface, threatening

to overflow. Eric stood frozen, so locked in concentration he didn't notice that the nightmare of the crown prince was on him.

It wasn't until he felt talons cutting through his clothes and piercing his flesh that Eric's eyes snapped open. He was slow to follow Solonar's movement, his head dipping to see himself impaled by the nightmare.

A trickle of blood gurgled in his throat, filling his mouth before it dribbled down his chin. This didn't feel like a nightmare caused by Elasuin. This felt *real*.

Horror gripped Eric the same time agony did. A scream tore from his chest with such ferocity it raked his throat and lungs, burning the entire way. His legs gave out as the crown prince vanished back into the darkness, leaving a hole in Eric's chest. Blood poured from it at an alarming rate. Frantic, he folded into himself as he tried to stop the bleeding.

He didn't want to lose what little time he had left, even if it meant he couldn't be free. He wanted to live. Shit. His heart hammered in his chest as adrenaline and fear spiked in his veins. He was bleeding too much. Deep scarlet soaked all of his clothes and pooled around him.

"Let me help you." A velvet baritone voice cut through the darkness. He ignored it.

Eric pressed his forehead against his knees, curling in on himself tighter, in a vain attempt to slow the bleeding. There was so much of his blood he had to cover his ears, otherwise hysteria would take him.

"Why won't you let me help you?" The voice was at his ear now.

He couldn't take it, not with the way he was right now, trapped in this nightmare of Elasuin's creation, bleeding to death in nothingness. He threw his hand out, trying to hit the owner of the voice with all his might. He didn't connect.

A Fae materialized from the darkness, cloaked in shadows and wearing a ghoulish black crown. Realization crawled across Eric's skin like burrowing insects. He had seen the Fae before, or rather the statue of him. Sweat now beaded at his temples, his skin pallid, dripping onto his clothes as he glared up from where he laid crumpled. Volodar Aloneth, the dead emperor, assessed Eric with a detached interest.

"Fuck you," Eric gasped, baring his teeth weakly.

"I gave you this gift," Volodar said, ignoring the insult. "Why do you refuse to use it?"

His question was curious, which just made Eric angrier. Blood gushed between his fingers as he clutched his torso. "You forced it on me. I never wanted it." His eyes filled with loathing, refusing to tear his gaze away from the nightmare emperor.

"I chose you for a reason." The emperor held his gaze, his face a blank slate. "I did this to help my people. To help *you*."

The quelled rage resurfaced with a renewed vigor. "You're killing me!" The words tore through his body, shredding his lungs as he roared. His words were agonizing, angry, and defeated. "You stole my life!"

The emperor said nothing to that. Eric didn't get to see his expression, because all of the blood loss and the hole in his chest became too much. His body slumped forward, on the brink of giving out from pain and exhaustion. He didn't want to die. He didn't want to die. He didn't—

Eric's body fell forward and collapsed in the dirt of the training arena. His blood soaked into the dirt. First he heard Rhistel's voice, somewhere further away, then he heard Elasuin's rapid footsteps. A second later, the third prince was lifting Eric out of the dirt and pressing a hand to his chest wound.

His eyes went wide as he realized with dread that the nightmare *was* real. At least, the damage it caused was, as his limbs went limp in Elasuin's grip.

"Eric?" Rhistel was next to him, his face pinched with worry. "Are you awake? Can you speak?"

He did his best to answer him but everything hurt and his body wasn't listening to him. All he could muster was an indistinct groan. It was maddening and terrifying. He was dying. There was so much blood—

"It's not real." Elasuin's usually hard voice was deathly calm. "Open your eyes, human."

He blinked. There was a gaping hole in his chest, except there wasn't. There was no hole in his chest, there wasn't even blood. His chest rasped another shuddering, painful breath as he assessed himself wild-eyed for any injuries.

When he saw nothing, he thought he might still be trapped in a nightmare, so he set to patting himself down, feeling for any injuries. His mind was in so many pieces he didn't process the third prince's words. They were nothing but the bare truth. *It's not real.*

Christ. He heaved, thinking he was going to be sick. It felt more real than he did right now.

"I warned you they would be worse today." Elasuin cut through the unspoken tension in the air, still holding Eric in his arms.

Enraged, Eric shoved at the prince's chest. Concern flashed across Rhistel's face, still for Eric, but now for a different reason. He knew he shouldn't antagonize Elasuin, but he couldn't help it.

He shoved against him again and this time Elasuin dumped him unceremoniously to the ground. Eric wasn't expecting to be dropped, so he was slow to break his fall, landing on his elbow. He gasped, his eyes flaring, and cradled his arm as a shock of pain ran up his arm.

His eyes found Elasuin's, who looked down at him, unflinching. His eyes were greener than Eric's, brighter, and full of fight. Eric's were duller in every way—spotted with flecks of brown, dulled from years of abuse, and his fight all but gone.

It was humbling.

Eric broke his gaze and looked away. He struggled to his feet, careful not to bump his elbow any more than he had to. He was ready for this training session to be done. Feeling Elasuin's burning eyes on him didn't help either. Eric avoided his gaze until he heard the third prince storm from the training grounds like a thundercloud, cursing as he went.

He looked up in time to see Rhistel peering at him, his black and violet eyes glistening in the sunlight. It hurt Eric's pride to see someone who didn't look older than twelve giving him such a strong look of pity. He regretted throwing a fit now, even though Rhistel was a full century older than him.

"He's just angry with himself," Rhistel explained. "You're his responsibility, right, and he thinks he's failing." The youngest prince held his eyes for a second longer and then turned on his heel and jogged after his older brother.

Eric watched them go, waiting a few minutes after they went out of sight before he left the training grounds himself. Malor was waiting for him at the edge of the arena. He surveyed Eric's injuries but said nothing.

Eric's thoughts were a mess as he trudged back to his room. Thankfully, all the nobles he passed didn't so much as look at him. Some actually turned and went the opposite direction at the sight of his approach. If he wasn't

utterly drained, he might have smiled that at least being the Marked One gave him a little reprieve.

When he got back to his room, the weight of everything seemed to press down on him more than before. The incessant gnawing at his brain had lessened but he felt the change in his body—felt it withering under the strain of magic.

"Is Hinni busy?" Eric called over his shoulder to Malor as he cradled his elbow. "If she isn't, could she bring some salve?"

Not waiting for a reply, he ventured into Cithrel's room and pressed the engraved door shut with a thud. Eric slumped against the door, wallowing in private. Seeing the freshly made bed with familiar silken sheets—Hinni made it every morning—sent a fresh pang of loneliness through him. Was Cithrel ever going to come back? Would things change between him now that Eric knew his fate? He didn't know what they were anymore. It all felt so complicated.

He rubbed at his eyes before pinching the bridge of his nose. Eric swore at himself for his idiotic thoughts. He might miss the prince, but the same couldn't be said for Cithrel, he was sure of it. For all of his struggling to find an answer to his anxious thoughts, he found nothing. The bags under his eyes seemed to deepen when he took in a sharp breath.

There was no way he had the energy to go to the library today, not after how poorly his training went. His back ached with every movement. Not that he wanted to learn anything more about this bloodthirsty empire, anyway.

His teeth gnashed together when his gaze fell to his arm. Revulsion washed over him at the sight of it. The blackened Marks that normally resembled a crown now looked like a shackle, imprisoning him once and for all in this world. The anger quickly died out, though, replaced with exhaustion. He was too tired to feel hatred, too tired to feel much of anything.

Eric's back slid down along the door until he tucked his arms around his knees. Dragging in a long, shaking breath, his lids fell shut. He counted one breath and after a few seconds let it out. He repeated the act several times, draining out all other thoughts, worries, feelings, until there was only his breath in this quiet space.

At some point he must have passed out, likely a combination of lack of sleep and exertion, because he was jarred awake by a knock on the other side of the door. He opened it to find Hinni there, with fresh salve in hand and a soft expression.

Wincing, he scrubbed at his face. "Sorry, Hinni. I must have fallen asleep."

"It's alright, you look like you could use some more rest." She stepped inside the bedroom when Eric moved out of the doorway. "I'll treat you and be on my way."

Eric huffed and sat at the edge of the bed before pulling his tunic over his head. "Thanks. I appreciate it."

"Of course." As soon as Hinni's lithe fingers touched Eric's back, though, he sucked in a pained breath through his teeth. "I'm sorry. I'll try to be more delicate," she said.

"I should try to get hurt less," Eric choked as Hinni spread the salve. "I'm sure there's an angry red mark across my back by now."

"You're doing remarkably well, Eric. You've already overcome so much since coming to the palace. Even if the princes are difficult, they're doing their best to help you."

"Right," was all Eric could manage.

Hinni didn't press it any further. She always seemed to know what Eric needed, which included her using the entire container of salve and helping him put his tunic back on.

Just as she finished, the sound of a door slamming shut followed by muffled arguing filled the air. Eric hobbled down the hall with Hinni behind him to find Sir Saelihn facing down Sir Malor, whose teeth were bared.

"What's going on?" Eric coughed.

Without a word, Saelihn's piercing rouge gaze fell on Eric, holding him in place. Eric went rigid under the unwavering guard's sight, but when Sir Saelihn tilted his head to the side, as if in question, Eric couldn't help but blink back.

Eric swallowed back down the rising lump in his throat. "How may I help you, Sir Saelihn?"

"I came at the request of the empress." His voice was calm, unbothered that Malor looked ready to bite his head off. "I must speak with you privately."

"I'll take my leave then." Hinni's soft voice broke the tense atmosphere. "Call for me if you need, Eric."

When the door shut behind her Eric cleared his throat. "Of course." He tried to ignore how feral Malor looked to be excluded and gestured for Saelihn to lead the way. Once they were alone, Eric asked, "What brings you here?"

Saelihn spoke in hushed tones and the words curled around Eric's ear, sending shivers through his body. "Prince Cithrel has returned from the border. His wounds are not grave but the warning he carries is. There are spies everywhere. Do not trust anyone."

Eric's eyes went wide. Saelihn's words felt like a gut punch and he couldn't breathe. A sick feeling roiled in his stomach as he thought bitterly that he couldn't trust anyone here to begin with. Then Saelihn's other words registered. He knew he should be terrified by all this news, but a singular emotion coursed through him after Sir Saelihn pulled away from his side and vanished from Eric's living quarters.

Relief.

Cithrel was back.

Then his relief died as he absorbed everything Sir Saelihn had said—Cithrel was injured. A knot formed in his stomach and without thinking, Eric was through the door and leapt down the winding stairs.

As he sprinted through the halls and bounded down another set of stairs, he was breathless when he spotted Cithrel's knights through a window. He recognized one knight with shoulder-length red hair—Sir Elyion.

They had disappeared around a corner by the time Eric caught up to them, his lungs burning and his back aching with each step. He was lucky Hinni had applied that salve earlier or he'd be flat on the stone floor by now. His heart raced as he ran towards Sir Elyion. The knight gaped in surprise before his face shuttered with recognition.

His lips were already pursed as the words spilled from Eric. "Where is he?"

"The prince is being tended to, Marked One," Elyion bit out.

"Where is he?" Eric repeated.

"The princess is with him. They're speaking in private."

"I just want to see him," Eric said, irritation filling his voice.

He hadn't stopped to bring Malor with him. If he had, he was sure he wouldn't be having this problem right now. Elyion stood in front of Eric in the hallway, blocking his path to where he guessed Cithrel and Lyari were. His brows knitted in frustration as he looked past the knight, counting down the doors and calculating his odds of which one Cithrel was behind.

His muscles tensed, bracing to make a run for it, when a saccharine voice stopped Eric in his tracks. "Let Eric Becker through."

Eric and Elyion both stiffened at the command of the crown prince. He turned to see Solonar staring back at him, a look of poorly masked frustration on his face. He leaned against the corner of the hall, his arms crossed over his chest.

Eric bit back a scowl at the crown prince, knowing he shouldn't stir trouble with the Fae who was letting him through right now, but somehow the expression on Solonar's face ate at him. The crown prince's hands were tucked under his arms, making it impossible to see any tattoos that might be there.

The thought was cut off abruptly when Sir Elyion ground his teeth together before side-stepping out of Eric's way. "The last door on the left."

"Thank you, Crown Prince." Eric dipped his head. Begrudgingly he added, "Thank you, Sir Elyion."

Solonar nodded once, still looking wholly unhappy, but Eric didn't linger. Within seconds he was running down the hall, his heart pounding in his ears. His breath left him as he stopped in front of the door, knowing who was behind it. It had been over a month since he'd seen Cithrel. Would he be happy to see Eric, even just a little?

The anticipation had his heart leaping in his chest while he stood on the other side of the door. His nerves began to swell as he still felt several sets of eyes on him for being allowed to see the injured prince. Their looks of infuriation burned holes in his back enough that he pushed through the door.

His breath caught in his throat as his gaze found Cithrel's. The prince looked exhausted, but worse than that, he was covered in lacerations. Hundreds of slashes dashed his skin, enough that there were more wounds than not on his body. It looked gruesome, despite how much his Fae-gold blood glistened in the light, but when Cithrel realized who had just barged in, the same calculated apathetic expression that masked his features

disappeared. Instead, there was an audible sigh, as if a weight had suddenly lifted from the prince's chest.

Lyari's slender hands pressed to Cithrel's bloodied and torn chest, making her fingers look even smaller. Her chain veil swayed in front of her face as her blind eyes followed the noise of Eric's entry. Her lips quirked into something close to wistful.

"What are you doing here?" Cithrel's voice was rough but strained. He fought back a grimace at Lyari's pressured touch.

The words left Eric's mouth without a thought. "What happened?"

Cithrel's rare soft expression flickered, darkening to something worse—anger, and regret. Eric bit back the sting in his chest as the air shifted in the room to something colder, detached. As Lyari's attention went back to her brother's wounds, Cithrel's hard arctic eyes snapped shut in what looked like pain. His nostrils flared in labored breaths. Eric waited, unsure of what else he should do in this situation. It was stupid of him to just barge in here, especially when he had no idea what was going on. Shame pricked his skin as he stood in the room, the only sound Cithrel's hitched breaths.

The prince's voice was hollow and grim when he spoke. "Archduke Laen is dead."

Chapter Nineteen

Eric didn't move from across the room, still standing with the door flung open, unable to process how things could have gone so horribly wrong in Archduke Laen's territory for the archduke to be dead. What hell could have broken loose out there?

"What, what happened?" Eric repeated, failing to picture someone bold enough to kill the archduke.

Archduke Laen was a bastard, especially to Eric, but he was still a living being and he was dead. His stomach flipped, imagining what kind of power it took to kill the elder Fae noble. Suddenly, Sir Saelihn's warning rose to the front of his thoughts. *Trust no one.* Eric's face pinched with worry. That warning meant something and after what Cithrel just told him, he was in greater danger in the palace than he thought.

"There was another ambush," Cithrel answered. His voice was gravelly, but at least now he was looking at Eric again. He didn't know how to feel about how much his chest fluttered under those blue eyes. "The Duke's entire estate was slaughtered in the middle of the night. Whoever planned the ambush on the border reinforcements with Paeris is behind this attack as well."

He cast Eric a baleful look, answering the question in his mind—someone in the palace was a spy and a traitor. Eric swallowed back bile that gurgled in his throat. The estate would have been a massacre. None of the servants or slaves would have even survived. It was a miracle that Cithrel made it out of there. His nostrils flared, thinking about the carnage. Having those blue eyes honed in on Eric didn't make him blush any more, but made him feel closer to queasy.

"I was attacked by several mountain nymphs. They had all but gone feral when they struck. They did this to me. I found the archduke's dismembered body after it was over." He rested his head back against the bed as Lyari's hands trailed along Cithrel's torn-up chest. The prince paused, studying Eric's face before he continued. "Something wasn't right about it all, though."

"God." Eric breathed, unable to manage anything else. "Why? Why would the nymphs do something like that?"

Eric had never met a nymph, but he wanted to less and less each time he heard about them. They were held in barely higher regard than humans. It was Volodar who fought for the freedom of nymphs. Cithrel was glaring at him now, but why, Eric didn't know.

Skirting his eyes, he found an escape by looking over at Lyari, whose attention was focused on treating her older brother's wounds. Small stems grew from her palms, spreading little buds across his chest in a chaotic criss-cross pattern. As the plants spread and grew, Cithrel's wounds waned. It was like the plants themselves fed off of his injuries. Eric fought to suppress a gag as his mind flitted through multiple horrific scenarios.

"It's nothing for you to concern yourself with," Cithrel said, snapping Eric back to attention. "You should go."

As the words sunk in, he tried to pretend it didn't hurt him to hear that he was being dismissed. He felt like an idiot for all his silent agony, missing him for so long, and having none of it reciprocated.

"I can stay with you," he offered, though his voice was pitiful.

"I need to rest," Cithrel answered, sounding more annoyed than in pain now. "I can't do that if I have to watch over you the entire time. Just—" He paused, taking in a shaking breath, closing his eyes. "Let my soldiers protect you."

End of discussion. Eric didn't have the confidence to reply without his voice cracking or shaking, so he just dipped his head and left. He couldn't bring himself to look back over his shoulder because he was already stupidly hoping Cithrel would change his mind and call him back. He didn't.

The rest of the knights, who weren't happy about letting Eric through moments ago, now had looks ranging from satisfaction to pity, seeing Eric pass by with a sullen look on his face. He did his best to avoid their stares, Sir Elyion's in particular. He didn't want to see the smug look of *I told you* so on that knight's face.

As he made his way from the crowd, he couldn't help but notice that Solonar was nowhere to be seen. Eric wondered why the crown prince helped him back there like that, or why he was so kind with him in the library before. Did it all have something to do with that tattoo, or was it all just another sick game of him watching Eric squirm while the aether inside him slowly killed him?

He ran a hand over his face, rubbing at the exhaustion that wore at him. The palace halls were eerily quiet as he walked back in relative dark. Gnawing on his lip, even as he crawled back into bed, he couldn't forget the tone in Cithrel's voice, or the look in his eyes, as he brushed off Eric. Alone in the dark, he didn't have to hide the sting in his chest.

The next few days didn't get any better, either. After Cithrel's injuries were healed and he returned to their shared living space, he hardly looked at Eric, even actively avoided him. Cithrel always ate on his own and stopped going with him to the library.

At first, Eric thought it could have been something else, but his worry was confirmed. Whenever he tried to talk to Cithrel, he was met with vacant stares or immediate dismissal as soon as he spoke. Worse still, the animosity that usually tinged Cithrel's words was gone. By the third day Eric was convinced he was halfway to madness.

As Eric picked away at his meal, he shook his head, feeling like an idiot for missing that Fae bastard. There was already so much on his own shoulders, that was *forced* on him, and the one being who was supposed to be there to protect him, to help him, was practically a ghost.

Saelihn's words echoed in his mind again, but with a different edge. *Trust no one.*

He never should have given in to his feelings for the prince. It was childish of him to think Cithrel might help him with the aether that was slowly eating him alive from the inside out. He was still a human and he still carried power in him that never should have been his in the first place.

Luthais was so scarce, avoiding as many court affairs as possible. Elasuin treated him like nothing more than a punching bag, and he didn't want Solonar's poisonous help. Eric didn't know what the hell he was going to do now that he was definitively on his own with this. He huffed, pushing his plate away in frustration.

It wasn't until Hinni appeared on the other side of the doorway that Eric blinked, bringing himself back to reality. Her black eyes flicked with a look of concern when she took in his appearance, now looking unsure of herself as she stood before him. Her bark-covered fingers fiddled together nervously.

"What is it, Hinni?" Eric managed a pleasant tone. It wasn't her fault he was miserable.

"Are you alright?" Her features pulled together.

"Just tired is all." He feigned a smile, but it was weak. "What is it?"

He half-hoped it was news about Cithrel, but that feeling was quickly crushed when Hinni replied. "Lord Aimar has requested your presence, regarding sensitive court affairs. He is waiting downstairs."

Even Hinni flinched when Eric's face darkened, all pretense of pleasantries draining away from him. "I refuse." He looked back at his meal, suddenly feeling like he had an appetite after all. "I don't see why the Court Merchant needs someone like me."

"The empress approved the meeting." The tree-like Fae's voice was impossibly quiet.

Eric closed his eyes, and sucked in a long breath through his mouth before letting it out. His fork dug into his palm from squeezing it too tight. The room hung in the never-ending silence until he opened his eyes again. Of course. Of course, the empress had arranged this meeting in Court. He felt a hundred years older and like he hadn't slept in weeks when he looked at her again.

"I'll be there shortly," he bit out. "We wouldn't want the lord to be kept waiting." He didn't bother to hide his own venomous sarcasm.

Hinni simply nodded and vanished through the doorway, pity plain on her face. He watched her go and then caught Malor staring at him. Anger flooded his cheeks and he did his best to glare a hole in the ground.

He stormed off to the bathroom and washed his face before peeling off his trousers and under shirt. Running a wet hand through his hair to push it back, he heaved another, unbelievably long and exasperated sigh. He did not want to go talk to that monster. He definitely didn't want to be in a room alone with him. Casting one last look at himself, he swore. Bleary hazel eyes with purpling bags under them looked back.

It took him the entire walk to the agreed meeting place in the palace, and then some time standing on the other side of the door, for Eric to be calm enough to greet Lord Aimar. With a final inhale, he smoothed out his features and strode through the door.

Eric kept his chin up and his gaze leveled on Aimar. The Fae noble lounged in his chair, legs crossed and looking like he was in the comfort of his own home. Several garnet and candy-red fabrics interwove together to

form his outfit today, twisting in ways that looked impossible to get in and out of. Aimar flicked his fingernails idly, waiting for Eric to speak.

It wasn't until Eric caught sight of a tail flicking in his periphery that he noticed the other being in the room with them. He wasn't going to be alone with Lord Aimar after all, it seemed. Seated next to Aimar was someone who somewhat resembled Hinni, but only in the sense that they looked more like nature than a being.

This being nestled in the chair had jagged charcoal stone skin with four horns jutting from their temples. Their eyes looked like they were made from minerals or stone as well, glinting a darker color than their skin. A tail flicked around them, with what looked like scales made out of pebbles. It reminded Eric of a whip. He cleared his throat.

"Good afternoon, my lord," he managed in a polite tone. "I believe you requested my presence for this meeting today?"

Aimar's white eyes honed in on Eric's lips and a smile spread on his lips, making Eric uneasy and enraged all at once. "Hello, Marked One." Eric's title hung on Aimar's tongue as he halted fiddling with his razor-sharp nails. "It's always a pleasure to discuss court affairs with the blessed one. Even if he comes from the severed world." He gestured to the being next to him as Eric found his seat across from Aimar. "This is Creusa. She's a merchant nymph."

Understanding struck Eric across the face. Seeing a nymph for the first time, many things seemed to fall in place at once. The way nymphs were treated throughout Fae history as slaves, and even presently, as lower than low-born Fae. He also understood the way they were described by Cithrel.

As Eric looked at Creusa, he also knew why Cithrel described them the way he did. The nymph flashed her mineral gaze at Eric, with a look that was like a storm, a force of nature. The nymphs were chaotic beings.

"A human," Creusa mused, her voice like rocks scraping against each other. "I haven't seen one in so long, I forgot what your kind looked like."

Eric halted at the way she said human, without the usual venom, and gave her a kind smile. "I'm pleased to meet you, Creusa. There's no need to address me by title. You may call me Eric Becker. This is my first time meeting a nymph, so it looks like we're in a similar situation." He flicked his gaze over at Aimar, the sincerity in his voice vanishing. "And what affairs might you be here for, Lord Aimar?"

Aimar licked his teeth, before gesturing across from him. "Did your little servant tree not inform you?"

"As I have no servant, nor a 'little tree,' I was not informed." He eyed the dumpster of a Fae noble before he added dryly, "So perhaps *you* could get to the point."

In between them, Creusa chuckled. She clearly enjoyed the tension in the room. "I'm a merchant, Eric Becker. I deal with Lord Aimar frequently, most often regarding rare flora and fauna within the mountains. The lord informed me recently that someone blessed by the aether, who had extensive knowledge of plant life, lived within the Alonethan palace. So I requested your audience in regards to the Imperial Gardens."

Eric blinked, surprised by the elegant way this rock nymph suddenly carried herself. Then he cursed himself—he'd never met a nymph before, so what could he possibly know? "I'm flattered you sought me out, Creusa, but I'm unsure why you chose me specifically. I was given a title, but I'm not in charge of the Imperial Gardens."

He did his best to resist frowning at her, but he was confused why the empress had approved this meeting. What could she be after? He didn't have time to think, because Lord Aimar answered.

"I told her that I was your previous master, and that you could be trusted with knowledge of flora." He flashed a knowing grin at Eric, who paled. "I can personally say you were one of my fastest learners."

The statement might as well have been a whip snapping across his back for the look of pure pleasure that crossed Aimar's face. Eric couldn't help but go entirely still at the comment. His hands squeezed together in his lap, fighting to stay calm and not react. To his side, he felt the nymph's eyes on him, boring holes in his forehead.

This whole thing now felt like a test from the empress, to see if he had a breaking point, and if this was it. His mind cursed for a short eternity as he collected himself, not wanting to give Aimar any more satisfaction. Creusa's gaze was still intently on him, waiting for his reply. His own eyes roved up to meet the whitened eyes of that masochist.

"Faster than you thought imaginable," Eric said and cocked his head to the side with a smile. "Since your slave was blessed by the aether and brought under the empress's personal wing. Are you in the empress's favor,

my lord? You're certainly not in the crown prince's, or the prince commander's."

This time, the smile fell from Aimar's face. His features threatened to contort into a look of fury. Eric watched with quiet satisfaction as he saw a grin spread across Creusa's face.

"It sounds like you're very qualified to be my audience then, Eric Becker." Her mineral gaze glinted.

After that, Aimar was forced to divert his anger as Creusa dove into business. As it turned out, the mountain that Creusa was from was home to several extremely rare plants and some that Eric never knew existed. The kind of rarity that Eric was sure Nithroel would love to have in her gardens.

Nymphs were very fond of trading and were also bound to the same laws of honesty as the Fae were, so it made discussions easy enough for Eric. He never forgot how much of a luxury it was in this world to be able to lie at will. Though, he never felt the need to with Creusa. She was intense and wild, but by the end of their meeting, she had grown on him. It bewildered him why the nymphs would be treated almost as poorly as humans were by the Fae.

Creusa rose to take Eric's hand in hers, the stone scraping at his skin but he didn't flinch. "It has been intriguing to meet and speak with you, Eric Becker. I look forward to seeing you in the future."

He returned her maniacal smile with one of his own. As soon as she let go of his hand, though, she vanished. One second Creusa was holding his hand, the next it was just Eric and Aimar alone in a room together.

A sickening smile spread across his old master's face. "You did well, Marked One." Eric was used to being addressed by his new title, but coming from him, it felt like acid on his skin. "Though I can't help but notice you look quite tired these days. I'm sure it's nothing our friend Creusa would notice, but I wonder if you're having trouble sleeping lately."

Eric froze, wiping as much emotion from his face as possible. He couldn't react, not now. Not when it was just the two of them. He cleared his throat, loud enough that Sir Malor could hear him through the heavy wooden door. He didn't take his eyes off Aimar.

"I'm unsure how my sleeping habits relate to any court matters whatsoever, Lord Aimar." He let out a shallow breath, readying himself to leave. "If there are no more matters to discuss, I'll be on my way."

On cue, the door swung open and his glowing-eyed protector was there at his side. He turned to leave when that sinister voice refused to be quiet. "Perhaps you've been reading too much, Marked One," Lord Aimar called over Eric's shoulder. "Or perhaps all that training you've been doing with yet *another* prince is proving difficult for you."

Eric stopped, unable to help himself. That comment severed a long-since fraying nerve. The Fae noble continued, a new pleased edge to his voice. "I wonder how much more you can possibly take. Surely the human body can only endure so much. After all, you shouldn't even have all that aether in the first place."

Eric paused, only for a second, then continued out of the room. He managed to keep it together until he turned the corner to another hall. A flurry of curses left his mouth then as he stormed down the palace halls, a look of fury on his face. No Fae even dared to look Eric's way right now with the state he was in. His shadows trailed behind him longer and darker than normal, a sinister edge to them.

That son of a bitch was watching Eric, he had to be. He was the other Fae spying on him. The empress had to know about the lord's actions, but she didn't act on them—or did she? It wasn't that his training sessions with Elasuin were private, nor was his going to the library, but he was almost alone in the library that day. There were only a few ways Aimar could know about Eric's health to make those pointed comments.

Saelihn's words might as well have been haunting him, for the amount he heard them repeated in his head. *Trust no one*. He had never trusted Aimar, and now he had even more reason to be suspicious of him.

More than that, his words lingered in his mind, all the more painful after what he'd read in the library earlier. His stomping slowed as his chest beat painfully, enough to catch his breath in his throat. Color began to fade from the edges of his periphery.

How much was Aimar able to find out about him? What else could he possibly know? Another question bubbled to the surface, unwelcome. Could he be behind Archduke Laen's death?

He leaned against the palace wall, biting the inside of his cheek. Not that Aimar didn't have the disposition, he was a monster, but he was only a lord. He didn't have the kind of aether or influence someone would need to kill an elder Fae noble like the archduke. Eric's face twisted then.

But that didn't mean he didn't have connections to someone powerful enough. He lifted his head, suddenly paranoid that he was being watched right then and scanned around him. The world surrounding him dulled, the shadows in his vision lingering. When he was sure he was alone, he rushed to get back to his private living quarters. It felt like his only safe haven these days.

When he slammed the door shut behind him, he was shocked to see Cithrel there. He didn't miss the pinked scars that marked his arms now after the attack on the archduke's territory. He was lounging in the sunken seating area, in very thin-looking clothes and his hair down, reading a book. It was one of the books Eric had borrowed from the library. He tilted his head, surprised for some reason that Cithrel was reading.

A shred of his dignity hoped it was because the prince was in fact, interested in him, to some degree. Eric shook his head, not wanting to waste this opportunity to talk to Cithrel. He needed to hear what Eric had to say. He had to listen to everything about Lord Aimar. If there was a chance of finding the traitor, the prince commander had to hear him out.

"We need to talk." Eric's chest moved rapidly as he spoke, full of adrenaline. "It can't wait."

Cithrel lifted his gaze from his book to look at Eric. The prince's posture went rigid a second later, blue eyes thinning to slits. There must have been something significant in the way Eric looked then because Cithrel jerked his chin at Malor once. A second later, the door clicked shut behind Eric and they were alone.

"What can't wait?" he said flatly, withdrawing himself from the couch. There was a cryptic expression on his face that Eric couldn't decipher, but he soldiered on.

"Lord Aimar is up to something." Before the fourth prince could dismiss him, his words came fast. "He knew things about me that no one was supposed to know. He's been spying on me while you were gone."

The book slipped through his fingers and clattered to the floor. He had Cithrel's undivided attention now. "What did he say?"

"He knew about my...." Eric paused, paling. He didn't want to confess that he wasn't sleeping well lately, not to the one who was the cause of it. "About my visits to the library. About the Unseen section."

Cithrel was staring intently, a threatening snarl on his lips. Eric forgot what he was saying for a second, lost in the attractive way the prince's lips pulled back to show his teeth. Then he blinked several times and focused.

"He knew about my lessons with Elasuin too. And, and the complication with the Marking."

The fourth prince was wide-eyed now. The look on his face made it clear Eric had just told him something even *he* was unaware of. The anger that formed on Cithrel's face made Eric regret saying anything for a split second. Then he reminded himself that the blond-haired prince he pined after didn't give him a chance to tell him about his Marking. He swallowed down the rising heat in his chest.

"Complications?" The prince's voice was calm now, quiet in the eye of the storm.

"Yes," Eric croaked. All of his nerves tingled, making him feel uneasy in his own skin.

Cithrel stepped closer and took Eric by the arms. It was sudden but he didn't grab him hard enough to be painful. The calluses on his hands sent a shiver down Eric's spine—he'd dreamed about his touch for so long. He felt guilty for getting a thrill from his touch, in this situation. His eyes widened, taking in every inch of the prince, the hard line to his jaw, the softened shine to his stare. He was focused on Eric and only Eric.

"What happened while I was gone?"

Cithrel's voice was laced with unease, with almost a look of worry in his eyes. Eric stared back at him. It was worry for Eric. Color returned to his cheeks at the thought. He tried to look away but Cithrel's fingers caught his chin and jerked his face back, forcing Eric to meet his eyes.

"What happened?" he asked again, his voice softer. He paused, then finally, "Please. Tell me, Eric."

"I read what happened to the duke, Ilphas Raxidor. I'm sure you know he was the previous Marked One. I read what happened to him—and what's happening to me now that I have this Marking." Eric looked down at his forearm, fighting to ignore the hammering in his chest and the heat that threatened to melt his insides the longer he was this close to Cithrel.

He'd avoided talking about Ilphas and the Marking, about thinking about it all, because when he did, it reminded him he was sprinting closer to

his own death every single day. He swallowed back the painful lump in his throat.

"I know that it's eating away at me, faster than normal because I'm human."

The breath that Cithrel let out was heavy and shuddering, enough that it jarred Eric. He fell silent again, waiting for the prince to say something. A flurry of emotions warred for dominance on Cithrel's face and between anger, frustration, worry, and several others, it was frustration that won out.

"Why?" he asked, so quiet Eric thought he misheard.

Eric's face flushed, anger lighting in his own belly. Then he threw his arms out, shaking off Cithrel's touch. "Why what? Why didn't I tell you sooner? It was kind of hard when you wouldn't be in the same room with me since you got back." Eric knew he should stop talking, and not have this conversation, but he was so angry, and tired of it all, that the words kept pouring out of him. "Or did you mean why did a *human* like me end up with the Marking in the first place? Or why did you get stuck having to protect me until this aether kills me?"

He threw his hands in the air, his chest heaving, feeling like an angry child. But he couldn't stop himself. Eric was shouting now. "Well? Which one is it, Cithrel?"

The prince had gone still, his arms at his side as he stared back at Eric. His expression was unreadable, Eric's panting the only sound. The longer the silence dragged on, the more Eric regretted what he had just done. It felt like a pathetic tantrum now that he stood here, fuming. Still, he kept his chin up even as his cheeks had gone well past crimson.

"Why," Cithrel finally continued, "do you do this to me?"

Eric's lips parted, stunned. "What?"

The prince continued as if he didn't speak. "Why do you consume my thoughts and compel me to look over my shoulder for you every waking minute? Why do you make me furious whenever you mention that filth's name?"

Did he mean Aimar? Eric's heart thumped wildly in his chest. His breath caught in his throat at the prince's outburst.

"Why can't I stop worrying about you? What is it about you that frustrates me to no end like this?"

Eric's mouth hung open as he stared at Cithrel, shocked by the sudden confession that he wasn't the only one who felt the tension between the two of them. His face and body burned.

"Why do I want you so much?" Cithrel finished, his chest falling. It was as if letting those words out had taken a burden from his shoulders.

Neither one of them took their eyes off each other. A tiny fragment of his mind still roared to him that this wouldn't end well, that it couldn't end well, if he didn't stop where this was headed now. But for all the crying of that part of his brain, the rest of him was electrified, *alive* with hunger for Cithrel.

Everything that the prince said was a truth he must have guarded up until now. How long had he kept all these thoughts to himself? How long did he feel this way? They had both been ignoring the tension, the *want*, for each other for long enough and now things had gotten so out of control, giving into this desire felt like the least destructive thing he could do now.

Cithrel moved and then his hands held Eric's face, fingers splayed around his jawline. Cithrel's thumb grazed Eric's cheek. "I don't want to be apart from you. I don't want to watch you from afar anymore. You've enraptured me, Eric."

Eric breathed in Cithrel's scent, an intoxicating citrus breeze, and then kissed him.

Chapter Twenty

Eric moved first, but he was still surprised by how soft Cithrel's lips were. He was breathing in spring as the prince lightly nipped Eric's lip. He let out a quiet moan, hungry for more. All he could think about was wanting to be touched by every inch of Cithrel. He couldn't ignore it anymore, especially not after everything Cithrel had just admitted to.

The prince stilled under Eric's touch, his muscles going rigid. "I'm sorry," Eric blurted. They last time they were this intimate, Eric had tried to kill him.

"It's—it's fine." He swallowed after a shaking exhale. "Don't stop."

A strand of Cithrel's hair grazed Eric's cheek. The kisses changed after that, deepened, growing more intense with each second. Cithrel's tongue licked every inch of him with heat, igniting Eric with its flame. Cithrel groaned between breaths as he pressed his body closer to Eric. Eric felt himself stiffen as Cithrel's length ground against him.

Before Eric could think through how badly he wanted the prince, Cithrel's scarred arms wrapped around Eric, bringing him against the prince's chest. Warmth radiated off of Cithrel, as if he could melt Eric from a simple touch. With their bodies pressed tight, he felt the prince's heart racing and when he looked up he saw the barely held back hunger in the prince's eyes along with the question in them. He looked at Eric, as if waiting for a sign that he should keep going, or if Eric was going to attack him again. But there wasn't any anger in Eric's hazel eyes as they warmed, gazing at Cithrel. That look of vulnerability, of wanting that mirrored his own, was enough to undo Eric.

"Don't stop," he panted.

Then his lips were on Cithrel's, harder, hungrier this time. His hands were frantic as they knotted into the prince's loose blond strands. A soft growl escaped the prince's lips as he explored Eric's mouth. They were both hard, their breaths moving faster as Cithrel thumbed Eric's face, then the corners of his mouth, tracing his lips. Eric couldn't think straight, except for the burning in his body that wanted, needed more of Cithrel.

"Go to the bed." The prince breathed into Eric's ear, his voice intoxicating. "I won't stop this time."

Eric's hands were frantic as he pulled at the prince's shirt, his fingers grazing along Cithrel's muscles and smooth skin. His abdomen muscles clenched tight with every sensation that rolled through him feeling the Fae. Cithrel panted in his ear as he nibbled Eric's lobe, pausing long enough for Eric to take his shirt completely off.

He took in every inch of Cithrel's muscles, lingering a little too long since when his eyes met the prince's again, there was a menacing crook to his mouth. It was a whole new side of Cithrel, seeing him so unrestrained and confident. It only aroused Eric even more and he thought he might tear the clothing off the Fae's back to get at him.

"Are you done looking?" The prince licked his lips, his husky voice made Eric burn deep down with each syllable.

As soon as his fingertips left Cithrel's cool marble skin, the prince moved faster than he could register and a second later his own shirt was gone, leaving his lean frame, spotted with freckles, bare. For a moment, he froze, realizing that all the scars that marred his body, even the garish ones on his back, were now exposed.

"Wait." Eric's voice dropped, trembling a little. He didn't want Cithrel to see his body like this in plain view, see how torn to shreds it was, how abused it was. Most of all, he didn't want to see the look of disgust on Cithrel's face at the sight of Eric.

"I've thought about this moment for too long to wait." Cithrel's voice was in his ear again as his hands slid down Eric's shoulders and the length of his back.

His fingers ran across each jagged edge of the innumerable pinked scars there. Eric turned to look at Cithrel, studying the bottomless blue for any sign or hint of aversion, but there was none.

There was a tenderness. The glint in Cithrel's eye shone even brighter, like he was losing a battle of willpower. He wanted Eric and it didn't matter to the prince how damaged Eric was on the outside. Eric felt his heart twinge along with lower down, pulsing, desperate need for more of Cithrel's touch.

"Shit," was all Eric could manage to say, lost in his own jumbled thoughts and emotions. Eric found the prince's mouth again, this time biting down on his lower lip, hard enough to hear Cithrel groan. He kissed him

harder, faster. Cithrel's trailed down Eric's back to his ass, forcing Eric to straddle him.

Eric shivered into the prince, feeling how much he wanted this. Their chests heaved as he wrapped his arms around Cithrel's neck, knotting his fingers into his hair. They didn't stop kissing, letting themselves get lost in the headiness. When it deepened and grew more feverish, Cithrel carried them to the bed, ready to claim what they both wanted.

Eric writhed against Cithrel's bare chest, kissing his jawline, his throat, and nibbling at his pointed ears. When he caught Cithrel eyeing him, he flashed an impish smile before biting the nape of his neck in reply. He had the satisfaction of feeling Cithrel stiffen at his touch. A moment later and Eric was splayed on the bed, his body exposed.

How many times had he imagined this? He lost count of the dizzying fantasies he craved. Except now this wasn't a dream, this was happening. The thoughts that had plagued his mind last time he was with Cithrel had gone silent, leaving him with his base desires. His Marking remained dormant. Eric sighed, arching his back without taking his eyes off Cithrel. But it was the prince who stood over him now, his bright eyes were heavy and hooded. His golden hair fell around his features but Eric saw how flushed he was, saw the clenched fists. Cithrel was waiting for Eric to make the first move, but he was struggling.

"I'm at my limit, Eric," he said, his voice rough. "But—" The words died on Cithrel's lips.

Without hesitation, Eric pulled himself up on the bed and licked Cithrel, enjoying the sensation as his muscles tensed in response, his own hunger stirring. He tasted almost sweet as he gripped the prince at his base with both hands. He watched as Cithrel's cock twitched under his touch.

"Tell me what you want." He looked up at the prince through his lashes, his tongue a breath away from Cithrel's tip.

The prince gazed down at Eric before reaching and grabbing a fistful of Eric's brown curls. Holy shit, he was at the edge of his own self-control. The sting of his hair being pulled was more pleasure than pain and Eric swallowed. He didn't look away from Cithrel, though, waiting for his answer. He wanted to devour the prince, but he was going to make sure Cithrel would never forget it.

"Taste me," Cithrel commanded in a low voice. "Taste all of me."

Eric couldn't resist anymore and tasted Cithrel before taking in his length until he felt it press against the back of his throat. He heard another satisfying groan come from the prince as he sucked. Hands moved with his mouth in an entrancing and almost torturously slow rhythm. He watched the prince's jaw flex, grinding his teeth together as he watched Eric move.

Then, as Eric's tongue played with the prince's tip, his hands began to pump Cithrel faster. The prince shivered, running his hands through Eric's curls, watching him with heavy eyes. Then he heard Cithrel's breathing coming faster through gritted teeth.

The blues of his eyes darkened as the Fae let himself be intoxicated by Eric's mouth. It was hard not to be pleased with how good Eric made him feel. Still, he wanted more. Tasting him wasn't enough; he wanted Cithrel inside of him. He wanted Cithrel to wreck him.

A smile spread on his lips as he looked up at that familiar angel-faced Fae, who was so close to being completely undone, saliva dripping from the edges of his lips. Eric moved fast then, his tongue lashing at Cithrel as his hands pumped harder and faster. Cithrel didn't fight the deep moan that came from him as he exploded warmth into Eric's mouth. All of Cithrel's muscles tensed and shuddered as Eric swallowed.

Eric pulled away and let Cithrel watch as his throat bobbed. A thin tendril of white dripped from the corner of his mouth. When he looked over at Cithrel, he could see it in his eyes that whatever he was seeing from Eric only made him want more. Even though the prince had just come, he was already beginning to stir again, not yet satisfied.

The stamina of the Fae was seemingly endless. With heavy steps, Cithrel moved until he was above Eric, blond hair falling around his face. The smell of citrus assaulted Eric's senses and he breathed deep. Looking up at him, Eric's lips parted. Neither one of them spoke for a moment, breathing the other one in.

"Tell me what else you want," Eric said, breathless, giving in to his own hunger.

His thumb ran along Cithrel's bottom lip before Eric traced his throat and chest, then down, stopping at his tantalizing pelvic muscle. He couldn't pretend that he didn't want the Fae prince anymore. From the way Cithrel's hands explored Eric's body, he was done pretending, too.

"All I want is you." Cithrel growled into Eric's ear. "Once won't be enough. I don't know how long it will be until I'm sated."

Christ, Eric couldn't control the shiver of anticipation that ran through him. He didn't care that it was clearly a warning. His body twitched as he felt himself flush.

Without looking away from Eric, Cithrel slid two of his fingers into his mouth and started sucking on them. Eric watched as he wetted them with his saliva, making him tremble in anticipation. He felt his nipples harden the longer he watched Cithrel taunt him.

It wasn't until the prince leaned forward, enough that he cast a shadow over Eric entirely, that his two fingers dipped between Eric's legs and one pushed inside him. His breath hitched as his back arched.

He let out a long sigh of pleasure. He couldn't remember the last time he was touched the way he wanted. It was nothing and everything to him as ecstasy began to devour his senses. He didn't give a damn if it never ended. He didn't want it to.

A wicked smile ran across Cithrel's features as he watched Eric's body react to his touch. Slowly, he swirled his finger inside Eric, watching his facial expression contort into different forms of rapture.

"Oh god," Eric panted. "More."

It was too much for Eric to take without being touched anywhere else. One hand clawed at the Fae's bare chest while his other slid down his stomach and he began to jerk himself off. Before he could, though, a firm, calloused hand caught Eric's and stopped him from touching his throbbing body.

"I'll give you more," the prince purred.

There was a hungry glint in his eyes, one that made Eric's chest squeeze. He couldn't count the number of times he'd imagined Cithrel sucking him, going down on him, ravishing him. Now that he was watching the real thing, it was like nothing he could have pictured, or possibly felt.

His tongue was warm and wet as he played with Eric's tip, all the while, his finger inside Eric never stopped. Eric felt heady from the feeling of having Cithrel fingering him and sucking him off. He'd never felt this good in his life before, never been allowed to feel this much with someone. God, it was driving him crazy.

Then, Cithrel slid his second finger inside Eric's ass, stretching him and doubling the pleasure. Eric bit down on his lip, probably hard enough to draw blood but he didn't notice or care. It was all he could do not to come right now. He knew he couldn't last much longer, not when he was being touched like this.

"I'm about to come," Eric panted, his breath hot in Cithrel's face as his mouth worked on Eric's length.

His breathy words were all Cithrel needed to hear. Picking up his pace, his mouth and fingers began to move faster. Eric gripped at the sheets around him, moaning Cithrel's name and begging him not to stop what he was doing. He'd never felt this good before, never had this kind of chemistry with someone else, to be completely satisfied from someone's touch.

Then his orgasm came crashing down on him as he pumped his hips and came, exploding into Cithrel's mouth. To his surprise and delight, Cithrel swallowed all of him, drinking him in as he pulsed on Cithrel's lips.

The Fae prince moved to sit back, running his index finger over his lips, wiping his mouth clean. Every muscle in his body was rigid, including his own cock. Eric stared at the prince, panting to catch his breath.

He swore under his breath, his head falling back against the bed, silently begging to be fucked by Cithrel. He was still hungry for more, or closer to starving. Even after that crushing orgasm, he was stirring again, wanting Cithrel's cock inside him, filling him.

Whether it was his body, or something else, Eric moved without thinking. His hand wrapped around Cithrel's wrist, keeping him straddled over top Eric.

"Please," Eric begged, his words husky. "Please fuck me."

Cithrel's eyes grew heavy, making it clear he wanted what Eric did just as badly. "I won't be gentle with you."

Eric ignored the challenge in the prince's words. "I don't want you to be."

A heartbeat later, Cithrel's fingers dug into Eric's bare thighs, thumbing across the scars that dragged along Eric's skin. Then they were pulled from the bed and Eric was sprawled out on the floor, underneath all of Cithrel's weight.

His breath caught, his hips grinding up on instinct when he felt the weight of Cithrel's tip pushing against Eric's ass. Eric cried out as Cithrel entered him, stretching him with his girth. He'd never felt so good and so full, and this was just the prince's tip.

"Don't stop," Eric pleaded, his hands clawing up Cithrel's arms.

Cithrel spread Eric's legs further apart, thrusting his hips so that Eric could take in all of him.

He let out a groan that vibrated to his core as he pushed into Eric. "You're so tight."

Eric's nails dug into Cithrel's arms the more the prince pushed into him. His mind went blank as he was filled with satisfaction. "Oh god, Cithrel."

He didn't know how much he cried out the Fae's name and how much was in his thoughts but he couldn't stop himself. Cithrel moved so goddamn perfect inside him he felt his own cock twitching and throbbing as Cithrel thrust into him, faster and faster.

"Fuck, Eric," he said through gritted teeth. "You drive me crazy."

Then his hands were off Eric's hips and the prince's fingers dug into the wood flooring they were fucking on. The sound of wood splintering broke Eric from his sex haze. He looked over to see that Cithrel's nails had dug into the flooring and the wood itself was destroyed. It sent a thrill down Eric's spine and his hips thrust further into Cithrel, his body wanting to possess every inch of the feeling.

Cithrel groaned and swore as his face contorted, his muscles tightening in response. Then his movements grew faster, hungrier, desperate for release. Eric gripped Cithrel's forearms as he plunged into Eric deeper and harder, without mercy.

The feeling was on the edge of pain and pleasure, but neither one of them would stop. They both wanted this so badly, they both had thought about this for so long. Then, Cithrel roared as he came inside Eric, his cock pulsating inside Eric's ass.

It was all Eric could do to keep himself together as he came on his own, spurting his release onto his own stomach. Cithrel's head hung low as he held himself up over Eric's body, not letting his full weight fall on Eric.

Up until now, all Eric had been able to see and hear was Cithrel and his breathing, but now that they had both fallen silent the rest of the world was

slowly coming back into focus. The sound of the fireplace crackled as the smell of citrus and sweat hung in the air.

Eric was brought back to reality when Cithrel shifted, pulling out of Eric and tilting his head back. Part of him wilted, feeling Cithrel moving away from him, not ready for it to be over yet. Still, somehow he felt insatiable. It was an entirely different feeling than he was used to after his time in Alonetha.

Now, he watched Cithrel straddling him, studied the line of his throat, his jaw, as the prince took deep steadying breaths. Seeing the smooth lines of his skin was too tantalizing, and without a second thought, he reached out and ran his fingers down Cithrel's jaw, his throat, and along his chest and abdomen.

He felt Cithrel still above him at Eric's touch. When he tilted his head back down to look at Eric, bottomless blue eyes seemed to gaze back at him, swallowing him whole. Eric couldn't help himself, so he kept moving his fingertips, tracing his way down to Cithrel's length.

Just before he could reach him, though, Cithrel's hand darted out and caught Eric's. A breath later, both of Eric's hands were pinned above his head and pressed against the floor under Cithrel's iron grip. The prince leaned in, close enough that his loose hair tickled Eric's bare skin.

"I think I've let you have what you want," Cithrel purred into Eric's ear. "Now it's my turn."

Eric went still at his words, every nerve ending in his body singing. This was completely different than when he served Aimar. Cithrel had him pinned and completely at his mercy, but he had never felt so free. He'd never wanted someone this badly.

After so many years of not being allowed to feel what he wanted or have his own desires, it was incredibly overwhelming to be free to feel again. His throat tightened as he swallowed down the rising emotions.

"I'm not nearly satisfied," Eric's own hoarse voice replied.

The rustling of the great trees surrounding the palace was the first thing Eric heard in the morning. He was slow waking up, realizing that somehow they'd ended up back on the bed again. That or Cithrel had carried him back to bed.

Eric felt his cheeks flush a little at the thought of something so intimate, and then felt his face heat entirely when he remembered *everything* they did

last night. Suddenly feeling too hot in this bed with a very naked and shockingly beautiful Fae prince, Eric moved to sit up, only to have a jolt of pain run down his back.

Collapsing back onto the soft bedding, he realized exactly how much they did last night and how rough they were. He pressed his palms against his eyes, having no idea how he was supposed to manage training with Rhistel and Elasuin when it hurt just to sit up.

He didn't have long to sulk in his silent dread, though, when several raps against the bedroom door broke the serenity of morning air. Cithrel stirred immediately beside Eric, his back muscles flexing as he woke.

Eric had to forcibly drag his eyes away from the sight. After their night together, a long night, he still couldn't have enough of the Prince of Blades. A shuddering thought ran through him and froze him in place.

What if last night was a mistake for Cithrel? What if what they did was never going to happen again? Whatever they were after their night together, Eric didn't want that to stop. The rapid thoughts only went to darker places in his mind as he quietly unravelled.

The roaring thoughts in his mind stilled when he felt the warm and familiar touch of Cithrel's calloused palm press against Eric's cheek. It felt good to lean into the touch. He looked over to see Cithrel gazing back at him with an impossibly unguarded and soft expression. The tightness in his chest contorted with a flurry of emotions.

"Good morning, Eric." Those blue eyes gleamed in the sunlight.

"Morning," he rasped.

When the knocking sounded off again, they were both pulled back to reality. Eric did his best not to look so sad when Cithrel's hand fell away from him. He watched as the prince's eyes grew cold and detached again, his mask as a Commander for the Imperial Army back in place. Seeing that happen before his eyes made Eric realize that the intimacy they shared was gone, no more than a far-off memory.

Cithrel padded over to the door, with no clothing other than the sheet he wrapped around himself, and answered the door. Sir Elyion stood on the other side of the door, his calm expression morphing into confusion. Then he spotted Eric naked in the bed across the room, and his expression turned to one of barely concealed disgust.

Out of instinct or self-preservation, Eric pulled the bedding up to cover himself. If he could have disappeared in that moment, he would have. One of Cithrel's trusted Fae warriors had just seen the countless scars on Eric's mutilated body. His freckles stood out even more as he paled, unable to meet Sir Elyion's eyes. Whatever feelings that washed away his self-loathing were long gone now.

"What is it?" Cithrel asked. He shifted to obscure Elyion's view of the bedroom.

Elyion cleared his throat and straightened in front of his commander. "Your presence has been requested by the empress." His gaze flicked back to Eric for a second and then down to the claw marks in the wood flooring as he paused. His jaw hardened. "Just you, Prince Commander."

"Understood." Cithrel's voice iced over at the mention of his mother, his back going rigid.

Eric hadn't imagined his tone either, because Sir Elyion flinched. When the prince turned to meet Eric's gaze, he must have seen the question that hung there because he looked away quickly in an effort to avoid any discussion.

"If he hasn't already been summoned," Cithrel called over his shoulder, drawing Sir Elyion's attention again, "send for Elasuin as well."

A small smile crept across Eric's lips. It was more than likely to discuss the traitor in the empire. But Eric wondered if maybe, just maybe, Cithrel did it to spare him from his training session with Elasuin.

"Of course, Prince Commander." Sir Elyion dipped his head before he vanished down the hallway.

Eric chewed on his lip as he watched Cithrel dress himself in the silence. They had never actually talked about Lord Aimar spying on him last night, since they were distracted. In the wake of the night, though, dawning realization overcame Eric.

First, outsiders kept pillaging and raiding the land on the perimeter of the Alonethan Empire. Then Archduke Laen's land was ravaged, and the elder Fae noble was slaughtered. Whoever the traitor was in the palace, Laen must have discovered something to warrant his murder. The empress must know something.

Eric gnawed on his lip. The Fae were fairly heartless by nature, but he couldn't think of many Fae more powerful than the archduke who could

have killed him, or that the archduke would have feared. That left only the Imperial Family.

"Say it, Eric," Cithrel sighed. The air shimmered and then Cithrel stood in his Commander's armor, the scent of citrus and spring in the air. "I can feel your thoughts prodding at me from across the room."

Eric shifted in bed, wincing at the pain in his back. "It's about the archduke, isn't it? They're not just skirmishes at the border, are they?"

Cithrel squared his shoulders, his features carefully arranged into a neutral expression. That mask Eric hated was firmly in place. "I'll know when I get there."

His reluctance to be honest with Eric irked him. Maybe last night really was just a one-time thing. So he didn't feel bad about what he said next. "Will you tell the empress about Lord Aimar?" Satisfied at the grimace from Cithrel, he added, "He's been spying on me."

The look of pure venom and barely contained fury told Eric he had hit his mark. Good. "We'll talk about *that* later."

Eric's blood went cold. He didn't believe Eric. Otherwise, the prince would have at least agreed to bring it up to the empress. Cithrel didn't trust him. No, he didn't trust a human.

"Oh." The questions that bubbled in his mind went dead.

He just wanted Cithrel to leave. He'd been an idiot for thinking whatever they did last night meant anything, that everything Cithrel said might have changed something between them. But it didn't. Cithrel was still Fae, and royalty, and Eric was just a human.

"Eric," Cithrel started, his voice thick, but Eric cut him off.

"You don't want to keep the empress waiting." He did his best to pin a thin smile on his face.

The room filled with a murderous silence as neither one of them spoke. Eric watched Cithrel's knuckles whiten as his hands tightened into fists. A moment later, his hands relaxed and he turned his back to Eric.

Eric squared his jaw, willing himself to keep it together, even if he was naked in bed from last night. He watched as Cithrel strode to leave and paused, his hand wrapped around the edge of the door.

"We will talk later."

The way Cithrel said those words made it seem less like a threat and more like he was reassuring himself. Or asking Eric to wait until he was

back.

Eric waited until he heard the sound of the far-off door closing before he threw his pillow at the door. His face fell into his hands again and he realized he'd just made a gigantic fucking mistake.

Chapter Twenty-One

The air was tinged with the scent of blood and iron as he stood on the battlefield. Black and gold Fae blood splattered his armor. A fetid black crown hovered above his head as he strode towards the onslaught of Fae that charged towards him. There was no hesitation in his veins as he summoned a wave of midnight thorns that burst through the earth and consumed his attackers.

Some were dragged under; others were ripped to pieces by the thorns. A few put up a fight with their own magic, slashing and burning the thorns away, but they didn't stop coming. Eventually Eric's relentless assault overwhelmed them. He murdered all Fae in his path without a single regret.

He was going to kill them all and he would enjoy it.

With slow and sure steps, Eric strode past the bodies that littered the ground around him. He felt like a god among the Fae soldiers that laid dead at his feet. This was his power now. A slow smile tugged at his lips as he walked through the gray and torn battlefield.

Abruptly, he stopped dead in his tracks. Pain flashed in his stomach. Confused, his eyes fell to his chest where his own thorns had eviscerated him. The pain spread throughout his body as his face crumpled in disbelief and agony.

Eric fell to his knees, clutching at the wound that refused to stop bleeding. What was happening? His hands were soaked in a deep scarlet just as a shadow looked over him. No. This couldn't be possible, he was a deity, he couldn't die like this. Dazed and dying, he was slow to look up at the shadow, only for his face to contort in horror.

The fallen emperor Volodar stood over him, his face partially cloaked in the same ominous gray shadows. It wasn't Eric's thorns that had impaled him, but the emperor's. Now Volodar looked down at Eric with nothing but aversion.

"Lay in rot with those you murdered without mercy," he snarled.

Then Volodar raised his hand like a guillotine ready to fall. Eric knew he was about to die, but his entire body froze. He couldn't move at all.

No, this couldn't be happening. He had to move, had to run, had to scream for help. He had to do something, anything. Where was Cithrel?

Where was he right now and how could this all be happening to him?

Then Volodar's hand fell and the thorns inside Eric's body burst forth in a frenzy, desperate to get outside of his body. The sound of his own skin tearing muddled with the rush of blood that filled his ears as Eric screamed.

Eric jerked awake, gasping for air as sweat dropped down his face and neck. Clutching at his chest, he gagged at the memory of himself torn to pieces in his mind. Still disoriented, he looked around the room, panicked that he might find the emperor ready to kill him. A scream tore through his chest as the nightmare refused to leave him.

Sunlight filtering in through the windows and cascading across the wood floors greeted his cries of terror. A breath later, Malor appeared in the bedroom, blade drawn and ready to attack.

Eric's breath came frantic and ragged, unable to suck the air into his lungs fast enough. Once he could think again, Eric ran a shaking hand through his hair. He struggled to reason that it was just a nightmare and not real.

Except it felt so incredibly real. The smell of dirt and blood and flesh still filled his nostrils. He fought back the bile that rose in his throat and closed his eyes again. "It wasn't real."

He patted himself down again, a reassurance that every piece of him remained intact. The look in Volodar's eyes felt more like a warning than a fevered nightmare. An unmovable feeling in his gut told him that nightmare meant something else, and that thought was what truly terrified him.

"Marked One."

Malor's voice cut through Eric's frantic thoughts and his head snapped up to look at the Fae knight. He blinked back the images in his mind before he caught his breath.

"Yes, Sir Malor?"

Malor's mouth thinned to form an even harder line than it usually did. "Shall I call for the princess?"

"That's not necessary." Eric swallowed the burn of bile again. "I'm fine. I think I just need some fresh air." The way Malor stared down at him like an insect with a broken wing made him add, "I should get dressed. If you'll excuse me."

He kept his eyes on him, challenging him to question Eric further, but Malor didn't. Malor's luminescent green eyes dulled. The knight's gaze

made him feel small, like a child caught in a lie, but after he held Eric's shaking gaze a moment longer, eventually he turned and left Eric on his own.

Bite marks and bruises marked his skin where his scars didn't. He found his hands traced his bare body, turning red when he spotted exactly where the bruises were that brushed his skin. Remembering how Cithrel had been anything but gentle with Eric last night sent a little shiver of joy down his spine.

At least, until he remembered the argument they got into before the prince left him alone in bed. Eric's hand fell away from the prince's marks on his body, leaving his hand to hang limp at his own sides.

As Eric went through the motions of getting dressed, he could practically feel his emotions draining out of him and leaving him deflated. Shaking his own head, Eric knew he couldn't be angry at Cithrel. It wasn't as if last night changed anything between the two of them. He was still a human, and a prisoner in this empire, and Cithrel was an imperial prince and his captor. They weren't in love, they had just, *needed* last night. It didn't mean anything, except, to Eric it did.

The pang of realization slid between his ribs and pierced his heart. Nothing changed for Cithrel, but something changed for Eric. His movements were mechanical as he finished dressing and slid on the first coat he could reach.

"I'd like to walk the gardens." Even his voice was mechanical as he spoke to Malor.

"Of course, Marked One." Eric ignored the way Malor's eyes glinted when he spoke. If he was that bothered by the state of Eric's body, he kept it to himself. "I'll wait for you at the doorway."

It took all of five minutes once they were in the gardens for Eric's thoughts to go back to Cithrel. The wisteria and willow trees swayed in the afternoon breeze, the only sound other than the pebbles that crunched under Eric's boots. It was a beautiful day by any account, but even the fresh air and flowers couldn't help lighten his mood.

A scowl formed as he passed the shimmering flowers around him and kicked at a loose stone on the pathway. It hurtled off into some shrubbery and vanished from view, but it didn't make him feel any better. He knew he

wouldn't feel better taking out his anger on rocks and plants, but he felt powerless to do anything else today.

Eric's mood worsened. If he meant anything to Cithrel, then shouldn't the prince believe him? After everything Aimar put him through the past five years, and after Solonar tried to kill him, what Eric was trying to tell Cithrel made sense.

He pinched the bridge of his nose, another headache on the horizon. "Son of a bitch," Eric groaned, running a hand through his curls.

"I've always loved your adorable names for me."

Eric whirled at the sickeningly familiar voice, dread pitting in his stomach. There was something else with his dread, though, something churning and beginning to rise to the surface. Rage.

The crown prince sauntered towards Eric, an easy grin on his slender lips. His raven hair was pulled back from his face, accentuating the amber in his cat eyes. "It's been a while since we met like this, Eric. And I see you've brought *him*."

"I'm not in the mood today, Crown Prince." Eric glanced between Solonar and Malor and found the same barely-bridled animosity there.

The two Fae eyed each other like enemies, some kind of unspoken threat hanging in the air. Whatever it was, he didn't care to find out. He just wanted to be where Solonar wasn't. As soon as he moved to leave, the prince snapped his attention back on Eric.

Solonar arched a dark brow. "You've found your claws." He bit the corner of his lip, barely able to contain his excitement. "I can't wait to see how you'll use them."

"I won't be doing anything with them."

"Well, that's disappointing," Solonar sighed. "I hoped you'd be a little more unpredictable, but I guess I was right. You're so very studious under the watchful eye of my little brother, mother's faithful beast."

Eric glared at him. He knew the crown prince was taunting him, but he couldn't stop himself. "We can't all be like you and live our lives free of consequence. I don't want to be on the empress's bad side. After all, I'd rather be predictable than punished. Don't you agree?" The look on Solonar's face bordered on something unknown, so Eric bit back his pride and added, "Crown Prince."

Instead, Solonar barked out a laugh. "Sharp claws and a sharp tongue. You just keep getting so *interesting*." He pinned Eric with his feline gaze, stepping in close. "I didn't know humans could be this much fun."

Eric gnashed his teeth together. "Don't call me that." He fought to control himself. "Just, get away from me."

"What's this?" Solonar stepped closer but made sure to stay out of Eric's reach. "Have I upset you?"

The wicked grin on Solonar's face was all Eric could take. "What the hell do you want? Spying on me wasn't enough?" He jabbed a finger at the crown prince, who fell back a step, to Eric's surprise. "You already tried to kill me. So why are you so determined to show up everywhere I go?"

The smile fell and a stony expression took its place. "He really didn't tell you anything, did he?"

"Who?" Eric fumed and stomped even closer, but Solonar mirrored his steps, keeping space between them. "Why would anyone tell me anything in this goddamned place? None of you can lie, so you just bury the truth so deep there's no way anyone could know."

"Cithrel." Solonar's voice edged. "It seems he's keeping more secrets than you think."

Eric huffed. Every Fae kept secrets, so what kind of secret could Cithrel have that his brother would hold over him? "I have an idea. Why don't you surprise me and actually tell me something? Why don't you try the absolute truth for once? What exactly is it that Cithrel is keeping from me?"

"That's...." Solonar began but his voice trailed off. He glared at Malor and his lips pressed together in a scowl.

Eric shook his head, a smile without any joy on his face. "For someone who so badly wants me to be unpredictable, it's pretty easy to guess what you'll do."

He turned on his heel to leave when the crown prince called over his shoulder.

"Eric, wait."

"Fuck you." He jabbed his middle finger in the air.

"Careful, Eric," Solonar warned. "You have my good graces now, but that doesn't mean I'll allow much more disrespect."

Eric rolled his eyes as he turned back to face the raven-haired prince. Not only did he roll his eyes, but he let out an audible scoff. This Fae

bastard was unbelievable. He thought letting out some of his anger and frustration would make him feel better, but it only made things worse.

"You'll *allow* me?" Eric waved his hands in the air maniacally. "Then what happens when you don't *allow* me to do something? Chase me down through those enchanted woods and make me fight for my life? Torture me? Take away my freedom? You've done that already."

His chest heaved as the words tumbled out without a moment to breathe. He knew none of this would fix things—everything he said would only make things worse—but he couldn't stop himself. He needed to let it out. When Eric didn't continue, the crown prince met his gaze. The mirth vanished from his expression and the amber in his cat eyes grew dark and brooding.

"I'm sorry for what I did to you then, Eric."

Oh. There wasn't room for any misdirection there. That was the absolute truth and Eric didn't know how to feel about it. The crown prince apologizing to him in earnest.

Just like that, the fight left Eric and then all at once, his mind seemed to catch up with his body. All the nightmares and the strain of magic trapped inside him culminated. He felt the weight of the heavy bags under his eyes and the ache that coursed through his body with every breath and movement.

So all Eric had to say to that was, "I'm tired."

"Eric?" Solonar frowned, his brows pulling together. The earnestness in his voice earlier shifted to something closer to doubt, maybe even concern, if Eric didn't know better.

"I need to rest," Eric lied. Then he added quickly before Solonar could reply, "Please stop crossing paths with me if you can help it, Crown Prince."

His words were strained, his throat too dry from shouting and arguing for what felt like the past eternity. With a meek dip of his head, he turned to leave. Solonar's mouth hung open like he had a million things to say, but nothing came out.

Knowing that apology was nothing but honest, he didn't know how to feel. Eric's emotions began to swell, tightening his throat and stinging his eyes. Just as he was about to wipe away the blurring tears, a hand clamped down on his shoulder, pulling him back.

Then, Solonar had a fistful of Eric's coat, pulling him forward enough that it exposed his neck and collarbone. Malor was there, but with one look from the crown prince he didn't move another inch.

"We have to talk. There's something I have to...tell...you..."

The crown prince's words trailed off slowly, his eyes being drawn somewhere else, something distracting him. Eric would have ripped his coat free from Solonar's grip if he wasn't thrown off by the dazed and disbelieving look that now marred the crown prince's face. He followed Solonar's line of sight down and felt ice creep into his veins.

With so much of Eric's bare skin exposed, it revealed several bite marks along his neck and chest and bruises that colored his pale, freckled skin. There was no mistaking what all of these markings were from, and Eric saw that Solonar knew it, too.

Eric stood still and watched the crown prince's face go through a myriad of expressions. It morphed first from shock, to realization, then to sadness, before finally landing on anger. The crown prince knowing who Eric slept with made his cheeks flush. Solonar practically had Eric by the throat.

"How long?"

The crown prince had gone so eerily calm that Eric had to blink and make sure he heard him properly.

"What?"

Solonar's fist tightened around Eric's coat, pulling him closer. The fabric groaned under his steely grip. "How long?"

"What are you—" Eric started, but he flinched away from the look of pure venom leveled on him.

"How long have you been *fucking* my brother?"

Eric gaped at the words spat in his face. He couldn't be serious.

"That's none of your damn business." He tore himself free of Solonar's grip and fell back a step. It took him a moment to adjust his clothes. "And keep your hands off me."

A rush of heat filled Eric's cheeks, but he had no reason to be embarrassed in front of Solonar. Eric found a pebble on the ground to direct his anger towards and glared at it.

"It *is* my business."

The way Solonar growled those words caught Eric's attention and his head snapped back up to look into those feline eyes, which filled with

anger. Eric was done putting up with the entire goddamned Imperial Family.

"How so?" Eric asked, an edge to his words. "Last time I checked, you tried to kill me, even though it was *against* the empress's order."

"And I am paying for that mistake every day!" Solonar threw out his arms.

Eric faltered when he saw the way his words were affecting Solonar. He saw how much it hurt him to be honest with Eric.

"How?" Eric huffed. "How are you paying for that mistake? Just tell me. I think I deserve to know."

Solonar opened his mouth to answer, but no sound came. A stray piece of black hair fell in his face as he took shuddering breaths. It looked as though he warred with himself, whether to tell him the truth and how much of it he should reveal. The tightening in Eric's chest made him realize just how badly he wanted to know, how desperately he clung to the truth.

Eventually, though, the crown prince let out a long exhale and looked away. "Your business is my business."

Eric set his jaw, surprised to feel so much hurt that Solonar wasn't going to tell him. It shouldn't surprise him that the traitor couldn't tell him the truth. He shook his head, scolding himself for expecting anything else.

"Then go ask your brother about it. I'm not going to tell you anything."

With that, Eric turned and left him behind in the gardens. He didn't stop and Solonar didn't follow him. His heart hammered in his chest, creating a painful rhythm. Eric rubbed the side of his forehead, feeling another headache coming on.

There was no reason for Eric to feel so hurt by Solonar keeping things from him. That black-haired Fae tried to kill him not that long ago. It didn't make sense for Eric to even *want* to trust him. Still, though, something had shifted in the crown prince and Eric didn't know what it was.

Eric turned at a fork in the gardens and realized that neither Solonar nor Malor were behind him. His forehead rumped. Were those two having another private conversation puffing their chests at each other? What the hell was going on between them? He decided he didn't want to know what their problem was with each other when a flash of light exploded in front of Eric.

He threw his arms over his face but the light blinded him anyways. When he could see through the spots in his vision he realized too late that

the light was a Fae Path appearing in the middle of the Imperial Gardens. Before Eric could defend himself, three nymphs were through the portal and lunged at him.

Eric cursed himself just as razor-like claws raked at him. His coat took most of the attack, but an opening in between his arm and face let the nymph gouge his cheek. He let out a sharp hiss from the pain as he rammed his boot into the nymph's chest.

His boot connected and made a horrific sound like nails grating on glass before the nymph toppled off of Eric and into the dirt. What the hell was happening right now? Shouldn't there be barriers on the palace grounds to prevent this kind of thing from happening?

The scent of magic in the air was different than the smells Eric had grown used to. It wasn't citrus like Cithrel, or smoky like Solonar. It wasn't even a total loss of sensation, like Elasuin. This smell was like shattered earth and blades forged in fire. It stung his nostrils with each breath.

Eric barely had time to get to his feet before the other two nymphs threw themselves at him. Blood trickled down his jaw as he scrambled back a few steps. They chattered and shrieked as their talons lunged for Eric. The smell of their putrid breath stung Eric's nostrils as he shoved the first one away, narrowly avoiding its slash. These nymphs were much different than Creusa.

She was a force of nature with her very existence. Creusa had been unlike the Fae, but there was something still otherworldly and enchanting about her. He had been surprised by her and looked forward to meeting her again. In contrast, the three nymphs here were closer to things that travelled in darkness and death.

The one he'd kicked earlier struggled to its feet. Or rather, its claws. Now that he could get a better look at them, they looked as though they'd been born from a decaying swamp, or the bones of some long-dead beast. The nymph on its feet looked sickly in the setting sun, jagged bones jutting through its skin like the nymph's body was too small for them. The skin looked like it was a dark green but in the growing darkness it was becoming a sleeker black.

"Why are you here?" Eric bit out. "Who sent you?"

One of the two that swiped at him crowed something to the other, followed by more chittering and hissing. They must have an entirely

separate language than the Fae. The one talking was covered in wounds. At least they looked like wounds from far away, but when Eric looked closer he saw they were scales coated in some kind of inky liquid.

A shiver ran down his spine; he got the feeling he didn't want to touch those scales. Eric glanced at his surroundings in the Imperial Gardens. There was still no sign of anyone, or any kind of weapon he could use. He took a step back, edging closer to the path that led out of the gardens.

"How did you get here?" he asked, his gaze darting around in search of an escape.

Eric swore again as he dodged another attack, sending the scaled nymph tumbling into a flower bush behind him. The situation was getting worse, now that they had him surrounded and his chances of escape were dwindling.

Grinding his teeth together, he knew what must have happened. Malor wasn't going to come help him because Solonar made sure to send him away. That bastard had to be behind this attack. He probably had something to do with the archduke's death, too. Eric clenched his hands into fists and took a defensive stance that Elasuin taught him.

If Eric sparred regularly with two Fae princes, he could do this. He just needed to stay alive long enough to summon his own power. He felt the aether breathing dormant inside of him. But something about the Marking felt off, broken apart within him.

Memories of the horrific nightmare danced through his thoughts and made his steps falter. Eric shook his head in an effort to chase away the plaguing thoughts. No, he wasn't like the Fae, it wasn't real. It was just a nightmare and nothing else.

The third nymph fell on all fours and charged Eric. He saw the nymph's blood-red eyes spark in the night. The rest of it seemed to be covered in moss, or slime, he couldn't tell, but the sound it made when it moved and breathed made him think of banshees wailing in the night.

"I don't want to hurt you." Eric just barely avoided the attack.

He didn't know why he kept trying to communicate with these nymphs—they clearly wouldn't, or couldn't, answer him. He wiped away the still-trickling blood from his cheek just as the slime-covered nymph raced towards him with a shriek.

It moved so much faster than the other two that even as Eric pivoted to dodge again, the nymph was on top of him and sent them both careening to the dirt.

His head slammed onto the dirt path with a crack, and his head spun, exposing his abdomen to the monstrous nymph. It roared as if it knew this was its chance and slashed its claws across Eric's abdomen. It shredded his clothes like they were nothing and several lines of dark red bloomed across his skin.

Eric sucked in a sharp breath as he brought his knee up hard and into the side of the nymph, sending it careening into the dirt next to Eric.

Rolling onto his side, Eric scrambled away from the nymphs, clutching tightly at his chest. Within seconds, his hands were soaked in his own warm blood. He wouldn't be able to keep this up, not against three of them. He was naive to think he could.

"Come on," Eric breathed to himself, struggling to rouse his magic.

There was no answer, though, as the nymph with jutting bones charged him. Eric pivoted on his feet and blocked the brunt of its attack, but he realized too late he'd made the wrong move.

Just as Eric pivoted, the bushes behind him rustled and the scaled nymph burst forth behind him. He was already in motion and couldn't stop himself as the nymph's slicked scales raked Eric's back and threw him to the ground.

He tried to break his fall with his shoulder and roll out of it, but the nymph on top of him was too heavy and crushed down on him like iron. His vision burst into spots of agony as more blood gushed from his wounds. Eric's lungs burned as some gravel dug into his skin, lacerating his brow.

Sharp waves of pain spread across Eric's face as he felt warmth sting his eye. Half-blind, and barely managing a wheeze, Eric struggled to break free from the scaled nymph's hold. But it was no use. He was pinned.

Trapped and helpless, Eric cried out as the three of them attacked him, ripping and tearing at his body. Despite the scream that tore from Eric's chest, still no one came. Agony coursed through him like an overdose.

No, this couldn't be happening. He was being torn to pieces. It couldn't end like this, not after everything he'd gone through, everything he endured.

I refuse to die like this.

As Eric's mind left him, he thought he heard the sound of chains breaking from the far recesses of his mind.

As the sun fell and bathed the Imperial Gardens in darkness, the color drained from Eric's vision. Bathed in the blanket of dusk, all of his humanity washed away with his sight.

His fingers dug into the packed earth underneath him and braced himself. Then in an explosion of rock, dirt, and dust, black fetid thorns erupted from Eric.

The overwhelming surge of aether that Eric controlled manifested and impaled the nymph that pinned him down and sent him flying into the air before the thorns gripped the nymph again and tore the supernatural creature into pieces.

Brackish innards mixed with the dust in the air, creating a gory mist that rained down on Eric and the two remaining nymphs.

Eric's assailants roared and hissed to each other, backing away from him, panicked. Eric felt no fear as he got back to his feet. He wiped the dirt from what was left of his clothes and his monochromatic gaze fell upon the nymph covered in a slicked moss.

It wailed and moaned as Eric neared it, like the creature was begging for its life. Even if Eric could understand the thing, it didn't matter. He wasn't going to let it live.

With a flick of his wrist, Eric's right hand splayed and leveled on the nymph before him. The swamp nymph cried out as it tried and failed to flee. Blackened thorns burst through the ground all around the nymph and wrapped itself around the nymph's limbs. The thorns raised the nymph up several feet in the air, then brought it down with enough force Eric heard bones breaking.

The nymph cried out, likely for help from its living friend, but that one was frozen in fear, unable to help or flee. As Eric moved to stand over the nymph he cocked his head to the side, studying it.

"Puh-lee-see," the nymph's broken voice wobbled. Somehow it was able to talk despite the vines and thorns wrapped around its neck tight enough to draw blackened blood. "Sp-areee m-eeee."

Eric blinked once, twice.

Then, he sliced his hand through the night air. The nymph's head tore free from its body with lightning speed. Its eyes were wide and stunned as

the nymph's head hit the earth with a heavy thud. Black blood sprayed across Eric's body and face, but he didn't flinch. A moment later, Eric's thorns withdrew and the nymph's body slumped to the ground, its blood soaking into the dirt.

"So you could understand me."

Eric turned to face his final attacker. That was when he saw movement behind the nymph.

"Eric!" a familiar voice roared.

The voice jarred him. It was a voice he knew so well, a voice he craved. Cithrel.

Color seeped back into Eric's vision as he stumbled forward, suddenly aware of his own body again. Pain filled his veins and sent a ripple of shock through him. With a groan, Eric nearly fell before he caught himself at the last minute. His entire body blazed with pain.

As the fourth prince came into view, his eyes widened in shock, maybe even horror, as he took in Eric's appearance. Looking down at himself, Eric's blood chilled. He looked like a butcher with his clothes and hands stained a dark crimson.

"Eric." Cithrel was suddenly next to him, his deep voice in Eric's ear.

"Are you alright? What happened to you? What happened here?"

Eric wanted to look at him, to let himself sink into Cithrel, but his body refused to move. He just looked forward, his gaze focused on the scattered limbs of the slaughtered nymphs. Eric breathed a single sentence, unable to do anything else.

"I killed them."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Instead of being bathed in vibrant colors and a soft evening glow, the Alonethan gardens were bathed in blood. Body parts and entrails laid strewn about the path and greenery. Eric saw with too much clarity what he'd just done. Two nymphs were murdered without mercy.

Eric clapped a hand over his mouth, feeling bile rushing up his throat. He was responsible for this horrific sight. He killed them. *It was his fault.*

Twisting around, Eric heaved his stomach's contents into the closest shrub. He felt Cithrel's calloused hands come up to squeeze his shoulder before patting his back while he retched.

"I killed them," Eric croaked in between breaths. "It's my fault, Cithrel."

He gave Cithrel a pleading look, desperate to see his face. In truth, Eric was terrified of what expression he would see. He didn't know if he could take seeing disappointment, or worse, fear.

What he saw, though, was compassion, maybe even understanding, in the eyes staring back at him. Cithrel's blue eyes shone more like glaciers in the moonlight as he gazed down at Eric, his arm firmly around Eric's shoulder.

Relief swelled in Eric's chest and he felt himself coming undone. Tears welled in his eyes as he leaned into Cithrel's chest. At least to Cithrel, he didn't feel like a monster.

"It's all my fault, Cithrel. I did this to them. I butchered them." His breaths came fast as tears streamed down his cheeks. "I—I don't know how I could've done this. What have I done? I—"

Cithrel cut Eric off, taking Eric's shaking hands in his own. Their warmth soothed his tremors. "It's not your fault, Eric. You were defending yourself. They would have killed you otherwise. You're not gravely hurt, that's all that matters. Everything's going to be alright."

"I don't know what happened." Eric clung tighter to Cithrel, reliving the last moments. "I was alone and they just appeared. They tried to kill me. I didn't know what else to do."

Eric looked up at Cithrel, his breath hitching. "Something took me over, Cithrel. I felt like a different person when the aether took over."

"It's alright. It's alright." Cithrel ran his hand through Eric's hair, his words soothing.

Eric clung tighter to the prince. The truth in Cithrel's words comforted Eric, despite the fact that he shouldn't be intimate with him right now, not when there was so much unsaid between them.

His fingers gripped Cithrel's cape, which surrounded and warmed them like a blanket. He held on so tight his knuckles whitened. He would think of their problems later, together. For now, he needed to feel someone's warmth.

Eric wasn't sure how long they sat embracing each other when he heard the sounds of rustling greenery and the crunching of earth underneath footsteps.

Every alarm in his mind told him he was in danger again, his muscles stiffening. He gripped Cithrel's cape tighter, his jaw clenching. The urge to pull Cithrel away with him and run swelled, but Cithrel seemed altogether unbothered by the disturbance.

Malor came into view behind Cithrel, dragging a shadowed mass behind him. Eric watched as the mass *moved*. He realized that the mass wasn't a something, but a someone. The third nymph.

"Did it get far?" Cithrel didn't look towards Malor, his tone cold.

"No, my Prince," Malor replied, matching Cithrel's even tone. "He attempted to flee the gardens, but I was able to apprehend him. He was unarmed and alone."

As Malor neared Cithrel and Eric, Eric heard the nymph crying and begging for its life in broken words. The nymph begged and pleaded all the while being dragged through the dirt and forced to look at its dismembered and butchered comrades.

The supernatural wails filled the silence of the early evening air. Eric doubled over, his stomach turning over to vomit again, but he only able to dry heave. He coughed and gagged as Cithrel's arm on his shoulder was a steady comfort.

"It will be over soon, Eric," Cithrel consoled him. He whispered in his ear, "You don't have to watch this. Close your eyes and it will be over soon."

Eric's face crumpled even further, feeling Cithrel give his shoulder a final squeeze before leaving his side. The prince's absence at his side sent

an immediate chill through him. With a shiver, Eric followed Cithrel with his eyes as the prince strode over to Malor and the struggling nymph.

"Hold him."

As Cithrel neared the nymph it began to thrash and shriek, its face a picture of horror as it was unable to break free from Malor. Realization was slow and awful as it dawned on Eric. The prince was going to execute the nymph right now, in front of Eric. No. No, he couldn't kill the nymph after what Eric did to the others. There had been enough bloodshed tonight.

Malor had one hand clamped down on the nymph's shoulder, forcing it to its knees. The other hand was firmly knotted in the nymph's would-be hair. Eric watched, his eyes filling with horror, as tears fell down the nymph's face, its own words incoherent through its sobs.

Cithrel's hand clawed at his side as he approached the nymph, who only moaned and pleaded louder.

Eric's stomach twisted again as Cithrel stopped in front of the nymph, towering over it like an executioner, bathed in moonlight. No, he didn't want to see this. He didn't want this to happen. Eric knew this wasn't right, not after what he did to the other nymphs. He had to stop Cithrel from killing the nymph, but his body wouldn't move. All he could manage was to shake his head in disbelief.

It wasn't until Cithrel reached out and took the nymph's neck in his hand. The nymph cried out just before any noise was choked off.

"Wait, Cithrel, stop!" Eric shouted.

Cithrel didn't say anything to Eric, but his hand around the nymph's neck froze. Malor's eyes flashed a vibrant green in the night and Eric knew there was fury behind that gaze. The knight's grip on the nymph's hair, which was more like seaweed, tightened. The nymph let out a pained moan.

Eric couldn't breathe, afraid any movement might change the prince's mind. His own hands shook at his sides, so he balled them into fists. He didn't want Cithrel to see the fear that riddled his nerves.

Slowly, Eric got to his feet, ignoring the shaking in his legs. His mind raced—he had to calm down and find a way to convince the fourth prince not to kill the nymph.

Eric's stomach curled thinking about how just moments ago he had murdered the other two nymphs in cold blood. Guilt and fear knotted in his

chest and he bit his cheek to keep himself together. He didn't want there to be more death.

Now that he had Cithrel's attention, though, his mind went blank. There had to be some reason he could come up with to spare this being's life. Then, his frantic and frayed train of thought came up with something so simple. Why nymphs?

It and the other nymphs had broken through the palace's enchantments and tried to kill Eric. He was certain the nymphs came here for him, but he didn't know why.

"Shouldn't we find out who sent the nymphs?" Eric said, his words tight. "Or why they were sent to kill *me*? It was nymphs that attacked the archduke's estate and now they've ambushed the palace. With their connection to the aether, it just doesn't add up."

Cithrel didn't turn to face Eric, or say anything. The Imperial Gardens hung in dreadful silence. Eric's blood thundered in his ears as he waited for Cithrel to answer him. The nymph might have been sobbing now, but it sounded closer to a choked gurgling than anything else.

Eric swallowed. "If you kill this nymph, then there's no chance of getting answers. There's no way to know who was behind this."

Eric chanced a step forward, but Cithrel stayed rooted in place, appearing to consider Eric's argument. He felt every heartbeat in his chest as he waited for Cithrel to answer him.

Then finally, Cithrel's hand fell away from the nymph's throat. Eric didn't know if he or the nymph was more relieved. He chanced a look at Malor's face and saw the glow of his eyes had guttered and dimmed. The Fae warrior looked impassive, but his anger at Cithrel's decision was plain.

"Take him to the Black Thorn. I'll interrogate him later."

With the flick of Cithrel's wrist, Malor was dismissed and Eric watched as the nymph was dragged out of sight again. He swallowed as his gaze met the nymph's.

The nymph stared back at Eric and even though he was clearly in pain, he looked grateful. He gave one low nod to Eric and that was it. Then he disappeared from sight.

Eric slumped back to the ground, utterly spent. His face fell into his hands and he dragged in long, ragged breaths that turned into sobs. It wasn't

long before Cithrel was next to him again. Strong arms slid around Eric's shoulders and pulled him close.

"Come with me. My sister will see to your injuries." Eric looked up to see a dark expression cross Cithrel's face as he took in Eric's wounds.

Now that the adrenaline was wearing off, Eric couldn't ignore the sting that radiated through his entire chest or the pounding at the back of his head. Even now, he felt the cool night air biting at the lacerations across his chest.

So Eric told himself his injuries were the reason why he needed to lean against Cithrel as they made their way back inside the palace to see Lyari. It wasn't a total lie, since by the time they made it back to their room Eric's head swam.

Lyari was already there, waiting for them. At the sound of Eric and Cithrel entering, the finely woven chain veil that covered her face shifted as she turned to face the noise. Even though Lyari was blind it still unsettled Eric how she always looked right at him, like she saw more than he could ever hope to.

"Eric," she said, rising to greet them. "Please, let me tend to you. It's the least I can do."

"Thank you, Your Highness." Eric stumbled over and collapsed into the divan next to Lyari.

She seated herself beside Eric and for a minute the only sound in the room was his own labored breaths, each one more painful than the last.

When she placed her pale hands to his gored chest, he fought back a wince. Then he felt the coolness of her touch soothing the burn from his injured flesh.

"I'll help with the pain soon, Eric."

Eric nodded. He didn't trust his own voice when the lacerations gnawed at his nerves this badly. He didn't notice the flower buds in Lyari's hair at first, but as the scent of her magic filled his lungs, he watched as the buds bloomed in shades of peach and orchid. The smell of petrichor and spring calmed some of the pain that pounded against Eric's every thought.

He always seemed to balance on the edge of calm and unease when the princess used her magic. It felt as though at any minute he would lose his balance under her power. The plant life that thrived within Lyari grew and

moved, possessed by her will. The flora crawled their way along Lyari's nape and forearms before they found their target.

Eric jolted at the abrupt yet soft touch of delicate leaves pressing against his marred chest. As his gaze, now grown heavy, trailed to the plants, he swallowed hard. The plants had grown into his wounds. They were *inside* him. He felt the magic-infused greenery *moving* through the bloody mess of his chest. It was hard not to feel like serpents slithered inside him. Eric squeezed his eyes shut, not wanting to see any more of what Lyari's plants were doing. The divan's fabric groaned under Eric's tight grip. He did his best to ignore the feeling of the leaves and vines moving under his flesh.

"Thank you again, Your Highness," Eric bit out.

She likely saw how much Eric needed the distraction because she gave him a warm smile just past her fine woven chain veil. "Of course, Eric." Her metallic veil jingled as she worked. "I'm sure we'll have answers soon. Whoever is behind this attack will be punished. You have the Alonethan Empire's promise."

Relief should have run through him, but part of him wondered if he had helped the nymph or not. Cithrel sent the attacker to the Black Thorn. If Lyari promised answers soon, then the nymph was probably being tortured. It might have been more of a favor to let the nymph die in the gardens.

When he stayed silent, Lyari asked, "Has the pain lessened?"

Blinking, Eric nodded quickly, "Yes. I appreciate your words, Your Highness." He managed a weak smile. "I'm honored by such kindness."

Lyari matched his smile and nodded, falling back into her healing. Eric looked over at Cithrel, wondering why he was so quiet. The prince stood off to the side with his arms tightly crossed, his eyes trained on Eric. He held Cithrel's stare, wishing that even just once he could know what the prince was thinking. He wondered if Cithrel would hate what he was about to say. Probably.

"Who do you think could've been behind this, Your Highness?" Eric asked, turning to face Lyari. Which was probably for the best, since he didn't have the courage to see what sort of expression must be on Cithrel's face.

Lyari's fingertips halted their tracing of Eric's wounds at the question. Then she continued on, as if nothing were wrong. "I'm not sure yet."

He needed to press her more. If she was Fae, then she was holding something back. "It must be someone with considerable power if they could break through the palace enchantments, right, Your Highness?"

Lyari focused on her work without so much as a twitch. "It would have to be someone powerful."

The princess's magic was working, since he felt the ache at the base of his skull alleviate. It made it easier for Eric to think about exactly what she said, *how* she said it. He leaned forward as she worked, only to grit his teeth at the sting in his opened chest. He had to push her for some answers, some inkling to more of the truth.

"Forgive me, Your Highness, but wouldn't that mean a High-born Fae was behind this?"

"Eric," Cithrel warned.

He didn't take his gaze off the princess to look at the prince behind him, who was likely gnashing his teeth. Instead, Eric watched the princess for any trace of emotion, any ghost of the truth on her lips.

Lyari had gone still, her hands frozen on his almost-healed wounds. She turned her head until it looked as though her blind eyes stared directly at Eric through the veil.

Her gaze unsettled Eric, who swallowed back his nerves. It shook his confidence in his question. He sucked in a long breath and waited for her to answer. Enough time passed in stillness that regret seeped into Eric's nerves and he was sure she wouldn't answer him.

Then she her hands moved again, returning to work, but she didn't turn her sightless gaze from Eric. "Yes."

Eric's shoulders slumped as he loosed a shuddering breath. The smell of petrichor was more pungent than soothing, the truth souring her magic.

"That's enough, Eric." Cithrel appeared at Eric's side, a look on his face that could wither the Imperial Gardens.

"Apologies, Your Highness. I didn't mean to speak harshly about such delicate matters." He dipped his head.

"It's alright." Lyari's plants surged under Eric's skin again, jolting him. "It's understandable that you would be concerned about this attack."

Her slender fingers trailed across Eric's skin, a delicate touch of silk, and as she did, he no longer felt the touch of her flora under his skin. He looked up to see the blossoming flowers begin to retreat and withdraw back

into their buds interwoven in her hair. They fed on his wounds and grew from them. As the greenery receded, so did the scent of her magic in the air. The smell of morning dew and the wilderness faded into nothing.

His gaze slid down to his chest where only several angry pink lines colored his skin. The wounds looked like they were months old, not from less than an hour ago. The princess's magic differed from her family's, which was battle-hardened and brutal.

"Thank you again, Your Highness." Eric dipped his head as she rose to her feet.

She inclined her head with a small smile. "You should get some rest, Eric. Your injuries will still need to heal naturally." As Lyari glided past Eric, she paused at her brother's side and pressed her palm against his chest. Cithrel gave her a cryptic look but said nothing. "You should rest as well, brother."

Then she vanished down the hall, leaving Eric alone with Cithrel. He was slow getting to his feet to face the prince. His skin felt too tight, while the scar tissue that formed so fast pulled at him. They eyed each other as the silence dragged on, neither one wanting to speak first.

Finally, with a sigh, Cithrel's hands fell at his sides. "I still have work to do. You can have my bed."

Eric blinked. His tone made it clear one of them wanted to forget their night together as soon as possible. Eric's brows pulled together, but that wasn't the most important thing right now. Cithrel turned to leave, avoiding Eric's face. He was just going to dismiss what happened in the gardens. But he needed to hear what Eric had to say, whether he wanted to or not.

He couldn't take it any longer. "Solonar was in the gardens with me." Cithrel stopped. "Just before the attack."

"Eric." Cithrel's voice was quiet, a frightening opposite to how Eric was used to hearing him speak. "Let me do my job, please."

Eric felt like he'd been slapped in the face, hearing how meek Cithrel's voice was as he uttered his last words. It made him feel like he was in the wrong for bringing this up, for wanting to help Cithrel and the Alonethan Empire in finding the traitor.

His face heated, shame and anger fighting for dominance. Eric was still a prisoner here—his cage was just larger now. He couldn't go home or see

his family and it was because of the Fae, the Imperial Family included. They condoned slavery and they kept him imprisoned in the palace.

Yet here he was, still trying to help Cithrel and his people, despite his situation—and despite the fact that multiple attempts had been made on his life since coming to the palace. He must have been crazy to help the people who tortured him and cursed him with this power that was slowly killing him.

"Do your job?" Eric's words came out splintered. "I thought it was your job to protect me. But where was your brother earlier? Where was Malor? I was alone when they attacked me and no one came when I screamed for help."

Cithrel turned to face him. His features had iced over into the cold, detached expression Eric knew only too well. "I *know* Solonar is hiding something and you don't want to hear it," Eric said.

"It's not your concern to meddle with these affairs, Eric."

"Is it yours, then?" Eric accused. "Because it looks like you're protecting him and not me."

"Stop this, Eric." Cithrel stormed forward and grabbed Eric by the arms, pinning him in place. "You have no idea what you're talking about. You have no idea what goes on behind these walls. Don't get involved in something that will devour you in your ignorance."

Cithrel leaned in, barely restraining his own emotions. "I have lived my entire life in this twisted world. Endured centuries of it. There's darkness and suffering that you know nothing about. Least of all my family." He spit the last word at Eric.

Eric shook off Cithrel's touch, baring his own rage. "I haven't known anything but suffering since I was brought here against my will and forced into slavery. *Forced* to be a sadistic lord's whore. Raped day after day, powerless to do anything about it."

He took a step back from Cithrel, unable to look at the Fae bastard anymore. "I wish every day that I could wake up from this nightmare. All I've wanted for five years was to forget about this place."

Tears stung Eric's eyes as he spoke. He looked at Cithrel, venom and pain plain on his face. "But I'm still here. After everything, I'm still here and you of all people were with me. At least you did."

"Eric, I—" Cithrel reached out to touch him, but Eric pulled away when Cithrel didn't finish his sentence. Instead he let his hand fall at his side.

"You still haven't found the traitor in the palace." Eric turned his back to Cithrel, squeezing his arms together in an attempt to keep himself whole. "It seems you don't know much about your family either. Maybe you should start looking there."

Cithrel didn't respond and Eric heard him make no move to leave. He couldn't bring himself to face Cithrel again, not after how terribly this talk had gone. He just wanted to curl up in a ball and forget this night happened. Eric was spared the silent torture when Cithrel spoke again.

"I have to go. You should listen to the princess and let your injuries heal."

Eric listened to him go, the only sound the light scrape of his armor as he strode out of their room. He scoffed as tears rolled down his cheeks. *Their* room. Now that he was left alone, this space felt like anything but his now. This was just another cage.

After the fight Eric and Cithrel just had, sleep came fitfully. His dreams were plagued with images of dismembered nymphs and pleas for mercy that went unheard. Every muscle ached and his skull throbbed. He swore he heard voices wailing into the night, calling out to him.

It wasn't until he opened his eyes that he realized he wasn't in Cithrel's private chambers anymore. A lone figure stood with his back to Eric, his war-torn armor covered in golden blood.

The Fae turned to face Eric and his heart stopped. Bright red curls ran to his shoulders as piercing blue eyes held Eric in place. The Fae's face was a mess of scarred flesh, the filth of battle, and the splattered blood of his enemies. Emblazoned on the chest of the Fae's armor was a single crest—a black doe.

Ilphas Raxidor.

Eric tried to move, tried to do anything, but he was frozen in place as Ilphas stepped towards Eric. His heavy blue gaze fell on Eric's forearm, on the Marking. Then Ilphas looked at his own forearm and found an identical tattoo burned into his skin.

He looked back up and his eyes bore into Eric, bewildered. "A human." A monstrous hand reached out and clamped down on Eric's shoulder,

squeezing him tight enough to scrape his bones together. "I hope you can bear it."

Eric's already thundering heart quickened, becoming an ache in his chest as this nightmare held him fast. "This Marking is already killing me."

Ilphas squeezed Eric's shoulder tighter. "I did not mean the Marking."

"Then what?" The words spilled from Eric's mouth.

"Chaos."

Eric shot up in bed, coated in his own sweat, gasping for air. Morning sunlight bathed his body as birds sung in the woods somewhere outside his window. Reaching out, he dug his fingers into his own shoulder, the ghost of his nightmare still weighing on him.

He pressed his palm against his forehead and closed his eyes. It was another nightmare; a side effect of the foreign power inside, eating away at him. Nothing more.

It wasn't long after he calmed himself down that the events of last night reared its ugly head in his thoughts. He and Cithrel hadn't been in such a dangerous impasse since he was first brought to the palace.

There was little he could do to take his mind off the thoughts that haunted him without relent, especially since his wounds were still too fresh to train with Elasuin. It was for the best, since Eric didn't think he could stomach the sight of the Imperial Family this morning.

He ignored the breakfast Hinni left for him and found himself in the library again. The librarian cast Eric a withering glance with displeased milky eyes as he entered, but then turned back to his books before disappearing down an aisle.

Several hours later, after pouring over the pages of the black book in the Unseen section, he still didn't have any answers about coming chaos or anything that could relate to his nightmare of Ilphas. It was useless. Eric scrubbed at his face with a groan.

"My, my, my. I'm not gone for long, but you're already half-mad, talking to yourself in my absence."

Eric whirled to see the one familiar face that didn't make him want to recoil. Luthais grinned back at Eric.

"Did you run out of liquor? Is that why you're back?"

Luthais clutched at an invisible blow to his chest. "You wound me, dear." He came to stand next to Eric, looking at the young tree with him. "I

thought I might find you here, hiding amongst the ancient pages."

Eric snorted. "I can't exactly go back to the Imperial Gardens, now can I?" His smile drooped.

Luthais got a little quiet. "No, I suppose you can't." Then, a moment later, his words took on a new vigor. "That's why I came to look for you, actually. I have news."

Eric's brows knit together, not knowing what his friend was hinting at. "News?"

"Our dear, brooding, blond-haired friend concluded his interrogations early this morning." When Eric blanched, Luthais added, "The nymph is very much alive, but he had a surprising amount to say about how he came to be in the Imperial Gardens to make an attempt on your life."

Eric's chest constricted, his lungs aching at those words. His gamble had paid off and the nymph was alive. More than that, he had talked. Eric frowned. "And? What did the nymph say?"

Luthais eyed Eric, studying his features for a minute before gaging how to answer. "They were sent by agents of Belfir Kingdom." Eric's frown deepened. "The nymph didn't know how they were able to break the enchantments protecting this palace, only that someone arranged a Fae Path for them beforehand."

Eric was still grimacing, unsure what this meant. The nymph didn't admit to who the traitor was, or even knew who it was. How was he supposed to convince Cithrel about Solonar with so little to go on?

"I see," he said. It was all Eric could manage.

Luthais clapped Eric's back. "Don't look so destitute, dear. With the information that slave gave us, we have enough to send an emissary to Belfir and question them. The peace agreement forbids them from such a hostile action."

Eric was thrust back into reality. "Slave?"

Luthais sobered, having seen the look on Eric's face. "Nymphs are little better than humans, Eric."

Eric's hands balled into fists. "Then the nymphs that attacked me...." He trailed off.

"Were slaves. They didn't have a choice but to obey their master," Luthais finished for Eric.

Eric shook his head, not wanting to think about how afraid they must have been, forced to come to the palace and try to murder Eric. It wrenched his stomach, like a rusty blade wounding him deeper. He thought of Creusa then, and a new wave of pity washed over him. She was so otherworldly and commanded attention. Yet she was barely more than him in this world.

"Who could treat not just humans, but nymphs, like this and feel nothing? Who could be so cruel?" Eric's temper simmered. He looked up at his friend, demanding an answer.

Luthais grew even more serious than he had before. He looked paler than usual, like what he had to say next pained him. "Someone who seeks the stirrings of war."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Solonar was seated in a sunroom, lounging on a velveteen divan, a glass of wine in one hand and a book in the other. He looked not unlike a cat would, basking in the sun, yet somehow he seemed discontented.

"You son of a bitch!"

The doors to the sunroom burst open as Eric stormed in, roaring. Luthais appeared behind him, his expression somewhere between concern and joy. The crown prince looked so leisurely it only boiled Eric's blood more.

"Eric, dear, please. This is not the time." Luthais touched Eric's shoulder, but he jerked his shoulder away with enough vehemence that Luthais stopped in his tracks.

"It was you, wasn't it?" Eric's chest heaved, fury filling his face. "Cithrel won't hear me out, but I can't stand by any longer. Not when you treat living beings as your own personal tools, to be cast aside when they break or lose their use to you."

Solonar swallowed. "I assure you, I don't know what you mean. Though if my *brother* has something to do with this, I understand that you're irate." He leered at Eric. "I'd wager he's nowhere near enough to satisfy you."

Eric crossed the small space between them and grabbed the crown prince by the collar. His teeth gnashed together, etiquette forgotten. His nostrils flared. "Trying to have me killed once wasn't enough for you, was it? You couldn't help yourself and had to try again. I wonder how much longer I'll have to wait before you try to kill me a third time?"

Solonar gripped at the collar of his silken clothing, the pleased smile wiped clean from his face. Now it looked more like he was desperate not to have Eric touch him. The crown prince's feline gaze kept darting from Eric's hands to his face.

"Believe me, once was more than enough for me," Solonar sobered. "I have no intention of repeating my mistakes."

Solonar fidgeted under Eric's grip, even though if he chose to, he could snap Eric's wrists as easily as dead branches. Instead, he stood frozen, his own grip on his collar, keeping the fabric from tearing.

"Now if you'll let me go, I'm more than happy to talk about this."

"I'm done listening to your lies!" Eric yelled.

Solonar huffed. "One would think after five years you would know the Fae cannot lie, Eric."

"Oh dear," Luthais sighed from the doorway. He covered his mouth with his hand, waiting for the inevitable.

Eric snapped. He let go of the crown prince's collar long enough to punch Solonar in the face. The black-haired prince stumbled back a few steps from the connection with his jaw.

Eric sucked in a sharp breath at the sudden sting across his knuckles. Solonar's face was impassive as he took Eric's punch. He just looked back at Eric, waiting for him to do something else. With how unbothered the crown prince looked, Eric felt the urge to punch him again.

"Eric, dear, I think this is far enough," Luthais interjected before Eric could lunge at the crown prince again. "As much as I enjoy watching my brother act like an aether-poisoned fool, what you've just done is very much still a crime against the empire."

Then Luthais turned to eye Solonar, his own irises flashed to ones identical to Solonar's. "You're willing to let this momentary indiscretion go, brother, right?"

Solonar glowered at Luthais, his amber feline eyes thinned to slits. They shared a silent exchange and the pressure in the air grew heavy. It ached in Eric's bones and raked across his skin. Even the air churned with the smell of burnt ash and clay.

Slowly, the crown prince squared his jaw as he re-adjusted his shirt collar, fastening the clasps so the fabric hugged his entire neckline. "But of course, brother," he said.

Luthais's gaze roved between Solonar and Eric as he loosed a heavy sigh. "Eric, dear, you should thank the crown prince for his forgiveness." Eric fumed, turning his anger on Luthais, but before he could get a word out Luthais held up his hand. "I should remind you that what you've just done is laid your hands on the heir to the throne and Alonethan Empire. As much as you're my favorite, dear, you're not protected from treason."

Eric ground his teeth together, glaring a hole into the floor, but he didn't argue. Luthais was right, but it didn't make him any less angry. The crown prince was almost untouchable. It made sense for him to keep scheming to get rid of Eric. He couldn't ascend the throne until the Marked One fulfilled

their purpose but if Eric was dead then he wouldn't have to wait for the crown. Treason was the perfect loophole that Solonar needed to get rid of Eric. Instead, he knit his fingers together until his knuckles turned white. He let out a long breath before he finally managed to look at Solonar.

He didn't hide his loathing. "You have my deepest regret for my actions and my utmost thanks for your mercy, Crown Prince."

Solonar eyed him, one hand still at his neck. "Of course, Marked One. Let's forget this incident ever happened."

It was all Eric could do to look away from the crown prince and not say something he'd regret. Luthais was right. He must have gone insane to attack the heir to Alonetha.

Still, no matter how much he thought everything over, there was an obvious traitor in the palace, and Solonar was the only Fae in the entire empire he knew who would want Eric dead badly enough to send assassins after him. He'd already tried to kill Eric once. Plus, there weren't many Fae capable of overpowering an elder Fae like the archduke.

His knuckles tightened further in front of him as he concentrated on the wood grains on the floor. Planning another assassination attempt could explain the constant border skirmishes, too. Solonar knew Cithrel would be sent away, the only being protecting Eric at the time. With his protection gone, it made it much easier to get to Eric. He was hiding something and Eric knew it.

A hand touched Eric's shoulder, which jarred him from his thoughts. It was Luthais. "We should go, dear."

Eric unclenched his hands and shook them out. "Right." He turned towards Solonar but didn't meet the crown prince's eyes. "Apologies again, Crown Prince."

Luthais kept his hand on Eric's shoulder as they turned to leave, but Solonar spoke up. "Stop. I'm willing to forget about this incident, but my good will isn't free." Luthais leveled a sour look on his brother. "Just Eric."

"Brother—" Luthais warned, but Solonar dismissed him with a wave.

"He and I have some things to discuss. In private."

Solonar didn't take his eyes off Eric. Instead, his head tilted to the side, challenging Eric not to stay. It was exactly what Eric wanted, after all. "It's alright, Lu," he said and stepped past Luthais. "The crown prince is right. We have a lot to talk about."

"Lovely—"

"I'll be alright." He lifted his forearm to show the Marking burned into his skin by way of explanation.

After a moment of tense silence, Luthais's cryptic expression softened a fraction. He reached out and patted Eric's shoulder. "I'll be right outside, lovely," he said. Then he turned venomous black eyes on his brother, sending all the warning he needed.

It wasn't until after the door clicked shut behind the second prince that Solonar spoke. "Please, have a seat, Eric." He motioned to the divan across his own seat for Eric to use.

When Eric fell into the cushions across from Solonar, the crown prince continued. "I understand your frustration with me over what happened months ago, but I assure you, I am paying for that harshly."

Whether he noticed it or not, Solonar brought an absent hand up to his neckline and rubbed at the fabric that wrapped around his throat. Eric said nothing and eyed him expectantly.

Solonar cleared his throat and a strand of his raven hair fell in his eyes. "In light of that, you have my word that I had nothing to do with this recent attack on your life."

Eric gritted his teeth. "Your word?"

"Yes," the crown prince replied with an unwavering stare.

So Eric sat there, chewing over the possible loopholes Solonar's *word* could have. He nodded as he thought, as if weighing his next words heavily. He could be telling the truth but still find a way to get rid of Eric. He eyed the arm of the divan.

"Who did you hire to do it, then?"

Solonar's amber eyes darkened. "Excuse me?"

"Who did you hire to have me killed? If it wasn't you directly, then who did you send after me?" Eric's eyes guttered.

The light dimmed in Solonar's eyes. His brows pulled together. "Is that really what you think of me? You think so darkly of me that I would betray the place that has been my home for five centuries? That I would betray the throne? My mother?"

The way Solonar spoke made Eric falter. Except that he just kept asking his own questions. The crown prince never answered Eric's question. "Have you given me any reason to think otherwise?"

A pained look colored Solonar's face as if he'd been raked over hot coals, but he didn't reply. Eric exhaled and looked at the ceiling. He hoped for more, but didn't expect anything else. This conversation was going as well as any did with a Fae.

"You were the last Fae with me before I was attacked in the gardens," Eric started, counting his points on his fingers. "Malor was nowhere to be found, either, which wouldn't be the first time you've ordered him away as the crown prince. No one in this palace, especially you, will tell me what your actual punishment was, which leads me to believe there is no punishment. Oh, and of course the most obvious point. You've already tried to personally kill me before."

Four of Eric's fingers were held up at Solonar's face; it couldn't be described as anything but grim. The murky green in Eric's eyes narrowed. "Did I get anything wrong, *Crown Prince*?"

Solonar bared his teeth but didn't move from his seat. "Are you sure you're not actually Fae, Eric? You have a gift for twisting the truth."

"Hardly, since I can actually answer a question."

The crown prince chuckled and held his hands palms up. "Ahh, there's the Eric I know."

"Enough." Eric sat forward in his seat, his jaw set. "You wanted me alone to talk, so answer me. If it wasn't you behind the attempt on my life, then who was it?"

"I've already given you my word, but that doesn't seem to be enough." Solonar leaned in, long strands of black hair falling around his face. This highlighted the sharp angles of his face. "If you're so sure of my guilt, then why is it your beloved, Cithrel, won't listen to you?"

Eric's hands clenched into fists. "He doesn't want to believe his brother is a traitorous bastard."

"Ah. Still, one would think, if you're as precious as is to be believed, he'd have more regard for your opinion. Yet, here you are, in front of me, your would-be traitor. But I don't see my armor-clad brother anywhere."

"Stop it."

Solonar tilted his head at Eric and his teeth flashed into a grin. "Why would my *dearest* brother leave you alone with me, of all Fae?"

Eric squeezed his eyes shut and dug his nails into his palms, where they threatened to break the skin. He was so sure it was Aimar but now after

everything he'd seen, the lord had to be working with Solonar, or he was just a decoy for Solonar to protect himself. Aimar wouldn't be anywhere near strong enough to get rid of the archduke but the crown prince could with ease. Now that Eric knew, the crown prince was just trying to bait him. Eric needed to stay calm. He needed to ignore the taunts. If he reacted, then no one would listen to him and Solonar would get away with being a traitor.

"It's simple, really, Eric." Solonar's voice cut through the air as sharp as a blade. "Cithrel doesn't believe you. You're the human he's been charged with protecting, after all. That doesn't fill your head with doubt? Not even a little?"

Each syllable grated against him, Solonar was manipulating him by avoiding the truth. He couldn't take it anymore. The air rushed out of Eric's lungs. His hands unclenched and he fell into a calm that was still enough to be eerie. When Eric opened his eyes, pools of obsidian gazed at the prince. Solonar's mouth snapped shut.

"Then I'll be doing the empire a favor by stopping you myself." Eric lifted a clawed hand as he rose to his feet. As he did, thorns erupted from the ground and wood splintered all around them as they attacked.

The rotted vines surged forth and struck Solonar. Just as quickly, flames engulfed the thorns and charred them in fire until they fell around the crown prince.

Solonar moved so fast, faster than Eric could follow even in this state, that his hands wrapped around Eric's wrists and pinned them behind his back before Eric could react. "You can't let the Marking consume you. Elasuin taught you to control it."

"Don't touch me."

The words were guttural as rotted spikes cascaded around Eric. The thorns sliced and slashed at Solonar's body, leaving small wells of gold blood to trickle down the crown prince's torn clothing.

Before Solonar's wounds began to heal, Eric was on top of him, his blackened hands clawing and raking at Solonar's face. The force of Eric's attack and the vines that entangled them were enough to send the two of them careening through the window. Shattered glass and wood splinters cascaded around them. They toppled to the ground outside the palace, with Solonar's back slamming into the stone pathway. The rock cracked underneath him.

The glass covered Eric in superficial cuts, but he didn't notice. All of his attention was focused on Solonar. Eric's hands wrapped around the crown prince's throat and squeezed. The scent of his own magic, decay, filled the air as Eric refused to let go. He would put an end to the attempts on his life. He would kill this murderer, this monster.

Solonar didn't attempt to take Eric's hands off him as he struggled to choke out words. "I promise you, Eric," he coughed out as Eric's grip tightened, "After the woods—I've only tried to help you. Even if I—hated—every second of it."

Eric didn't blink as Solonar managed the words. He wasn't able to process what the crown prince said anymore, not in his aetheric state. His mind kept replaying what Solonar said about Cithrel. The words rang in his head in an unrelenting cacophony.

Just a human. Nothing more. Just a human. Nothing more! Just. A. Human. NOTHING MORE.

"I will kill you," Eric promised.

The veins around Solonar's neck bulged garishly, about to burst. Veins of gold flecked the prince's eyes as blood filled his vision. His mouth had opened to cry out but no sound came, instead leaving his lips in the shape of a silent scream. Solonar still did nothing to fight back. He didn't raise a hand to Eric.

The power Eric had over Solonar felt like a drug lacing his veins. It filled him with elation. There was a voice in his head, calling out to him from the darkness of his thoughts, but he couldn't hear it. More likely, he refused to hear it. He finally had strength; he could finally fight back against all the horrors he was forced to endure for five years. He wasn't going to suffer these Fae monsters anymore. He had *power*.

Solonar's eyelids began to flutter, but not from the sunshine of the day beating down on them. Eric's hands shook around Solonar's neck but he didn't loosen his grip. He was so close to killing this traitor.

"Eric!"

Cithrel's voice pealed through Eric's ears and a breath later Eric was thrown from Solonar. His entire body jolted and a lance of pain ran through his ribs as Eric was catapulted into the earth ten feet from where he almost killed Solonar.

Air rushed from Eric's chest as dirt stung his eyes. His head snapped up and peered through the dust to see Cithrel standing in front of Luthais, looking over Solonar's prone body. Eric gnashed his teeth together as he glowered at Cithrel. Of course he was still taking Solonar's side.

The fourth prince's armor glinted in the sun. The emerald cloak was even more pronounced amongst the damage and debris of the wall Eric had obliterated moments ago.

"Move," Eric flatly demanded.

"Eric, stop this." Cithrel raised his voice as a shield glimmered out of thin air and into his grip. "I can sense your aether. It's festering. You need to control it."

"Listen to him, lovely," Luthais called from behind his brother as he attempted to heft Solonar to his feet.

Solonar barely kept his feet under him, but he clung to Luthais. His dazed amber eyes found Eric across the courtyard and held his gaze. He opened his mouth to speak, but his knees buckled. Luthais was fast enough to catch his brother's weight and hold him up.

"You have my word, Eric," Solonar croaked. He took in a ragged breath in between coughs. "I am just trying to help you. I am not the traitor."

Eric snapped. "You're full of lies and twisting the truth!"

"You're being unreasonable!" Cithrel raised his voice over Eric's. "I won't let you hurt yourself or the crown prince, heir to the empire."

A shred of common sense told Eric that Cithrel was right, but after the past few weeks—days, even—he couldn't handle being dismissed anymore. Words of dismissal dug into his skin, rankled his bones. This was a wound that refused to heal. Cithrel didn't have any respect for Eric, let alone care for him. He'd been a damned fool for thinking otherwise. It was pathetic to believe anything else.

"I'm done letting this poisonous family control me and abuse me," Eric called out, his hands flexed at his sides. The ground began to rumble under his feet in response. "I won't be a victim anymore."

"Eric, lovely, please listen," Luthais pled. His face crumpled, his gray hair pulled back into a tight knot while his purple eyes shone. "You know what the Marking on your arm means for us. We can't fight back."

"I don't want to fight all of you," Eric corrected. "Just him."

He raised one of his black stained hands and pointed a clawed finger at Solonar. Their eyes met across the courtyard and neither one of them flinched. In response, Solonar straightened himself and pushed his silver-haired brother away from him. His wounds had had more than enough time to heal by now, and left no trace of Eric's attack. The crown prince pushed past Cithrel and ignored his hissed warning.

"If beating me proves my innocence and puts an end to your ravings, then by all means, Eric. I won't fight back."

Eric stood across from Solonar one breath, and then in the next, he was inches from away. The crown prince had just enough time to smile at him before Eric gashed Solonar's face. The blow echoed in the air as Solonar was thrown to the ground. Gold blood splattered across the stone pathway and dirt.

As Solonar got to his feet, he kept his face vacant and said nothing. He looked at Eric, his feline eyes assessing him, waiting for the next assault. Even Eric could tell he had no intention of fighting back or defending himself.

For some reason, that only angered Eric more. He charged forward and black vines erupted through the ground and swarmed around Solonar.

The crown prince didn't move at all as the fetid thorns constricted around him and dug into his pale skin. Bright gold oozed out from the darkened vines that knotted around Solonar. Still, he didn't cry out or make a move to escape. There was no trace of Solonar's magic in the air either. No scent of ash or smoke.

"Fight back!" Eric shouted, enraged.

"No."

Solonar didn't so much as blink as he replied to Eric, having entirely submitted to his violence.

Eric's features crumpled, as pain accompanied his confusion. His head began to feel like it was splitting, a life of its own now desperate to tear itself apart. He staggered back, clutching his temples.

His teeth grated together as the pain worsened. Eric had no idea what was happening, but it was agony. Every heartbeat felt like a knife in his chest. Blood pulsed through his veins and burned, the acid eating away at it with every second.

No. Panic vied for dominance in Eric's thoughts against sudden clarity. What the hell was he doing? He was about to kill Solonar, the crown prince. That was treason, even with his title. If Solonar died at his hands, there was no escaping this world.

Never mind his freedom. He was losing his humanity.

Please, no, stop. I don't want this. I'm not a killer! His conscience pled with him.

The memory of Eric's last nightmare rushed forward. The vision of Ilphas, his body covered in scars and in the blood of his slain enemies. The image of Eric's predecessor smiled at him, aware that Eric had tried to kill Solonar. He was giving in to the aether and letting it consume him.

"No."

The word was a whisper on Eric's lips when his legs gave out. He was aware of Cithrel next to him, but if he said something, Eric had no idea what. It was also likely Cithrel who shook him, but he couldn't react. His entire body felt as if it was melting, threatening to fall apart and decay on the spot. It was all he could do not to scream.

He deserved this. He was nothing but a hypocrite. His Marking's power had infected him and now it was taking control. He was diseased.

Eric saw the image of Ilphas again, only this time the red-haired Fae wasn't smiling. He wasn't even looking at Eric. His gaze was trained far off into the courtyard, but there was nothing there.

It wasn't until Eric turned to meet Ilphas's eyes again that the blood previously boiling in his veins turned to sludge.

Ilphas's figure mouthed three words to Eric. *Chaos is coming.*

Then the palace courtyard imploded as a wave of pure aether surged through the air. The pressure was stifling and pressed down on Eric. It grated on his bones and pinned him in place.

The phantasm of Ilphas vanished, but in the spot he had been looking at was a Fae Path. Through the portal, dozens upon dozens of Fae warriors and nymphs rushed forward, clad in battle-scarred armor.

The palace was being invaded.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Everything moved quickly, fastest of all Cithrel. He stood in front of Eric, as foreboding as an unbreakable wall. A blink later, twin blades appeared in his hands, their enchanted steel curving to a point and glinting in the daylight. The fourth prince stood tall as his green mantle billowed behind him.

Eric struggled to stand straight under the weight of the sheer pressure of aether in the air. Only a few high-born Fae were capable of this much power that it leaked into the air like this. It made his head swim. This was no ordinary invasion of the palace. No, something like this had to have been planned.

Eric's teeth chattered along with the tremors that rattled the trees, including the great trees that caged the palace. A long, low rumble filled the air as leaves cascaded to the ground like heavenly raindrops of an oncoming battle.

The air whistled as metal flew before it clanged against Cithrel's unyielding blades. Cithrel roared, his features fixed into a murderous calm as he slashed away the projectile weapon with such brutal efficiency that his own blade hummed from the reverberation.

"Stay close to me."

Cithrel didn't say anything else to Eric and kept his ground. The rest of the courtyard exploded in activity as Imperial Guards materialized to defend the members of the Imperial Family and the palace.

A Fae with razor-sharp teeth and lavender-colored skin charged forth at Eric with a shark tooth sword. At the same time, three other Fae roughly the size of grizzly bears were on top of Cithrel.

Eric planted his feet and took a defensive stance, his blood rushing through his ears as the animalistic Fae darted towards him, his blade ready. He didn't know how he was supposed to defend himself when he couldn't concentrate enough to summon his power.

It didn't matter, though, since the razor-toothed Fae had a blade run through his stomach, black blood pouring from the wound. His face twisted into one of surprise and fury, then his lifeless body slumped to the ground.

Eric looked up at the Fae soldier who ripped his blade from the corpse. He gaped at the sight of Luthais in shimmering silver armor and an emerald mantle. It made sense for every prince to have combat training, but it surprised him that Luthais was so adept. The second prince flicked his blade fast enough to rid the metal of most of the Fae's blood. He turned to look back at Eric, his grave expression softened to a small smile.

"It's good to have you back, lovely."

Heat flooded Eric's cheeks and he managed a weak nod. What the hell happened to him a few minutes ago? It felt like some kind of newborn nightmare that he was trapped in. That wasn't him, except it somehow was. The feeling of power and joy that filled him when he was choking Solonar still lingered. Even after that, when he attacked Solonar, it felt so *good*. And that terrified him.

Eric swallowed down the fear in his stomach and nodded at Luthais. "Thanks," he said.

Their conversation was cut off when Cithrel, Luthais, and Eric were surrounded by several other Fae and nymphs.

Then the bloodshed began.

Eric stared wide-eyed as invading Fae and nymphs were cut down without mercy and with brutal speed by the princes. Cithrel moved faster than Eric had ever seen before. Now that he wasn't just protecting Eric but fighting to kill, he moved with horrific efficiency. Eric flinched when a stray splatter of blood and entrails coated his face in the wake of Cithrel's blade strike.

Eric gaped, hit in an instant by the heat and tinny smell that marred his face. His fingers shook as he slowly reached up to touch his face. Looking down, he saw his fingertips came away stained an inky ebony. The jaws of hell had to be opening up to swallow him whole. Carnage surrounded him, eager to drag him under. It was inescapable. Everywhere he looked there was death.

His Marking pulsed under his skin and sent a hot lick of flame up his arm and into his heart with each beat. The burn was so sharp and demanding that the screams and war cries around him faded away and left a singular desire.

The desire to fight. Eric's hands twitched and his jaw slackened. He shook his head at the notion—once, twice.

His eyes glazed over as he looked at himself. He was covered in gore. Even more blood had splashed and mixed with dirt onto his boots. It felt like all he was able to smell was blood and torn up flesh. None of it was his own blood, but that made him feel worse.

"I can't," Eric answered the pressing thought.

Luthais heard Eric but he didn't notice. The second prince eyed his brother with a knowing look. Cithrel flicked his gaze from Luthais to Eric but said nothing. A second later his blade sung through the sky and impaled a Fae that approached Solonar.

Eric gagged, mostly from the blood that baked under the summer heat. The stench of death was overshadowed by smoke and ash, which Eric feared more.

The crown prince's magic burned with such intensity and brightness that he looked like a second sun, blazing away any impurities. His pulled back midnight hair that now fell all around him and gave him a celestial appearance.

Other enchanted beings crumbled to ashes around the crown prince as his fires burned hotter and more intense. A Fae darted towards the Alonethan heir, its body cloaked in ice like a second skin. It must have believed it could protect itself against the inferno and slay the heir.

That Fae was wrong.

Its enchanted frost melted away in a flash of steam before the Fae disintegrated against Solonar's intense fire. Eric found himself unable to look away from the destructive force of the crown prince. That is, until Solonar turned to face Eric, his face a mask hiding whatever emotion the crown prince was unwilling to convey.

Eric looked away, his brows pulling together. The fire that burned around Solonar reminded Eric of that night in the woods when he was surrounded by flames, trapped by them. Solonar had lured him and hunted him like feeble prey that night in the enchanted woods. Even with the power of the Marking, he hadn't stood a chance against the crown prince.

It was clear that dreadful night was only a fraction of what Solonar was capable of. This time, Eric was on the other side of the infernal blazing wall, protected by the Alonethan heir's magic. The knot of guilt was unmistakable in Eric's stomach realizing this.

Something was wrong. If Solonar was the traitor, he would have found a way to avoid this fight. Instead, he stood between his siblings and the enemies pouring forth, relentless. Much to his shock, it looked like Solonar was protecting Eric.

Eric winced again and met the pale purple stare of Luthais. His face was caked in muddied black blood, a fresh body at his feet. His mantle was torn and stained. How many people had he killed already? Luthais turned so that he faced Eric, his back to Cithrel's.

When he reached out a tentative hand to Eric, all Eric could see were the bodies of the massacred in his nightmares, the scars that covered Ilphas's face.

Eric recoiled from Luthais and squeezed his eyes shut. It was too much—too much killing. He was surrounded by murderers and he didn't want to be one. Except, he already was. He'd killed those nymphs. Even if he managed to spare the life of the third, their deaths were on his hands. No one else took their lives but him.

Eric understood all the nightmares then. They weren't nightmares at all, but warnings, premonitions. He was going to be a killer, swallowed whole by his own bastardized power. Ilphas's warning gave Eric much less time.

Chaos was here. All the talks of war were done. Eric was watching the beginning of a war unfold before his eyes. He was trapped by it, by his curse. He had no choice now but to be the weapon the Alonethan Empire had made him into.

No. Eric couldn't let that happen. He refused.

A flash of light and a pulse of magic ebbed in the air washing over the countless battles being fought amongst the Alonethan soldiers and the invading Fae.

Eric looked past Cithrel and Luthais, even Solonar, and looked towards the flare of incandescence. There he saw a new, separate and much grander Fae Path appear. The pressure it caused in the air with its presence squeezed against Eric's ribs with enough force he thought his bones might crack and snap.

Then the pressure was gone, sucked away in a vacuum where the intense feeling of lightness washed over him. The air filled the trees and stirred the wisteria and willow branches. Leaves floated in the light air in the Fae Path's wake.

A tall figure walked through the Fae Path, bathed in the shadows the portal's light cast. As the figure stepped through, it became taller and larger. Whoever came through that portal dwarfed even Cithrel in stature.

"It's been so long," the shadowed being said as it turned its attention to Solonar. "Ah, there he is, with a likeness so unsettling, it's haunting. The crown prince, son of that treacherous bastard, Volodar."

When Eric followed where the figure looked, he was surprised to see Solonar had paled, his cool skin turning sickly. All of his usual arrogance and predatory grace was gone and instead he looked like a frightened child, horrified to see his nightmares become reality.

The figure sauntered away from the Fae Path and towards Solonar, whose emblazoned fires now sputtered and dulled. The Alonethan heir was petrified with fear.

Away from the portal's light, the shadows melted from the hulking figure and revealed a Fae more magnificent than perhaps even the empress.

Auburn curls crowned the Fae's head, which highlighted his rich bronze skin and gold-flecked onyx eyes. As the Fae male neared Solonar, Eric could see he was easily a head taller than the crown prince, and compared to the heir's slender frame, this Fae was all chiselled and toned muscle. His body resembled a marble statue, his physique forged into a perfect Fae warrior.

The Fae stopped in front of Solonar and looked down at him with a smile that a man might give an ant. His golden armor shone magnificently in the sunlight, highlighted further by the purple mantle that hung from his shoulders. The brilliance of this Fae showed that he didn't need a crown to make it clear he was royalty. His tall and regal stature shone even brighter, as if the sun itself favored him. Rays of light broke through the canopy, illuminating the Fae's presence and revealing his true power. It made Eric think of colorful and vibrant animals that thrived in nature, the kind of animals that were filled with venom. The most poisonous ones.

This Fae royal was the embodiment of that dread.

"We have a peace treaty." Solonar found his voice after what felt like ages of stunned silence. "Your signature is on it."

"And then my father was butchered before my eyes," the Fae replied. Solonar recoiled, the words a whip that split his skin.

"I don't believe that was in the treaty, was it, *Crown Prince*?" The warm-skinned Fae spoke with the kind of trained elegance that was simultaneously condescending.

"You have no right to be here," Solonar shouted. "What you're doing is an act of war!"

"Is that what this is?"

"Your presence and attack on our palace is in direct violation of the peace treaty. How could this be anything other than a declaration of war?" The crown prince's voice shook, although whether from rage or nerves was unclear.

The Fae took a step closer to Solonar then and bent so that he towered over the crown prince.

"My father signed that treaty under false pretenses, only to be slain by that wretch father of yours moments later." The Fae leaned in as if to whisper, but his next words rang out for everyone to hear. "I, King Krysos, signed no such treaty."

Then the palace grounds were bathed in a light so brilliant it was blinding. The King's magic shook throughout the courtyard and luminous aether flowed through the trees, its golden light shining through the veins in leaves and in roots under the ground.

Air burned down Eric's throat and filled his lungs with heat as the king's aether reacted with Eric's Marking. His knees buckled and he collapsed to the ground. Gravel dug into his palms as he clawed the ground for more purchase, as if it could anchor him from the pain that threatened to incinerate him. Tears streamed down his cheeks as the light burned through Eric's closed eyelids. Blasts of white spots danced across his eyelids after the king's power receded.

Eric swallowed as his heart thumped in his chest to an erratic rhythm. He blinked away the bright spots and saw that Cithrel struggled to keep his gaze from gravitating towards the king. There was a grim aura around the fourth prince, who was one of few Fae still standing after the wave of the king's aether. Cithrel had materialized a shield to protect himself from the light.

Eric's eyes darted past the king to the Fae Path that still lingered behind him. It was unguarded. Eric's breath quickened as he took in this entire scene. No one paid any attention to him; not in this dire situation. He

thought all his chances of escaping the Fae world were gone, that he would die in this supernatural world and never see his brother again. He thought he would never be free again.

The muscles in Eric's arms tightened, his hands clawed at the ground. Was it worth it to attempt another escape? A few months at worst, a year or two at best, that was how much time he had left if he did manage to get back home. He knew he wouldn't have much time left even if he escaped because of the aether that lived within him—that consumed him. It wasn't even a guarantee that he would get back to the human world, he had no idea where the Fae Path would leave, or if he could control it.

This could be his last chance to have his freedom back, no matter how bad the odds were. If it was only for a month, or a week, he had to try. Even if it was just a day, if he could breathe San Francisco air as a free man and see his brother one last time, it would be worth it.

Ilphas's ruined face resurfaced in Eric's mind then, a reminder. Except now, all it reminded him of was the grim future he faced if he stayed in Alonetha. Chaos was here. War had been declared before his eyes. A war that Eric was expected to fight in, to kill in.

He didn't want that. He would not be a killer.

Eric's eyes fell back to the Fae Path before they darted to the three princes around him. It seemed after the explosion of light, the fighting had ceased. Everyone's attention was on King Krysos, and now Solonar.

Solonar still stood after that wave of magic, but barely. The crown prince looked weak on his feet as he stood before King Krysos, who stood tall and confident. Cithrel and Luthais struggled to find their footing while blind, along with the rest of the courtyard.

If Eric could channel his magic into one final burst, he should be fast enough to reach the Fae Path before the princes could react—he hoped.

Eric closed his eyes and let everything else around him fall away. All the bloodshed, the wind in the trees, the scent of magic in the air, the world, everything drifted away until there was silence. Then, he heard the voice.

Volodar.

This is not the answer. You have to fight, Eric.

"I will fight." Eric's hands balled into fists at his sides, resolute. "I will fight for myself. I will fight to be free."

He didn't give the spirit of the emperor time to answer because right then, he found his aether. Eric reached out and seized the magic that plagued him. Before, it had been like sprinting through sludge to reach the aether that lived in the Marking and like holding fire to use it. Now, it was as easy as closing his fist and breathing to use the aether's power. It was his.

When Eric opened his eyes again, they were black and the world was in monochrome, but he was still himself. He was in control.

He gathered the magic in his limbs, let it course through his blood, and concentrated its power one final time. The power of the Marking pooled around him and waited to be unleashed.

Then, Eric unleashed it.

It was a mad effort as the courtyard around him exploded in a flurry of his thorns and vines. They propelled him forward, faster towards the Fae Path, and shielded him from the oncoming onslaught that swarmed around him.

Eric heard voices shouting at him. He was sure one was Cithrel's, but he blocked it out. Whatever he and the prince had was a means to an end. When Cithrel hadn't chosen to listen to Eric, it was clear to him what they were—he just didn't want to admit it to himself. It was always temporary. Both their confusing relationship and his being in this world in the first place.

It made it easy for Eric to focus on reaching the Fae Path. He rushed forward, the portal humming with untamed magic and his bones sizzling in anticipation. He'd never gone through a Fae Path while he was conscious before, but his body reacted to the swirling magic as if drawn to it.

Eric heard shouts and screams behind him. He felt the Fae that charged at him, attacked the cage of thorns that surrounded and protected him, but the thorns were an extension of him. He felt their strength, he knew they would hold against the onslaught around him. Whoever the attackers were, they weren't going to be fast enough.

His heart swelled as he neared the Fae Path. He was so close now, only a few steps away from finally being free. After five years it was all going to be over. Eric was finally going to go home.

Eric stopped moving, his body brought to a violent halt. His entire body slammed against a wall of his own putrid vines and thorns. The barbs scratched at his skin in a desperate attempt to protect himself from crashing

to the earth hard. Eyes wide and wild, he frowned, confused. Was he through? Did he make it? The frown deepened as he tried and failed to move, his vision growing fuzzy around the edges.

Someone shouted behind Eric, horrified and furious. Was that shouting because Eric was trying to escape? Or something else? Eric thought it might be Cithrel, or maybe Solonar, but he couldn't tell. His thoughts seemed hazy all of a sudden, like he couldn't connect any dots on a simple maze.

It wasn't his thorns that stopped him in his tracks. His blurred hazel eyes looked down at what had stopped him and saw a silver glinting blade protruding from his chest. Crimson stained the clothes around the blade and was already forming a puddle at Eric's feet. As pain started to reach his nerves through the shock, Eric was slow to bring his gaze up to the wielder of the blade that stabbed him.

Glowing green eyes stared back at Eric.

Malor pressed the blade deeper into Eric's chest until only the hilt was visible. Blood spilled from his mouth as Eric choked, some of it staining Malor's armor. An angry splatter of red blood coated the black doe crest.

Then Eric was sure he heard Cithrel's voice behind him. All he could make out was one word. *Traitor*.

Eric's jaw slackened, the power of the Marking likely the only thing that kept him alive, and stared at Sir Malor. His thoughts moved slow and with great effort, as if being dragged through sludge.

Cithrel had been right when they fought. It wasn't Aimar or his brother who was the traitor. Solonar wasn't giving Eric half-truths, either, back then. He'd been telling Eric the whole truth. The crown prince would never betray the throne he wanted to ascend.

Malor had been the traitor all along.

Eric scoffed, then choked on more of his blood. God, it was getting harder to breathe, to stand. He wanted to sleep. He'd been such an idiot, blinded by his own hatred and fears that he didn't believe the truth even when it was given to him.

The sound of footsteps brought Eric back to attention, or what was left of his attention, as his consciousness faded fast. He looked up to see the brilliant King Krysos standing next to Malor.

"We have what we came here for," the king said, his eyes roving over Eric. "I see no reason to stay any longer. Bring him."

"Yes, my King." Malor bowed his head.

It was wrong, all wrong. Malor was loyal to Cithrel. He was a warrior with the Alonethan Empire. Cithrel, the prince commander, had put his trust in him.

Malor ripped the blade out of Eric's blood-soaked chest. Eric's legs gave out and he collapsed on the ground, broken. Breath refused to come and red tinted his vision. Everything was red.

A smile formed on Eric's stained lips. He should have known better than to give himself hope. He was never going to escape this world. He should have known he was going to die in this place. At least it would be over soon. He wouldn't have to wait for his own power to kill him.

Somewhere far off, Eric heard muffled voices, but he couldn't make anything out. Not that it mattered. He would be dead soon.

As his limp body was dragged through the Fae Path, Eric closed his eyes and accepted his fate. He let himself be embraced by the quiet hold of death and knew he would never be free.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Ice-cold water shocked Eric's system and jarred him awake. His eyes wouldn't open but every muscle, every fiber in his body seared with pain. Was he dead? If he was, this had to be purgatory.

A second wave of freezing water washed over Eric. The liquid ice set his teeth to chattering and forced his eyes open, bleary and bewildered. His entire body shook from the cold, worse now that it had soaked through his clothes.

If you could call them clothes. His bloodied and torn-apart clothes were gone. Instead, little more than rags covered his body, which cried out in pain at being soaked in frigid water.

Eric hugged himself to lessen his shivers as he took in his new surroundings. Cold black stone floors that stretched on as far as he could see did little to help his shivering, nor did the darkness that surrounded him. Every few feet there were dim orbs of light to keep him from being in total darkness, but if there were any windows, they weren't anywhere Eric could see.

It felt like he was in some type of dungeon, not much better than the Black Thorn.

"Get up."

Someone kicked Eric from behind and his hands shot out to catch his fall, jarring his entire chest and causing a blast of pain that shot up through his body. Eric sucked in a sharp breath as he curled up into a ball in an effort to protect himself.

His thoughts clouded as he struggled to remember what happened and how he got here when he noticed the dirtied bandages on his chest he'd bled through. He didn't die after all but he wished he did when he tried to sit up.

"I said get up, you disgusting thing." Eric recognized the voice.

Large hands grabbed Eric on either side and jerked him without care to his feet. Tears welled in Eric's eyes at being jostled. The feeling of his gored injuries being tugged and pulled bordered on torture.

Malor dragged Eric to his feet and then shoved him forward. "Move."

Even though he stumbled forward, Eric managed to find his footing, and glared at Malor through a wince.

"You son of a bitch," he grunted, his jaw clenched in pain and anger. "How could you? Cithrel trusted you. He chose you above all the other knights, he trusted you that much. How could you betray him?"

Malor backhanded Eric. His head snapped back from the recoil and a fresh bloom of pain filled his head. He saw black spots in his eyes and his ears rang from the force of it. Eric mangled a cry in his throat and careened into a wall.

"Move," Malor spat.

This time Eric did as he was told. The fresh aching won over anger. He was slow to regain his balance but managed as Malor jabbed and prodded him forward without care, like Eric was a creature.

Eric held himself close as Malor escorted him, to where he didn't know. The halls were no warmer than the dungeons, the walls a smooth obsidian with a continued absence of windows. The only indicator that he'd left the dungeons was the increase in how many glowing aether lights lined the halls. There were dozens upon dozens, which made the stretch of hall appear to go on forever.

Everything about this place was cold and devoid of life. It shouldn't be possible, but somehow this place was even more of a nightmare to be trapped in than the Alonethan palace. Wherever he was, it was a dark, dark place.

As his teeth chattered between breaths, Eric kept his head low and did his best to avoid Malor's attention. The knight's glowing gaze had always seemed guarded, a little off in general. Now Eric knew why.

He struggled to come to terms with the fact that not only had he been wrong about everything, but that he'd been fooled so easily. Eric's head hung a little lower. He should have seen it coming, but he gave into his emotions and let his anger and hatred for the Fae cloud his common sense and judgement. Solonar was right about everything. He told the whole truth to Eric the entire time. Did that make him just as selfish as the monsters in this world? Was the aether flowing in his veins making him just like them?

Eric gritted his teeth as Malor shoved him from behind again to move faster. A fresh jolt of pain arced through Eric's shoulder blade and along his spine. As he steadied his rough breaths, Eric realized just how comfortable he had been living in the Alonethan palace. All it took was a handful of

months to make him forget how he was treated by Aimar and how much he was abused.

Eric cursed himself. He should have trusted Cithrel, and now he was probably never going to leave wherever he was alive.

Malor shoved Eric around a corner and his shoulder slammed into the wall. The first thing Eric noticed after he got over the aching was the shimmering of filtered light. Finally, there was sunlight.

This hallway was much shorter than the previous one and it took Eric longer than he'd admit to realize he had been walking uphill the entire time. That was why the dark hallway felt like it went on forever—the dungeon was underground.

Several turns later—mostly left ones, Eric noted—he was used to Malor's pointed manhandling and managed to avoid tripping over himself or running into things. Either that, or the noticeably warmer temperature helped to soothe his raw and painful wounds.

It wasn't until they neared a set of purple and golden imbued doors that arched far above Eric's head that Eric guessed where he was being taken. He swallowed the lump that stuck in his throat as two Fae servants appeared out of thin air and unlatched the doors to swing them wide open.

Sunlight danced in the room, its warmth bouncing from reflection to reflection before it bathed Eric's skin. The room shone radiant, even more so with the king seated at his throne, rich violet robes cascading across the dais around him.

Eric was in the Throne Room, to be judged by Krysos Therion, the King of Belfir. His breath shook as he was brought forward to stand before the king. Every step felt like a recurring nightmare, forced to put his life in the hands of noble Fae. Only this time, this felt infinitely worse.

Without warning, Malor kicked at the back of Eric's legs. Eric had no time to react and his knees slammed into the ground. The sharp ache shot up through his legs and into his chest, sending a fresh shot of adrenaline to his heart. Blood rushed in his ears, deafening him as he looked up at the king.

King Krysos looked down at Eric with an amused smile, like someone with a new plaything. Sunlight gravitated towards the king and set his bronze skin to glistening. Opulent gold earrings studded the king's pointed ears and glinted in the light, which only drew the eye to the most

magnificent piece of all. A pure golden crown rested upon Krysos's head. It was the perfect piece for the Fae. It matched his sardonic smile, with the crown resting crooked on his auburn curls.

The air in the room staled and dried up in Eric's throat. Everything felt too dry and hurt. Eric licked at his cracked lips, all at once aware of how thirsty he was. Malor appeared in front of him, chains with manacles in his arms. Malor wasn't gentle as he bound Eric and the metal scraped off skin along Eric's knuckles, wrists, and ankles. By the time the green-eyed Fae finished, Eric's skin had been raked raw and his limbs were ten times heavier.

It wasn't until Eric tried to move with the chains that he felt the magic seep into him, attacking his muscles and bones like a virus. The aether-imbued chains infected his body with a poison that worked its way deeper and deeper under his skin. He tried to speak or do anything, but found himself pinned and petrified by the metal links.

All the while, the king watched in silence, unsettling amusement on his flawless features. When Malor stood at Eric's side and his clawed grip dug into Eric's shoulder, the king spoke.

"Welcome," he said. His voice oozed sweet sincerity. "I do believe formal introductions are in order."

Malor leaned over and grabbed a fistful of Eric's hair and jerked his head back. Eric grimaced at his hair being pulled out. Helpless, he knelt there as Malor treated him like a broken doll. Then Malor spoke.

"Introducing His Majesty, the King of Belfir, Krysos Therion." Malor dipped his head, low enough that his face was almost next to Eric's. When he straightened, he continued. "Your Majesty, I present the Marked One, supposedly blessed by the aether. A *human*."

Sir Malor spoke the word human with a level of disgust Eric had never heard before. It made his stomach lurch. All of the tense interactions Malor had with Solonar made so much sense now. The prince must have suspected Malor's betrayal early on. How long had Solonar known and not acted on it? How many others knew that it was Malor? The memory of Cithrel's face twisted with shock and rage was answer enough on that account, at least.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, human." Krysos drummed his fingers on the arm of his throne. "It's been so long since I met one of your kind. I'd forgotten how...small...you are."

Eric looked on, mute, as he was insulted. He knew what the king really meant—inferior. Malor's grip on Eric's shoulder and hair tightened. His eyes began to water as he felt chunks of his hair being ripped from his scalp.

Krysos' fingers stopped their drumming. "You must be beyond your limits by now. My apologies." With a flick of his fingers, Malor released Eric and stepped away from him. "Looking at you now, it's clear to me how harsh aether is on a human's body. I knew the emperor was a cruel man, but even I never thought he would do something so malicious, giving his power to you."

Eric's heart quickened and he swallowed. Malor must have been feeding information to Krysos if he knew how much the emperor's power ate away at him.

Listen to me, Eric, the emperor's voice whispered. You must fight.

Eric shook away the thoughts. He wouldn't use the Mark's power. He didn't even know where he was if he did somehow manage to escape the Throne Room. Every heartbeat sent an ache through his chest. He didn't have the strength to attempt to summon a Fae Path, if that was even possible—he'd never even tried to.

Eric was so lost in thought that he didn't notice the amiable smile fall from the king's face. Krysos lifted a finger and Eric was backhanded across his face by Malor. The Fae king didn't tolerate being ignored.

Eric felt his skin split open on his cheek as the blow sent him careening to the black stone floors with no way to break his fall. Dizzying pain shocked him as his head cracked against the floor. Before he even had a chance to gasp for air, Malor dragged him back to his knees in front of the king.

"It's quite rude to ignore your king when he addresses you, human."

Eric mumbled something incoherent in response, his strained breath muffling his words. Blood dripped from his jaw and onto his clothes and the floor.

"Speak," Krysos commanded, his lazy expression trained on Eric.

"I said," Eric began, his quiet voice growing in volume, "you are not my king."

Eric stared up, unflinching, on his knees and hands bound in chains, at the King of Belfir. The black hue in Eric's hazel eyes blazed with defiance

as a smile formed on Krysos's lips. He didn't reply, but instead rose from his immaculate throne.

He strode down the dais, his purple robes trailing behind him. The king stood over Eric with a piteous smile before he walked around him. He observed Eric like an animal in a zoo, unable to move or escape.

Krysos circled Eric again and summoned a miniature sun in his palm. He spun the blaze around his fingers. "It's a little sad how much they kept you in the dark," he began with a forlorn expression. "After everything they put you through, it's too cruel to never tell you what their fabled Marking was doing to you."

Eric's lip curled back in a silent snarl, the sound of Krysos's mocking voice grating on his ears. What the king said was true, but it made Eric sick to his stomach to hear it out loud.

Eric was going to rip Malor to shreds when he was freed. He was the cause of all this murder and suffering. He didn't understand what someone as loyal as Malor could gain from betraying his empire and siding with a cruel king bent on waging war.

"Look at you." Krysos grimaced, his prisoner no more than a gross inconvenience as he continued to circle. "Scowling up at me like I'm the villain, when they're the ones who've been lying to you from the very beginning."

No. Don't listen. The words were truths twisted into lies.

"I don't think I would be imprisoned right now, otherwise," Eric growled. "Or beaten."

Krysos stopped mid-step, the small sun in his palm going still, its flames licking at his fingertips. He looked at Eric as if he'd mutated into something else. Then an awful peel of laughter came from him, deep and boisterous. He laughed and laughed, filling the high-ceiling throne room with its echoes.

"What makes you think you were ever anything but a prisoner? You and I both know very well that you were nothing more than a captive. That Marking on your arm is no different than the shackles you're in now. The only difference is I'm willing to take the shackles off you."

The words were a slap across Eric's face and stung him as badly as any crack of Lord Aimar's whip. His face burned with shame. So much had changed since the Marking was burned into his skin, chosen by the

emperor. He was blessed and taken in by the Imperial Family and yet, he was no more free. He couldn't go home and every single choice he made since he became involved with the Imperial Family had its own price.

It was getting harder and harder to convince himself that anything the king said was a means to hurt him, especially since he made sense. His life was forfeit; it was only a matter of time. Once the king was done using Eric, he would be slaughtered the same as any captured wild beast.

Well, if that was the case, then why the hell did he give a shit? He lifted his chin, a wicked grin on his lips. The black hue in his eyes grew, gleaming in the light of the Throne Room.

"What makes you think you aren't a prisoner yourself?" The smile on the king's face fell, the sun in his palm winked out. Eric's smug grin spread as he continued. "I heard you talking about the treaty. I've read about the end of that last war. It was over a hundred years ago. You said you never signed a treaty of peace. If that's true, then why did it take you so long to take action? I might be their captive, but what about you? How long have you lived under the boot of the Alonethan Empire? Tell me, what kind of king lives like *that*?"

Krysos stilled, the way only Fae can, his golden eyes gone cold. Eric's smile broadened, the black hue in his irises spreading, seeping into his vision. He ignored the sting in his cheek from smiling, satisfied he'd gotten to the king with his words. Good. He hoped Krysos was angry.

"How many times has your kingdom, your family, been punished by the Aloneths? I read about your kingdom's countless failures. The wasted efforts."

The king said nothing, stood over Eric with his gaze hardened, the royal purple cape falling around him.

Eric's words came faster, leaning forward to leer at the Fae king. "The Kingdom of Belfir is a speck in the history books of the empire. All your talk is just that, *talk*. You call me a prisoner, but you are chained by the empire just as much as I am."

Krysos pulled his hand back, a ferocious gleam burning in his golden eyes as his hand came down, intense light ignited in his palm. Eric's eyes went wide as the king struck him across the face. The smell of burning flesh filled the air as fires as hot as the sun burned and melted Eric's cheek.

A scream tore from his lips as the fires danced across his skin and devoured everything they touched. Pain consumed him as the infernal flames ate away at his body, searing and cauterizing his esophagus.

Every breath sent a trail of fire down Eric's throat, burning his lungs. He tipped over, breaking his fall with his jaw as he connected with the cold blackened stone floor again. Tears stung his cheeks as the salt touched his burns.

His vision blurred before draining away into blacks and grays and whites. His magic fought to bubble to the surface, eager to protect him and fight back. But the power within him was weak, unable to be fully utilized with how broken Eric was. It was all he could do to endure the blinding pain and stay conscious.

The sound of footsteps clacked on the stone, drawing near to Eric's face. Then more pain as the king's golden-clad boot connected with Eric's jaw. The world flashed bright with fresh agony as his face whipped to the side before it slammed back against the stone. An unbearable crunching noise filled his ears as his mouth hung at an awkward angle from the blow.

Bile swirled in his stomach as the world spun. Eric closed his eyes and begged himself to stay awake, to not pass out.

"Pick him up," Krysos ordered.

Vise-like hands gripped Eric's shoulders and jerked his broken body back into a kneeling position. Eric sagged but did his best to meet the king's eyes. The smile reached his eyes, even with his jaw broken. He would not give the king the satisfaction of crushing him.

"What a disobedient thing you are." Krysos's voice was taut. "After everything Sir Malor told me about you, I would've thought you'd be a more well-behaved whore. But I suppose I expected too much from a menial human."

Those words were enough for Eric to spill the contents of his stomach across the floor. Pieces of vomit splattered against his face, bits sticking in his now bloodied and matted curls. He couldn't stay conscious for much longer.

"Not feeling well?" The Fae king mocked. "It can be hard to endure this much pain without the Imperial Family's aether to heal you. They worked so hard to keep their precious human vessel charged."

Eric fought to keep his eyes open as his weak breaths grew shallower. He didn't understand what the king was talking about. What did he mean by that, keeping him charged? He looked up at the king through a bloodied eye, his busted jaw hanging at a wrong angle.

"Didn't you ever wonder why the entire Imperial Family lingered around something as weak and useless as you? Or did you not notice that every victory the empire seized was at the hands of the Marked One? The Marked One is their own personal weapon."

Black spotted the corners of Eric's sight as Krysos stared down at him with a satisfied look injected with venom. His thoughts dragged. What was he talking about? He didn't understand.

"They need their weapon *alive*." Eric felt cold as his eyelids fluttered. The king's words rang in his head. "Their Marking has been eating you from the inside out, just as it does to all of its predecessors. The only way to stop that is with more aether to charge you, to keep you going."

Eric's world slowed. That couldn't be true. What the king was saying meant that everytime Lyari was summoned, or anytime he sensed magic in the air, it was to give him their aether to keep him going. If that was the case, he was already living on borrowed time.

Nausea rolled over Eric as his thoughts swam. That couldn't be true, it couldn't be. But....

"Every touch, any sign of affection, they were all lies. A clever Fae trick." A new pained look washed over Eric's face as the king's words buried in Eric's chest like a lance. "You are nothing but a husk to them."

No. No, that couldn't be true. Every word that Cithrel had said that night before they slept together had been unguarded and honest. Except now, Cithrel's words were tainted by the double meaning to them. Oh, god.

"I'll keep you alive to prove it to you. When one of those imperial bastards comes for you, I'll show you, Eric Becker, just how little a human like you means to them. Then when I spill their blood at your feet, all you have to do is give your power to me. I promise to put you out of your misery if you do that."

The same word repeated in Eric's mind as the cold floors, the damp room, the light from the King's flames, all fell away. The word encompassed everything he was as darkness took him.

Eric wasn't sure how much time passed, but it was all a haze to him anyways. He spent most of his time sleeping or doing his best to treat his injuries. His aether was so unstable with his body wrecked like this, it was all he could do to try and heal his broken jaw. Even that left his face swollen and bruised.

The only sign that days continued to go by was the occasional presence of Malor tossing moldy and stale food into his dungeon cell. The Fae knight always looked pleased when he saw Eric broken and huddled on the dirty floor.

Eric guessed weeks had passed, judging by how often he was fed and how awful he still felt. He had no strength to do much else other than to relive himself in the corner of his dungeon and drag his broken body from where he slept to where his food was always left.

By the third week, Eric didn't have any tears left to cry and instead felt a hollowness deep within him. The empty sensation was almost a comfort to him. Soon everything would all be over. He couldn't bear to keep thinking about every look, every conversation he'd had with Cithrel. It hurt too much to question it all, to know deep down what the real truths had been.

The king's words repeated in Eric's head. All he had to do was give the King of Belfir his power and then he would end Eric's suffering. As the words repeated again like a trance, Eric stared down at the stale bread in his hands. Past the bread, the black and burned Marking on his arm. Maybe it would be best to do what the king wanted. If the princes were only keeping him alive, no, *charged*, to be their death bringer on the battlefield, then he didn't want that anyways.

Suddenly, Eric's dull gaze snapped back into focus. He heard the king's words with new meaning this time. The king had said *when* the imperials come for him, not *if*. That meant Krysos was certain someone from Alonetha would come for Eric.

They might all be manipulative Fae bastards, but they were his only chance to escape whatever hell Krysos was keeping him in. His mind began to race. He needed a plan, he needed to be ready when someone did come for him. First, he needed to find a way out of this cell.

After several hours, though, Eric was no closer to finding any weaknesses or means of escaping this cell. That meant his only opportunity

was when Malor came to bring him his next meal. When Malor opened the cell, that was his chance to escape the underground dungeons.

His mind worked to remember the last time Malor had brought Eric's food. Everything was so foggy as he worked backwards in time in the cell. With how much food he had left, it was a safe guess that Malor must have come by in the evening yesterday. Eric didn't know how much time he had left before someone would come for him.

Slowly, Eric dragged himself back to where he slept and curled up with the scraps of what should have been a blanket. Then, like every time he trained with Elasuin, Eric closed his eyes and began to concentrate. The world drifted and fell away as he receded into a trance.

Eric was going to find a way to use his Marking to fight and escape.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Over the next few weeks, Malor never said anything when he brought Eric's meals. This time was no different as Eric heard his footsteps approaching. Malor came into view not long after and stood on the other side of the wall of Eric's cell.

Eric knew the drill well enough after weeks of the exact same routine. He curled up on his makeshift bed at the far end of the cell, facing the room, and didn't move a muscle.

Malor watched him all the while, green eyes glowing in calculation. Once he was sure Eric couldn't or wouldn't move, his power flashed and a previously non-existent doorway formed.

Eric studied every movement Malor made through barely-open eyes, searching for any sign that his guard might be down. But the Fae knight was cautious. Malor kept his own gaze on Eric, a permanent grimace on his face. It was clear Malor hated the fact that he had to keep feeding Eric like a servant.

It conjured an uneasy feeling in Eric's stomach at how plain Malor's emotions were now. For months and months Eric had known Malor to be reserved and stoic. The unease twisted and knotted there as Eric was reminded of just how little he actually knew about the Fae in this world, even after so many years.

Eric was brought back to attention when Malor let the plate of stale food clatter to the floor, spilling its cargo across the damp and dirtied stones. This was nothing new. It was nicer than usual since half the time the Fae preferred to crunch the hard bread under his boot.

"Thanks," Eric muttered.

His voice was low but loud enough for Malor to hear the sarcasm. In one fluid movement, the Fae's green eyes flashed across the cell and he backhanded Eric. The same gash on Eric's cheek from over a month ago split and re-opened and fresh blood spilled on the stone floor.

Eric gasped from the sudden pain, while his head jerked to the side and narrowly missed slamming against the jagged walls. Black spots dotted his vision as he cradled his injury. The throbbing was insistent and burning hot.

He told himself it would be worth it when the fourth prince came for him, he just needed to endure it.

Malor's green eyes blazed with a renewed fury in the darkened cell as he stood over Eric's curled up body. Neither one of them spoke, with Eric's ragged breaths filling the silence. Eric said nothing else as Malor left, and the enchanted doorway vanished.

Eric's breath steadied once the Fae was gone. He got to his feet to stand before the cell wall Malor left through.

His mind was already working as his palm pressed against the wall. It was the same kind of enchantment that Cithrel used on Eric's room back in the Alonethan palace.

As he drew in a long breath, Eric closed his eyes and called on his aether. The slithering feeling of living plants and vines crawling along his limbs was unsettling, but he pulled that power forth. Then he exhaled and released the bottled energy.

There was a spark of ultraviolet light and then the wall disintegrated away to reveal the dim lit corridor of the dungeons.

Eric looked down at his hand and frowned. "I need to be faster," he said to himself.

With a sigh, he turned away from the opening and let the wall reform behind him. He'd been practicing breaking enchantments and healing his wounds for weeks now, but he had little improvement to show for his efforts.

It didn't help that every time he used his power he felt weaker, like a drained husk. He pinched the bridge of his nose in an effort to get some relief from the growing headache. His bloodied and torn-up face was starting to really sting now too. Eric dabbed the blood away from his cheek and did his best to try and stop the bleeding.

It wasn't until a few days later that something was different—Malor didn't have a plate of food with him. The Fae knight glowered down at Eric, not unlike when someone looked at a bug. This must be it. The day Eric was waiting for. He was being summoned by the king.

Eric shoved down the involuntary swelling in his heart at the thought that Cithrel, someone, was coming for him. Eric kept his face even, despite the hammering of his heart in his ears. Eric pushed the curls out of his eyes when Malor stood at the enchanted doorway and steeled himself. His palms

were sweating and he squeezed his fists tight to shake off the nerves before he spoke.

"What, no boot flavor today, traitor?"

Malor whirled on Eric at the taunt like he always did, except this time Eric was ready. Just as the Fae's clawed hand came down on Eric, he blocked the attack. The bones in his forearm ached from the force of blocking the blow, but Eric was already moving.

All of his time meditating and his training with Elasuin would culminate here. He had to overpower Malor.

The Fae's eyes blazed an unnatural green with anger at Eric's defiance. Eric kept his focus and channelled as much of his aura and power into his punch as he could. He brought his fist into the pit of Malor's stomach.

Malor's eyes went wide before he doubled over from the blow. He coughed and spit up some vomit. But if he cried out, Eric couldn't tell, since all he heard was the rush of blood in his ears. Eric saw some blackened blood dribble from the Fae's lips, but he didn't stop.

Eric had already stepped into his next attack and brought his knee into Malor's jaw. The glow in Malor's eyes guttered and dulled before his body slumped to the ground. His chest heaved as he watched the Fae's body to make sure he didn't get up. When Malor stayed down, Eric rushed to the wall and seconds later, his aether slithered to the surface.

He shattered the enchantment in the same breath and sprinted down the aether-lit corridor of the dungeons. Eric didn't look back. He was sure Malor wouldn't stay down for long. He had to get out of this dim-lit maze as quickly as possible.

At first, he stumbled a few times, his limbs trembling from adrenaline. It wasn't until he allowed himself to properly breathe that he moved faster. Eric remembered the turns he and Malor made on their way to the Throne Room weeks ago; he'd spent most of his time memorizing the route until it was second nature.

He rounded the next corner and saw sunlight in the distance when the ground under his feet rumbled with what felt like an earthquake or explosion.

Shit.

Eric pushed through the sting in his muscles. That sound meant one thing. Malor was coming. His chest burned and pounded with each footstep

and heartbeat. His limbs already felt weak from using his Marking, but he couldn't afford to use any more and collapse.

Instead, he ran as fast as he could and hoped he could evade Malor. Every breath was a lick of flame in his throat, but Eric kept going as he rounded another corner that led him out of the dungeons.

That was when he felt the pressure in the air. It was thunderous and overwhelming. Eric braced himself for the weight of Malor's aether, but the raw power of it knocked Eric off balance and he collapsed to the ground.

There was just enough time to throw his hands out so he didn't smash his face into the stone floors. Skin scraped off the palms of his hands but Eric scrambled back to his feet, his eyes straining against the sunlight.

The back of Eric's mind warned him that he should've encountered other guards or servants by now, but he had no time to stop and consider. Sweat dripped down the nape of Eric's neck like an icy reminder of Malor's power.

Energy thrummed under Eric's skin, the ghost of thorns prickling his nerves as if his vines writhed and squirmed to be let out. He didn't want to let the Marking out—he couldn't afford to, at least not yet. He was sure he couldn't withstand the cost of using it.

Even as he steeled his will, the Marking burned and seared in demand to be let out. It was enough for Eric to stumble and lose his footing. He skidded across the floor and his shoulder slammed into a smooth stone wall.

Eric's whole body ached as he kept running, while the weight on his shoulders and joints of Malor's aether intensified. His chest heaved with each breath but he could tell Malor was gaining on him.

Just then, the floor seemed to tremble under Eric's footsteps again, this time much stronger. Eric felt the fury and anger behind the roar of Malor's magic. Eric wiped the sweat from his face, wincing as his knuckle brushed against his battered cheek too hard. He kept running but the tremors under his feet continued, getting stronger each time.

All those weeks spent honing his magic and refining his escape plan, he forgot just how fast the Fae could be. So Eric had no time to react before Malor rocketed through the air and pinned him against the wall with his hand around Eric's throat. Eric's ears rang from hitting the back of his head on the stone walls and he saw bright spots in his vision.

Malor's grip on Eric's neck tightened and Eric's eyes went wide. He gasped for air but nothing came. Every nerve in his body screamed in pain

and fear as oxygen refused to come. Eric clawed at Malor's hand, but it was no use. The Fae had him completely overpowered.

"Without the empress's protection, you're nothing more than a weak little beast." Malor's eyes blazed with untempered hate. "It feels so good to have my hands around your neck after following that bastard prince's orders for so long. I can't understand why someone as powerful as him would protect a thing like you."

Malor studied Eric's red blotched face for a moment, his hold like iron. Revulsion was plain on his face the longer he looked at Eric.

Black spots blotted Eric's vision and tears streamed down his face. He survived in the Adlar estate for five years. He lived through a prince trying to kill him. He refused to die here.

"You betrayed the one who gave you a life in the palace." His pulse beat at his throat. A wave of aether in its wake. Thump. "You would already be dead if it weren't for Cithrel." Thump. "The archduke suspected you and that's why you had him killed. If Krysos killed him, the border skirmishes would take suspicion away from you and the impending palace attack." Eric's eyelids fluttered as he gasped for air. He choked out the last few words. "All because of a human, right?" Thump.

"How could you have been chosen? You have no right to be blessed by the aether!" Malor roared, his claws crushed Eric's throat. "It never should have happened. I never should have been forced to lower myself to protect you. To take orders from you. The empire is doomed if they believe you deserved the Marking."

Thump.

Eric's world faded to shades of black and gray, as the scent of decay, his magic, filled the air. Malor's eyes glowed but he was too slow to react when thorns and vines skewered him from all angles. The traitorous Fae was piked and contorted by the black rotten barbs. Black blood soaked through Malor's armor and dripped onto Eric's fetid thorns. They pulsed before they absorbed the Fae's spilled blood. Eric's magic fed on the Fae blood.

Eric looked into Malor's eyes. The Fae's expression was warped between shock, fury, and agony. Then his eyelids fluttered closed. A breath later, Eric called back his thorns and Malor's body fell to the castle floors with a sickening thud.

When Eric pulled the aether back within himself, into the Marking, he coughed and gagged. Blood dripped from his mouth, staining his teeth. Using his power had cost him, more than he wanted it to. He had no choice, though, unless he wanted to let Malor or the king kill him.

He turned to hurry away, even as each step sent a flare of pain up his body. Then he realized he wasn't alone in the castle halls like he thought he was.

Eric's heart stopped as he looked into the eyes of a nymph. But not just any nymph—it was the nymph who'd tried to kill Eric at the Alonethan palace. The nymph Eric convinced Cithrel not to kill.

"He won't stay down for long." The nymph's eyes darted around to make sure they were alone. "You should go now."

The nymph made no move to attack him. He was helping Eric escape. It didn't make sense. "Why are you helping me?"

"Creusa told us you were different. Special. It wasn't until the king forced us through the Fae Path to kill you that I realized what she meant. A human that could use the aether? That's unheard of, at least until now."

Eric shook his head, unconvinced. He had murdered the other nymphs in front of him. He was a killer. What happened in the courtyard was done no matter how badly he wanted to take it back.

"I owe you my life." The nymph's black eyes guttered. "Now, my debt is paid to you, Marked One."

His black eyes gleamed in the sunlight that filtered through the castle windows. Eric didn't know if this was just another trap, but he didn't have time to think it over. Malor would be conscious again soon, and all the more furious.

"What's your name?" For whatever reason, Eric needed to know.

"Thyx."

Eric nodded silent thanks to Thyx. The nymph dipped his head once. Then he was gone.

Eric turned and limped down the hallway, his eyes scanning the halls for any sign of a passage or doorway outside. He was so close to getting out! He needed to keep going. He couldn't waste the gift Thyx had given him.

His lips quirked into a grin when he spotted a stained-glass door. Sunlight from outside shone through. If he could just get outside, he was

sure whoever was coming for him would sense his presence and find him. Anywhere was better than this castle and Krysos.

"I never thought I'd be happy to return to Alonetha," Eric wheezed to himself.

With a shove, Eric stood in the open doorway and basked in the rays. Relief flooded him, enough that he didn't notice the shadow behind him at first.

"Going somewhere?" Eric felt a chill run down his spine at the familiar voice behind him.

Eric turned, his blood gone cold, and saw Thyx's lifeless body crumpled on the stone floor. The ends of the king's violet robes were stained almost black as they soaked in Thyx's blood that pooled around him.

Krysos toed Thyx's body out of his way as he stepped towards Eric. "It wasn't exactly clever of him not to notice the lack of guards. Typical of a lowly nymph I suppose."

Eric's eyes fell back on Thyx's body, where his black blood turned the stone floors a shimmering ink. The king stood radiant and flawless, unbothered by the corpse at his feet. It made Eric's gut writhe.

"You're a very predictable thing," Krysos sighed, bored. "I knew a disobedient human like you would try to escape. I am surprised at how far you got. Congratulations. But I would be remiss if I let you go and didn't get to see the look of crushing defeat on your face."

There was a flash of white light that burned molten hot next to Eric's face. "Now let's go greet your beloved traitorous prince together." Then there was darkness.

When Eric came to, the first thing he felt was a sharp lance of pain across his face. His cheek and part of his lip were burned and cauterized. When he winced, the charred flesh cracked and split. The bitter taste of copper filled Eric's mouth and he fought back a grimace.

He was back in the Throne Room and so were the enchanted chains around his wrists and ankles. Only now, a battered Malor was chained next to him.

Malor's birch skin looked as if it had been peeled back to expose flesh. Black blood stained his skin and the floor around him. The Fae's armor had been stripped from him and left in rags little better than Eric's.

Malor caught Eric staring at him and one green eye glowed bright. Where the other should have been was a pit that oozed more black blood. Despite that, Malor's teeth gnashed like a feral beast.

Eric swallowed back the metallic taste of his own blood and looked away from Malor. Because seated on his throne in front of Eric and Malor was Krysos, a lazy smile on his face.

"I knew humans were fragile, but this is dreadfully dull," the king said and rested his chin on his fist. "You look so close to shattering to pieces, it's tedious. I thought you would be far more entertaining."

Eric started to scowl but the severe burns across his face stung at even the slightest movement. Tears welled in his eyes as he did his best not to move.

"Oh, well, not that it matters. I'll have the power of your Marking one way or another," the king sighed. The hazel in Eric's eyes dulled. Krysos grinned as a tuft of his curls fell forward. "Not to worry, human, I only need you alive a little longer. I did promise that I'd spill the prince's blood before you, then I'd kill you. I am a king, and my word is my bond."

The way Krysos spoke made him sound regal, but the mischievous glint in his eyes screamed anything but noble. Eric knew he didn't have much time left. It didn't matter how stupid it was, but Eric didn't want anything to happen to Cithrel, even with the secrets and lies between them.

Suddenly, there was a pulse of what he could only describe as pure aether. The sensation was overwhelming and assaulted every sense. His head swam as his body hummed with the surge in raw power. It was wild magic.

Eric's pupils dilated as the aether filled his lungs, a combination of citrus and fresh morning air. It was Cithrel, he was here! Except, there was more to the scent. Something mixing with it.

Eric's head snapped to the Fae king, who already had a knowing smile smeared on his lips. "I suppose we can begin," Krysos said.

The godlike Fae descended the dais, his brilliant violet robes trailing behind him. The smile was still on the king's face even after he turned his attention from Eric to Malor.

The air left Eric's lungs as the surprise on his face was mirrored on Malor's. Malor dipped his head in fealty as Krysos stood over the Fae.

Eric's pulse thrummed in his neck. He had no idea what the king was going to do, but something felt sinister in the air.

"How long have you been a knight, Sir Malor?"

The calm words made Eric shrink away out of instinct. Malor raised his head but didn't meet the king's unflinching gaze and instead kept his single eye trained on the floor at Krysos' feet.

"The greater portion of a century, my King."

Krysos nodded along, his expression thoughtful. "I see." The king studied his palm, then his knuckles, and finally his fingernails. "You say 'my King' so easily for a knight who served the Alonethan Empire for so long."

Malor opened his mouth to speak but Krysos continued. "I'm afraid I don't quite trust you to remain faithful, given how quickly you seem able to betray your sovereign."

At that, Krysos summoned an orb of light that burned so fierce it was blinding. Eric was thankful he couldn't see anything because soon the agonized screams of Malor filled the air. Then, silence, as the light dimmed and dissipated.

When Eric opened his eyes, next to him laid the blackened and charred husk that was once Malor. Eric's eyes widened at the same time as his jaw clenched. The sight of a burned and mutilated corpse made him sick. He gritted his teeth to keep from being sick again. He would never get used to the sight of death.

A second pulse, this one much stronger and incensed, filled the air around them. The wave of Cithrel's scent coursed through Eric again, and there was that other scent, too. He couldn't place what the other scent was because that was when Krysos turned his attention back to Eric.

"They're very close now," the Fae king said with a toothy grin. "Besides, I don't need a knight who can't even control a single decrepit human. Don't you agree?"

Eric's teeth ground together at the same time as the Fae king chuckled to himself. Krysos sauntered over until he was close enough that Eric felt the king's breath on his cheek. Without care he gripped Eric's chin in between his immaculate fingers.

He let out a stifled moan as some of his burnt flesh peeled away from his face in Krysos's hold. Tears welled and spilled over automatically, the

salt stinging his burnt flesh even more. Eric squeezed his eyes shut to keep the scream in.

"At least you know when to be quiet now," Krysos drawled.

The Fae king's brilliant amber eyes shone with anticipation. He was overjoyed to watch Eric suffer in agony. He leaned in until their lips were almost touching and Eric smelled the cinders of Malor's flesh.

"I can hardly wait to taste the power of the Marking. It's going to feel so good ripping Volodar's last breath of aether from his dead vessel."

At those words, the Throne Room exploded. Shards of obsidian stone and luxurious wall fabrics disintegrated in a blaze of fire amongst the falling rubble.

Krysos let go of Eric as they both turned to face the source of the explosion. Joy and fear warred for dominance in Eric's chest at the unmistakable sight of platinum blond war braids.

Cithrel strode through the devastation, twin needle blades in either hand. The look on the Prince of Blades' face was one Eric knew all too well. The look of the ruthless and cold fourth prince of Alonetha—the look of death—and it was directed at Krysos.

The Fae king's lips quirked, as if an intruder was a minor inconvenience. "If it's only one of you little princes, it won't even be fun for me."

Cithrel said nothing and stepped aside, which revealed a shadowed figure behind him. Eric understood the strange scent of Cithrel now—there was another scent altogether. The smell of ashes and cinders.

"I wouldn't dare leave you unsatisfied, *Your Majesty*. Ah, there you are." Solonar appeared through the dust and rubble, a devilish grin on his lips as his cat eyes found Eric's. "I've been looking for you."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Eric's chest squeezed tight at the sight of the two princes. They came for him. He wanted to run to them but his chains kept him immobilized. Guilt curled up in his belly knowing that the crown prince came for him, too, a reminder that Solonar had been the only one honest with him.

"I could smell your stink as soon as you stepped through the portal," Krysos sneered. When Solonar replied with a simple scoff, the Fae king placed his hand on Eric's shoulder and squeezed. Eric couldn't help but let out a pained yelp.

"You have someone who belongs to me." Solonar flexed his wrists as he neared Krysos. "I'm here to collect him."

Eric's brows furrowed in an effort to bite his tongue. He didn't want to give Krysos the satisfaction of hearing him cry out again. That was when he caught sight of Solonar gazing down at him. His feline eyes had thinned to slits, unable to hide the worry that colored his face.

Solonar's features looked paler than usual, like he hadn't slept in a while. Eric puzzled over if the crown prince had actually been worried about him, or if he was worried about the power of the Marking falling into his enemies' hands.

Eric shook the thought away—it was obvious what the heir to the Alonethan Empire was worried about.

"Something that belongs to *you*?" the Fae king echoed. Krysos tilted his head to the side as his hand slid up to Eric's marred and mangled cheek.

Eric bit down on his tongue to keep himself silent as the king's fingers jabbed at his wounds. Solonar's amber gaze honed in on Eric's twisted face, and the crown prince's overconfident façade fell away. His usual smirk melted from his features, exposing the drained and gaunt shade of his skin.

Eric tore his gaze away from the crown prince to face Cithrel and found him already staring back. Cithrel's stare wasn't much better than his brother's. The emotions that were normally locked away behind a wall of cold ice melted and painted themselves across Cithrel's face for Eric to see. His heavy brow darkened his demeanour and created an even stronger contrast to his near-white war braids.

Rage and relief muddled together on Cithrel's face the longer he looked at Eric. The prince looked torn on what to do or say next. Cithrel must have guessed that the Fae king would have told Eric about all the truths the Imperial Family had kept from him.

How could they possibly start to sort through everything that happened between them? All the broken conversations, misunderstandings, and secrets had built up. How badly Eric wanted to be with Cithrel, to feel his touch, hadn't changed. But it was clear things were different than he thought they were.

"I'm afraid you've wasted a journey coming all the way here for this human." Krysos's nails raked along Eric's ruined face. "He still has something I want. Though I am feeling generous. I'm willing to let you have his husk when I'm done with him."

Cithrel's lip curled back, ready to attack the Fae king when Solonar blocked his path. Eric slouched in relief that Solonar stopped his brother. As much as he was angry at Cithrel, Eric didn't want to see Cithrel get hurt.

"As generous as your offer is, that simply won't do." Solonar lifted his chin and fixed Krysos with his own stare. The two high-born Fae stood off against one another, both bristling.

"I'm starting to see why this human is so disrespectful." Krysos cast Eric a sideways glance that could've melted iron. "You should really learn better manners."

In the same breath Krysos's fingertips dug into the fresh wound on Eric's cheek and ripped. Eric recoiled with a shriek as fresh pain burned across his face. His manacled hands flew to his face as if he could stop the torture. This time Solonar didn't stop Cithrel as he charged forward.

Krysos kicked Eric aside like he was little more than an inconvenience, where he almost slammed into the opposite wall of the throne room. "The Prince of Blades has a temper, my, my." Krysos faced Cithrel's attack head-on. Light blazed in his hands and cast a shadow along Krysos's face that looked like a nightmare. "I wonder if this sudden burst of emotion has anything to do with seeking some semblance of redemption in front of your human courtesan?"

Eric curled up in a ball of anguish. His hands cradled his face in an effort to stop the bleeding when he felt slender cool fingers brush along his hands. Solonar pressed his hand to Eric's and let his power flow into him.

His shoulders slumped as the pain subsided. Able to think somewhat clearly, he couldn't look away from the fight that raged in front of him and Solonar.

Krysos launched himself at Cithrel, light burning and dancing in his palms, and slashed at the fourth prince. The Fae king was fast, but what Cithrel lacked in gifted aether he made up for with speed. The two of them engaged in a macaber waltz of blades and light. Cinders sprayed and metal clanged in the throne room.

Eric watched with strangled breaths, a pitiful lump on the ground. Solonar held Eric close and kept his head propped up to get whatever air he could. He couldn't look away from Cithrel and Krysos as Solonar worked over him.

It felt nothing like when Lyari used her magic on Eric. Her plants breathed life into his sinew and bones, whereas Solonar breathed fire itself into his lungs, scorching the very air his body inhaled.

"My apologies." Solonar's fingers trembled over Eric's torn-up flesh. The glint in his eyes shadowed. "I'm not very good at using my aether to heal."

Eric blinked. "I didn't think you'd come."

As the words spilled out in the dark Solonar's eyes lightened. Eric paused to cough up phlegm and blood, mostly blood, before he tried to explain. "I thought you hated me and you would be glad to be rid of me. Without my Marking, wouldn't you be free to ascend the throne."

He was sure Solonar pressed harder than he needed to on Eric's wounds when he said that. Eric sucked in a pained breath through his teeth and did his best not to whimper. His nostrils burned at the stench of his own burnt flesh as his wounds cauterized. Christ, he was tired, so tired, of the pain.

The black-haired prince gazed down at Eric with a detached sort of displeasure. Those weren't the words Solonar wanted to hear.

"There are many reasons why I hate you, Eric Becker." Solonar straightened the high collar at his neck with a grimace. "And I can't remember what it was like for time to move so slowly, with every sunrise having me wish to be rid of you."

Eric swallowed, not hiding his own irritation of hearing how honestly he was loathed. Then the weight on Eric's chest got lighter. He looked over

to see Solonar ghosting his fingertips over Eric's chest, his touch gentle. "But rest assured, Eric Becker. I would come for you, every time."

There were no words to say in the space Solonar created between them, so he stared. Solonar stared back with an honesty that laid Eric bare and made him feel more vulnerable than any bedchamber in Alonetha.

What did the crown prince mean by that? He didn't even attempt to deny his hatred for Eric, and yet, it somehow felt like the Fae heir's heart had just been laid bare at Eric's feet.

His thoughts were saved from torture at the sound of metal clashing close, too close, to where Eric laid half-dead.

Cithrel's wounds looked as if they were starting to heal slower and slower each time the Fae king tried to incinerate him. Eric bit down on his cheek and his muscles went rigid. It pained him to move even a little bit, but it hurt worse to watch Cithrel fight and suffer on his behalf. Even if Cithrel didn't have feelings for Eric, he would fight for him, honor bound by his empress.

It was too much to sit and watch this fight happen and do nothing. Eric tested out his strength, what was left of it, in an attempt to sit up on his own. A sharp ache blossomed in his ribs and along his jawline, but he ignored it.

When Solonar began to protest, Eric held up his hand. "I'll be fine." Fine enough to do what he needed to do. "You need to help Cithrel. He's fighting a battle he can't win for my sake."

Eric met Solonar's feline gaze with enough resolution it made the crown prince look away. "I've been Marked by the aether. I'll manage. But there's no point to this prison break if we don't get out of here alive."

There was a beat of silence and then Solonar straightened his shoulders with a snort. When he looked back at Eric there was a renewed fervor to those amber eyes. "It sounds like you're insulting me, Eric." He rose to his feet, his fingertips rolling off of Eric's back as he did, and looked over at the Fae king. "To think the heir to the Alonethan Empire could possibly lose, to anyone, is ludicrous."

Twin fires ignited in Solonar's palms and blazed a deep orange before further igniting into indigo. He glanced over his shoulder and shot Eric a wry look. "My brother has simply been holding my place for me."

Then the room exploded.

Solonar launched himself with such frightening speed that the stone floors cracked and crumbled underneath him. Shrapnel and gravel swirled in the air in Solonar's wake, dust clouding the room. As fast as Cithrel was, even he had barely enough time to dodge his elder brother's attack on Krysos. The Fae king was thrown from Cithrel and slammed into the floor by Solonar before he realized what had just happened. He roared in anger a second before a barrage of searing flames engulfed him.

The crown prince was relentless as he landed blow after blow on the King of Belfir. It gave Cithrel enough time to be at Eric's side a moment later and catch his own breath.

"Are you alright?" Familiar calloused hands cupped Eric's cheek. "Can you stand?"

The touch of his hot palms on Eric's cheek was enough to make him blush. How badly he wanted to lean into Cithrel's touch, to let the prince touch him however he pleased, but he needed to survive this fight first. A deep part of him knew what he wanted probably wouldn't happen again. Their entire relationship was a lie. Cithrel had been doing his duty to the empress and nothing more. He hadn't been honest with Eric. They were just a fling, a one-time physical release, nothing more.

"Not well," Eric said, after the mere effort of trying to stand made his legs scream in protest.

Without a word, Cithrel's arms were under Eric, his strength a silent gift as he helped Eric to his feet.

The temperature in the room was sweltering as both Fae royals battled for dominance in the shattered throne room. If it wasn't for the aether Solonar had given to Eric moments ago, his body would have crumpled under the pressure of their bottomless power. It scared him to see how never-ending the power of Krysos and Solonar seemed to be.

"We need to get you out of here." Cithrel's expression was grim, the blue in his eyes cool and calculating.

Eric gaged his expression, but anyone could see there was genuine concern for his brother. Solonar was losing ground to Krysos, slowly but surely.

His thoughts drifted back to what Solonar said. Why would the future emperor of Alonetha come for him? Why put himself on the line for Eric? It seemed like more than enough for Cithrel to come for him, but why

Solonar? Solonar told Eric the truth, and somehow it only left him with more questions.

As the pressure in the room changed, Eric realized Cithrel was summoning a Fae Path for them. He had never seen one created this close, or really felt what it was like as one formed. A dull hum filled the space in front of Cithrel and Eric as mellow light danced in the air. The light danced and shapes formed near the floor, resembling all the circles in folklore and myths Eric had always read about as a child.

An opaque mirror appeared in front of Eric and Cithrel, the portal itself shimmering as if it wasn't sure whether it was a window or a river. The mystical portal pulled Eric towards it, beckoning him to touch it, to go through it. It wanted to spirit him away and he wanted to listen.

If it wasn't for the doors to the throne room bursting open, he probably would have. Cithrel braced Eric as they spun to face the onslaught of guards and soldiers that charged into the throne room with magic at the ready. The aether of dozens of Fae rippled in the air with enough force to splinter bone.

Eric still held his breath, though, as he saw now they were surrounded and hopelessly outnumbered. His searching gaze found Solonar across the throne room as the crown prince clashed with Krysos without a misstep.

Despite Solonar's artful assault, his crimson and onyx armor was scratched and torn. He was strong but Krysos was just as strong, almost stronger. Eric swallowed hard and brought his gaze back to Cithrel.

"We need to go—now." Cithrel kept his eyes trained on the Fae soldiers that circled them.

"But what about your brother?"

"He'll be fine. I have orders to bring you back safely," Cithrel said. His tone was final.

"Where do you think you're crawling off to?" Krysos appeared in front of Cithrel and Eric all of a sudden. A smile spread wide on the glorious king's face, but his eyes seemed to blaze with rage. "Your disrespect for your king seems to have no end, human."

Eric's mouth hung open as Krysos lunged forward. In one sweeping motion he brought his hand back and across Eric's mangled cheek, hard enough to split the skin and rip him from Cithrel's support. His head snapped back and cracked onto the broken obsidian floor with an audible crunch. He went blind from the pain as his head rang out. The taste of wet

copper filled his mouth and he was sure his jaw was broken again, if not a few teeth knocked out, too.

"I am going to have so much fun ripping your Marking from your broken body."

The King's words sent a chill through Eric's curled-up body that froze him in place. Every inch of his body yelled at him to run, but his limbs refused to move. It felt like those words were Death itself pinning Eric in place.

"Don't you dare touch him!" Cithrel charged at Krysos, who barely spared him a sideways glance.

Sunlight hit Krysos's curls at the same time Cithrel brought down his rematerialized twin needle blades on the king. Except the golden metallic bracer on Krysos's forearm blocked the attack with ease.

"Who are you to command me, low born?" Krysos's head tilted to the side, an amused smile on his face. "Did you really think I was doing anything but playing with you earlier?"

Purple fabric flourished around the Fae king as he thrust his arm down and cast Cithrel's blades aside. Eric watched as Cithrel's wearied face paled a little before it steeled back over. "What you believe is none of my concern. I only act on what I'm ordered to do, and that is bringing Eric Becker back."

There was a flash that illuminated Cithrel and when it faded he looked like another being altogether. Eric understood several things about the cold-blooded Prince of Blades all at once.

His emerald cloak and silver armor were gone, instead leaving behind skin-tight sable armor. Embossed on the center of his chest plate was the head of a doe. Instead of shining, it seemed to drain all the light from the room. A single jet-black blade rested in his right grip. Eric shivered involuntarily the longer he looked at Cithrel. He swore there was a separate aura coming from that blade, like it was its own being. A being that hungered for blood. Eric fought his urge to recoil from the Prince of Blades.

The look on Krysos's face had gone from one of smug satisfaction to simmering fury. "We'll see how long you can last then, *little prince*."

The Fae king turned on his heel and in the same motion grabbed Eric by the throat and dragged Eric with him. Blood and teeth spilled from Eric's

mouth as he gasped for air that didn't come. He struggled and failed to find his footing as Krysos handled him like a carcass.

"Eric!" He heard Cithrel's voice, but he was quickly overcome by a swarm of Belfiran Fae soldiers.

Everything was going to hell so quickly, Eric didn't know what to do, what he could do. Through his panicked haze he scanned through the countless bodies until he found Solonar. The raven-haired prince cut down Fae after Fae with no sign of stopping, his focus on Krysos before falling onto who Krysos had in tow.

Solonar bared his teeth at the Fae king before he all but disintegrated his opponent into ash. With sure steps he stood in front of Krysos and Eric, his jacket clinging to his shoulders by mere shreds. Eric's eyes went wide.

"Oh my, traitor." Krysos looked delighted as his grip on Eric's throat stayed firm. "I think your pet is at a loss for words right now."

Krysos was right. Even if he wasn't suffocating, what he was seeing now took his words away. Solonar's entire torso was exposed and revealed a myriad of twisting black markings that tattooed his smooth skin. The maze of Fae symbols ran along all his exposed skin up to his throat. It was impossible to miss how similar the markings were to what was burned onto Eric's forearm.

It was the tattoo he thought he saw back in the library along Solonar's hands and neck. The one that looked like his and Elasuin's. An oath. A curse.

Solonar realized too late what he was exposing to Eric and caught Eric's stare in a panic. It was obvious he wanted to say something to Eric but no words came out. Eric guessed it was because there was likely no way around the truth.

"Am I not a king of his word, human?" Krysos released Eric and let him slump the floor. His knees slammed into the stone. Eric gagged and spat up some blood. "Here is your proof."

Eric coughed up more liquid in his effort to catch his breath and cursed his body for failing him. He looked up with a furrowed brow only to see Solonar staring back. The crown prince hadn't moved from where he stood, a dark expression on his face. He made no move to reach for Eric, just stood there, gutted and hollow.

Krysos gestured to the crown prince. "You can ask him what those markings mean, but I promise if he refuses to answer you, I will. Though I'm sure you notice some similarities." He gestured between Eric's arm to Solonar's body. Krysos grinned at Solonar. "Will you tell him or shall I, traitor?"

Solonar's hands balled into fists at his sides and his chest heaved, but he said nothing. Eric felt a weight in his chest double at the crown prince's silence. How many secrets had there been? Eric was on his hands and knees as he used what strength he had left to sit up. He felt his heart begin to beat erratically.

"See, human?" Krysos bent to look at Eric as he gestured wildly at Solonar. "He can't bring himself to tell you the truth, even now."

A ball of radiant light crackled to life in Krysos's palm as he circled Eric. His posture was relaxed but every movement felt predatory. "What this traitor, true to form, so desperately tried to hide from you is this very Marking on his body. It looks so much like your Marking because it is your Marking. Well, an extension of it."

The world dropped away from Eric as the Fae king's words sunk in. If that was an extension of his own Marking, which bound Eric to the emperor's power and last wish, then what did Solonar have tattooed on himself? An uneasy knot tightened in Eric's stomach. He had an idea of what that tattoo meant. The sickening feeling spread as his thoughts raced through the past months with Solonar. Every interaction they had, it all changed, had a different meaning.

The understanding must have been plain on Eric's face because Krysos continued. "That's right. The crown prince is bound to you with that Marking. I can see it in your distraught eyes. You know exactly when it happened, now, don't you? I'm guessing right around when the crown prince had a sudden change of heart towards you."

Eric was at his limit. His heart hammered; blood rushed in his ears. This was too much. It was all too much. "This was your punishment." He wasn't talking to anyone, but Krysos and Solonar heard the hushed words anyways.

"A harsh punishment, especially from his own mother. But I'm sure he deserved it." Krysos kept circling Eric, juggling the ball of light in his hand.

"A binding oath like that one would have taken a considerable amount of aether. The crown prince must have made the empress very angry."

Krysos laughed a loud, overjoyed laughter. Solonar had gone blank, his entire body shut down. "Can you imagine being such a bastard that your own mother binds you to a human?"

Eric's attention snapped back to the Fae king, who was all too delighted with the appalling situation. "Let me clarify, human." Krysos jabbed a finger at Solonar, who was little more than a statue now. "That cat-eyed traitor is Marked by a protection oath. A very strong one. No matter how badly he wants to rip your flesh from bone and watch your sinew turn to ash, his life is now directly tied to yours."

The fear and awful sting to Eric's nerves burst in his chest. The room felt like it was spinning and falling away from him all at once as the truth slammed into him in an unrelenting assault.

The way Solonar had constantly appeared around Eric almost out of nowhere. His sudden change in demeanour towards him. The odd way it felt like he was protecting Eric. It wasn't his paranoia. It was all real. Eric belatedly noticed tears streamed down his cheeks. That was Solonar's punishment for defying the empress and trying to murder Eric all those months ago. It all made sense now and it made him sick.

"I told you they never cared about you, human." Krysos stopped his pacing in front of Eric. He was so confident he did so with his back turned to Solonar. "It was nothing but a lie. Even now, he's only here for himself. The blade dancer you swoon over, too, he's just following orders. Likely to protect his pathetic oath-bound brother."

Eric's mouth opened to speak, but no words came out. He just sat there, his jaw slack. He suspected as much, but for a sliver of time, he had believed what Solonar told him. He let himself be vulnerable and be swept up in Solonar's twisted truths. Eric had no one but himself to blame for misplacing his trust.

Eric looked up to see Solonar still frozen in place, unresponsive, and Krysos leaning over Eric, a frown on the King of Belfir's face. "I almost feel sorry for you, human. The look in your eyes is so pathetic. Perhaps I'll tear that Marking from you quickly."

Eric's head fell back down and he mumbled something incoherent. He didn't try to run or fight. It was all too much to bear.

Krysos knelt down until he was almost eye level with Eric. "It's hard to hear you through your tears, human. Speak up." When Eric was still too quiet to hear, Krysos's façade of patience snapped. He grabbed a fistful of Eric's matted curls and forced Eric to look at him. "I said *speak up*—"

Krysos's rage was tempered in an instant when he looked in Eric's eyes and saw black pits instead of muddy hazel. His hand jerked out and festering vines and thorns twisted around Krysos's neck.

"I said, don't touch me again or I'll kill you myself."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

With a haunting grace, Eric rose to his feet. Krysos attempted to burn away the rotted thorns, but it was no use. They multiplied like a hydra and quickly overwhelmed the Fae king.

Eric looked down at Krysos, who had reluctantly fallen to his knees in front of Eric, and caught a glimpse of his reflection in the shattered throne room. A black crown floated above his head and red-tinged black eyes gazed back at Eric. They were his eyes. He was the embodiment of death, a wraith.

Krysos's eyes widened in rage as he struggled against Eric's overwhelming aether. The King of Belfir had never faced an opponent like Eric before and it infuriated him. The room burst into an array of white light and engulfing darkness as Krysos fought harder and harder to free himself of the vines.

Forgetting Solonar and Cithrel, Eric stood there and watched the Fae king's efforts with a detached interest. When Krysos finally burst free, Eric had his palms splayed at his sides.

"How *dare* you," Krysos snapped.

This was the first time the King of Belfir looked like a mess. His normally dazzling appearance was ragged and torn now. The purple robe that wrapped around his body was shorn from him and exposed gold rivulets of his blood that wound down his skin. His gold bracers were shredded and hung from his wrists like paper.

Eric tilted his head and swallowed the throne room in darkness. He was vaguely aware of a noise behind him but he ignored it. He wouldn't let Krysos go unchecked anymore. He wasn't going to stand by and watch others die in front of him. He would stop the Fae king right now. And he would enjoy it.

Power coursed through Eric's veins, a welcome drug. Krysos fought and moved faster than before but he wasn't fast enough. The relentless vines and thorns slithered and darted all around him until Krysos was trapped. The putrid vines caged and confined the Fae king.

Eric revelled in it, the dominance he had over Krysos as his power overwhelmed him. Again, Krysos was brought to his knees before Eric,

bound and fettered by Eric's thorns. It maddened the Fae king, who roared and roared in defiance, to be humiliated and overpowered by a human.

Eric glided across the floor, Death incarnate, and stopped when he towered over the cage of jet-black thorns. As he looked down on Krysos, the corner of his mouth quirked. He couldn't help it, seeing the arrogant King of Belfir brought to his knees and helpless.

The noise got louder and louder behind Eric until it morphed from indecipherable babble into words. "Eric! Stop!" It was Cithrel's voice. He shouted over and over at Eric until he was forced to turn and face the Prince of Blades.

"Stop this, Eric." His chest heaved and his sleek black armor was coated in what looked like ink, but Eric knew was blood. The dozens of Fae that had converged on Cithrel now laid strewn about the destroyed throne room, their blood splattered across Cithrel's blade and armor. It only made the black seem darker, emptier.

"Stop what?" Eric asked. He played dumb, as if he didn't understand what Cithrel was saying to him. He knew exactly what the fourth prince meant; he just didn't care right now. He only hesitated because there was one thing he wanted Cithrel to say to him right now.

"You'll kill yourself if you keep using the Marking." It wasn't what Eric wanted to hear.

He turned his back to Cithrel and caught Solonar's eye, but Solonar made no move to stop him. At least the crown prince was brought back to his senses. "You have no right to tell me what to do, Cithrel Aloneth."

Cithrel shouted something back, but Eric refused to hear him. He cast his black pitted gaze back down on Krysos, who snarled and thrashed against the thorns that bit into his skin and trapped him.

"I'll kill you." Krysos looked up with a renewed venom in his eyes. His words were a promise. "I'll strip that aether from your flayed corpse."

"Go ahead," Eric replied. He looked down at the king with heavy-lidded eyes. "I should kill you right now."

At that, Cithrel began to shout and argue with Eric. He shut the prince out—he wouldn't hear any more half-truths. This was his choice, his final decision. He wasn't anyone's puppet to be manipulated. That decision alone gave him more power than the Marking's power ever could.

"But I won't," Eric continued. "You don't deserve my mercy, but I'm giving it to you anyway. I'm not your killer because I'm not a killer at all. But I am free."

Eric turned his back on Krysos and strode towards the Fae Path that was still open. Somehow Cithrel had maintained that magic. He caught sight of Cithrel's expression and wished he hadn't. It was a look of total surprise. The hurt twisted in Eric's chest like a fresh wound. Cithrel didn't believe in Eric to do the right thing at all. He had never trusted Eric. When he looked over his shoulder at the sound of footsteps, it was Solonar behind him.

They kept walking as Krysos's cries of injustice filled the throne room. It wasn't until Eric stood before the portal, the two princes just behind, that Krysos caught his attention. "If I have to burn down entire forests, I will find you again, human!" Eric looked back at Krysos to see him straining against the thorns. The king ignored the way the black vines constricted tighter as he struggled and bled. "I will raze the Alonethan Empire until you are all that is left. Then I will kill you."

He said one word. "Goodbye."

Eric stepped through the Fae Path and disappeared.

The ethereal light still ebbed and flowed around Eric and the two princes as they landed on the other side of the Fae Path. Whatever magic led them out of the Belfir Kingdom's castle began to seal behind them.

All of the side effects that Eric had suppressed came crawling back to the surface. Dizzying nausea overwhelmed him and he squeezed his eyes shut. The pressure in his skull made him sure it would shatter. He didn't register the thumping sound behind him until it shook the ground around them. The Fae Path pulsed from a barrage of Krysos's attacks, but nothing came through.

Eric's stomach knotted as a shadowed shape moved closer and closer to the Fae Path, until the unmistakable outline of Krysos stood just on the other side of the portal. Eric stopped moving, stopped breathing all together, as he watched. He waited, but Krysos was unable to come through.

It was only when Krysos's figure faded and vanished from the Fae Path that Eric let out his breath. He fell back onto the forest floor they now found themselves on and let out shaking breaths. He couldn't believe it, even though he was the one who did it. His relief was bittersweet. Krysos's threat

rang in Eric's ears, as if on repeat. War was coming, and it couldn't be stopped now.

What was Eric supposed to do? He lifted a hand above his face to study it. Dirt and leaves clung to his fingers, but otherwise there wasn't a scratch on them. Whether it was his own aether or what Solonar did for him, Eric's wounds were almost entirely healed.

He closed his hand into a fist and eyed the Marking on his arm. Would he be Marked until he died? He still didn't know how much time he even had left to live. It was possible that he could delay his impending death as long as he stayed next to the Alonethan family, as long as they kept "charging" him. At least that's what Krysos had told him. Eric swallowed hard at that thought.

Shoving himself upright, Eric looked around and saw Cithrel and Solonar a little way deeper into the forest floor than him. He guessed they were thrown further from the Fae Path since Eric had stepped through first.

The hum of the Fae Path just behind Eric sent an instant tremor through his body. Slowly, he looked behind him. It was still intact, though the vague figure of Krysos was gone. Eric's brows knit together. How could that be possible? Wouldn't Cithrel have stopped maintaining the Fae Path? Or, was someone else entirely maintaining it?

Eric looked back down at his own hands, turning them over a couple times, but they looked the same. He patted himself down, checking for any oddities. When everything felt the same, he was sure it wasn't him or his aether that was keeping the Fae Path up.

Then that meant....

Eric clambered to his feet and looked over at Solonar, who already met his gaze. The crown prince's look was somber. Was Solonar serious right now? Eric felt it then.

The warm summer breeze of California wind drifted towards Eric through the mirror of the Fae Path. The smell of California sycamores and oak trees wafted through. Eric sucked in a sharp inhale, letting the nostalgic scent fill his lungs. It smelled like home.

This was it. This was his chance.

Eric moved to step towards it, but halted. Why the hell was he hesitating right now? He needed to go now, he could finally be free, it was right there,

he could *feel* it. His features crumpled then as he glanced back at Cithrel and Solonar.

Solonar was helping his brother to his feet. Cithrel coughed up blood, the golden color stained down his chin. He had fought and put his life on the line to bring Eric back safely. He was hurt right now because of Eric.

Eric rubbed an absent hand along the back of his neck, filled with a sudden discomfort. He didn't want Cithrel to get hurt, certainly not because of him. He didn't mean for any of this to happen. All those ghastly premonitions were now coming true and he wanted to run away.

That was when Solonar drew his attention again. The raven-haired prince pinned Eric with his gaze. He stood across the forest from Eric, his entire torso exposed, which made it easy to see the Oath of Protection burned into his skin. It mirrored Eric's Marking and more. Even if everything Solonar did for Eric wasn't real, he was bound to Eric.

Solonar nodded to Eric once and kept his grip firm on his younger brother. He was letting Eric go, or rather, he was telling Eric to go. Go now.

Still, his legs wouldn't move, wouldn't take those final steps through the Fae Path to his old life. Why was he hesitating? Eric looked down at the Marking on his arm. The black tendrils that were embedded in his skin stared back at him. The dull churning of aether under his skin was still there but the eerie lurking of something darker was gone somehow. There were no more voices in his head either. Maybe there never was a voice. Maybe it was his own mind and body finding a way for him to cope with the aether in him until he was ready to accept it. He didn't know.

Again, his gaze fell back on the Fae Path. California was waiting for him. The edges of the path rippled, still showing the chance of a lifetime, the chance to have his *life* back. His muscles twitched, his instincts telling him to go, but his conscience kept him rooted. Slowly, he looked back at Solonar. Those cat eyes shone in the forest light and never left Eric's face.

Then Cithrel righted himself and for the most part stood on his own. His eyes met Eric's through the trees and Eric felt his spine tense.

"Will you be able to make it back, brother?" Solonar asked Cithrel, breaking the silence before Eric could react.

Eric's unsteady gaze stayed on Cithrel, who hugged his side with one arm. There was a noticeable hole in his armor that Eric only saw now. He was a Fae warrior, but it had still been one against thirty.

"I'm fine," Cithrel said. He turned his attention back to Eric. "Eric?"

Eric almost broke when those blue eyes softened infinitesimally. He swallowed back the lump in his throat. Two parts of him warred internally. One part that wanted his old life back and to leave this world behind. The other felt like he owed Cithrel for everything he'd done.

Eric cleared his throat and steeled himself. There was only one real choice for him and he knew it. "I'm alright. Whatever Solonar did to me, I feel fine now." It was true. Even his previously broken face was unblemished. Eric squared his jaw. "Neither of you are in any shape to move now, though."

Cithrel went deathly still. His eyes flicked to the open Fae Path, suddenly aware of its existence, and silence fell. Eric watched as the confusion changed and twisted to realization and then a look of treachery. Eric didn't hide the hurt as he saw Cithrel's gaze harden. He told himself this might be his last chance, his *only* chance to get back his freedom. He had to do it, with what little time he had left. However much time Solonar gave him.

"No," Solonar agreed. "We're not."

Eric clenched his fists and lifted his chin. He wished there was a way for him to thank Solonar for this kindness, even if it was a hollow gesture. It was all he could do though to ignore the crashing thoughts in his mind that threatened his escape. He couldn't think about the princes. He had to think of himself.

That singular resolute thought was all it took to ignite the obedient aether inside him. He barely even noticed the burn on his arm as the Marking seared his skin and manifested. The trees trembled and the sky darkened.

Thorns cascaded from Eric's palms, writhing and skittering around him to form a shield. He had enough time to protect himself from the onslaught of blades that aimed to incapacitate him. Cithrel's blades.

The librarian's words resurfaced in his mind as his chest constricted, cutting off his air. *You are Eric*. That meant he didn't belong here, in this world, and he never would.

That was it, then. The line in the ground had been drawn. Eric had known it all along but chose not to acknowledge it, chose to hide from it and let his feelings muddle his brain. He knew that what they had was

nowhere near to love, but it still hurt to let go. Cithrel would always be loyal to the empire, and it was his duty to keep Eric in Alonetha. The Prince of Blades was willing to punish himself further just to keep Eric from escaping. The two of them, a forest and a world apart, both knew that.

If it wasn't for Solonar, who threw himself on his brother, Cithrel probably would have succeeded in stopping Eric. No matter how much Cithrel fought against his brother, he couldn't break Solonar's hold on him. Eric watched as Solonar kept his brother down, one hand pressed Cithrel's face into the dirt. A look of murderous calm covered Cithrel's expression, his gaze dark like a storm.

Cautiously, Eric withdrew his fetid thorns and waited to see if Cithrel would make another move, but he didn't. "You're a traitor, brother," Cithrel said. Then he held Eric with his stare. "So are you."

Solonar's face was wiped of any emotion. "As long as I bear this Oath, I am not. Feel free to take it up with our darling mother, though."

Eric's heart hammered hard enough that each thump sent a reverberating ache through this chest. He couldn't bring himself to answer Cithrel because part of him believed what he said was right. Eric was abandoning them, even after he caused the start of a war. A war he wanted nothing to do with. If he ran now, he was a traitor. Except, Alonetha wasn't his home. It hadn't ever really been anything more than a prison to him. The things he'd been forced to live through, to endure for years, he didn't think he could ever forget them.

"Were you ever going to tell me the truth?" He eyed the angel-faced prince who glared back. "How long were you going to keep things from me? Forever?"

Cithrel's lips thinned. When the silence dragged on Eric continued, needing to get the words out now. "Was I ever anything more to you than a duty? Did you ever even like me?" Still, he kept quiet. Eric sighed, running both hands through his curls. "I'm sorry, Cithrel."

Cithrel's chest rose and fell in a heavy rhythm, but he didn't answer Eric. He just stared with the same wild expression. Eric wondered how much Cithrel had to give up for the sake of the empire, for the sake of his duty. The pain in the Fae prince's eyes was evident. This was a pain he'd held in for decades. Centuries. Golden blood spattered across Cithrel's face,

mixed with the earth and dirt. It hurt too much to keep looking at Cithrel, even if they would never be honest with each other.

Eric's hazel eyes found Solonar's. There was a strange twist to the crown prince's face, but Eric couldn't place what it was. Then it was gone and the same easy confidence was there. Solonar quirked his lips.

"Thank you, Crown Prince."

Solonar huffed a laugh. "Safe travels, Eric Becker."

Eric turned and didn't look back at the raven-haired prince who had once tried to kill him, but now gave him his freedom. He didn't look back at the Fae he'd cared for and wanted to protect and be near. He never looked back, even as Cithrel shouted behind him, cursing him, as he stepped through the Fae Path.

This time Eric hurdled through the air headfirst before he crashed into the earth and landed in nearby brush. He wasn't sure how long he laid there, but after using so much aether and countless near-death experiences, it was a while before he disentangled himself and got to his feet.

Everything felt surreal, like he'd wake up from this dream any second now and be back in the Alonethan palace. This wasn't a dream, though. This was real. The sound of a woodpecker hammering on a tree behind Eric brought his focus back.

He took a moment to assess his body. There were a few shallow cuts along his limbs, and some sore spots that would surely bruise, but other than that he felt fine. He chuckled to himself. How long had it been since he just had a couple scrapes? Eric paused as fear jolted through him. He shouldn't have cuts and scrapes, not with aether in his body.

Eric scanned his arm and his jaw slackened. The Marking that had been burned into his arm was almost entirely gone, except for one small, twisting thorn that wove itself around his skin. Then the Marking vanished as if it dove underneath his skin. Was Solonar responsible for this too? Was he really human again? Was the aether gone?

Closing his eyes, Eric took in a long, slow breath, even as his body trembled. When the magic didn't come forth at his command, he waited. He waited long enough that the unforgiving sun began to set.

Even when he studied his arm a second, third, fourth time, there was no Marking. There was nothing. All that was left was a ghost of the Marking, a reminder that it had been real, but that was it. He was just Eric again.

It was over. Eric was free.

A slight breeze ran through the sycamores then and Eric looked out towards the sun. It would be dark in a few hours and if he was where he thought he was, it was going to take him all night to get down the trail and to a gas station, or to any other living person. The more daylight he could get in, the better. He didn't want to be on this trail with no gear and in these tattered rags if he ran into any wildlife.

A droplet of sweat trickled down Eric's neck and under his shirt as an annoying feeling of longing washed over him. He never thought he'd be happy to feel himself sweat under the California sun. Then Eric began his hike down the trail.

It took less time than Eric initially thought, whether it was all that time training with supernatural beings or the fear that if he took too long, he might wake up from a deep sleep. But after only a few hours, Eric saw the flickering fluorescent lights of a gas station.

He breathed a sigh of relief as the gas station's air conditioning hit his face. The girl at the front desk, gum in her mouth, stopped mid-chew when she saw Eric walk through the doors. He could only imagine what must be going through the poor girl's mind at the sight of him. His clothes were basically rags and he was caked in sweat and dirt. He was a walking warning sign. The girl paled as Eric approached the till and asked for a phone. Her purple dyed hair fell in her face and she was too shocked to brush it out of her eyes as she handed him the gas station's phone.

Eric's thumb froze over the numbers. It had been so long since he'd held a phone, or any technology. He thumbed the worn-out buttons and stared. He wondered if his brother even still had his old number or not. With a sigh, Eric ran a hand through his overgrown and unruly curls. That was when the bulletin board next to him caught his eye.

Looking back at Eric was his very own college student ID picture. The younger version of himself stared back at Eric—awkward smile, freckles, and all. Eric saw there was a number at the bottom of his missing persons flyer. A moment later, there was a ring of the phone on the other end of the line. As he waited for the other end to pick up, he looked back over at the gas station attendant. The gum had actually fallen out of her mouth now. She just stared, wide-eyed and stunned.

He waved back with an awkward smile.

Eric looked away when he heard the other line being picked up. "Officer Becker."

Eric put a hand over his mouth, too overcome by the sound of his brother's voice to say anything. After five years, it was Bryce. He guessed his brother became a cop after all. He wondered what else had changed while he was gone.

"Hello? Is anyone there?" Bryce sounded annoyed, like this was a common occurrence. His brother was just as grumpy as he remembered. That hadn't changed.

Eric blinked away the tears that were ready to spill over and cleared his throat. He squeezed the phone tighter. "Hey, Bryce. It's been a while."

The line was silent for long enough Eric worried he'd been hung up on.

"Eric?" Bryce's voice shook on the other end of the line, like he wasn't sure if this was real, either. That made two of them.

Eric huffed a shaking laugh. "It's me." He didn't stop the tears that fell now. He sniffled. "I'm home."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The professor was barely audible as he discussed translations of Horace, his back turned to the class while he wrote out the Latin on the board. Professor Anderson was almost as ancient as Latin itself, so he preferred to do as much as possible by hand rather than using any technology. Eric typed everything Anderson said that he could catch, which wasn't much.

He heard Jason grumble next to him, who also seemed to struggle to catch everything Anderson mumbled. They'd share their notes after and see how much they had between them, which probably wouldn't be much, considering how Professor Anderson liked to stand in front of the white board and block his handwritten notes for the majority of the class.

Finally, the white-haired professor turned and fell silent, mercifully standing out of the way for the class to see what part of Horace's *Odes* he'd chosen to write down. "What could the possible reasons be for Augustus to commission Horace to write this poem?"

The fourth poem in the fourth book stared back from the board at the front of the room. Every student was silent as the professor's question hung in the air unanswered. Whenever Professor Anderson asked these types of questions, everyone quickly learned they were rhetorical, unless you wanted class to go on twenty minutes past when it should.

Eric caught Jason in his periphery, whose fingers tapped on the table, itching to pack up and leave class the exact moment class ended. Eric's hands hovered over his own laptop, waiting for the inevitable follow-up question.

"Why would Augustus choose to commission him, then, for the Saeculare festival?" Anderson's eyes squinted as he roved over all the students in the room, pausing. "We'll discuss these answers next class. Bring your translations and observations."

With that, the room erupted into motion and chaos. Almost every student at once shoved out of their hard wooden chairs and packed up their belongings. Eric had just closed his laptop when he looked over to see Jason completely packed and ready to join the herd of students to get out of the classroom.

"After that lecture I definitely need a drink," Jason complained, but with an easy grin on his face. "Should we hit up the campus bar or are you in the mood for something a little stronger?"

"Can't. I have to see Bravikov today." He had weekly visits with Dr. Bravikov ever since he showed up at that gas station eight months ago.

Jason's smile fell at the psychiatrist's name. He felt uncomfortable talking about Eric's therapist, or discussing anything related to Eric's baggage, really. He didn't blame Jason. That kind of heavy topic would make anyone uncomfortable. Jason recovered a moment later, laughing at nothing.

"Oh, right." He edged closer to the flow of people and further away from Eric. "I always forget when your sessions are, man. My bad. We'll go for a drink next time. Meet me at the library on Sunday to go over our notes for the presentation?"

"Sounds good. See you later, Jay."

Jason gave one swift nod and waved before he ducked his head and vanished from class. Eric always took his time to leave classes, which usually left him alone with the professor, but the old scholar didn't seem to mind. Professor Anderson was oddly comforting to him. He reminded Eric of the ancient Fae librarian that liked to call him "creature."

Even after almost a year, he still remembered everything. The librarian had been one of a handful of Fae that showed him kindness. He wondered how much that tree had grown by now. Would it even still be growing with the Marking on his arm almost entirely gone? Had it wilted and died?

He eyed the black tattoo that wound around his forearm—the one that only he could see. There was just a fragment of the old Marking left, but ever since he stepped through the Fae Path, it was invisible to anyone else. A fact that caused several serious arguments between Eric and his brother.

A sour feeling washed over Eric then. He didn't have the best relationship with his brother now. He tried not to hold it against Bryce too much. After all, how else was his brother supposed to handle the fact that his younger brother, who'd gone missing in the woods for almost six years, suddenly reappeared?

Eric ran a hand through his hair as he walked the halls. His hair was back to being close-cut with barely any curls left at all, but by now the action was more of a comfort than necessity.

A lot of things were the same, but different. He was back at school and living with his brother again, but school didn't hold his attention the way it used to. His grades were near perfect thanks to all his time studying in the Alonethan library and having to learn an entirely new language. Still, it left him feeling hollow after classes. He didn't see how it mattered now, but he didn't know what else to do with his life. Nothing was able to hold his attention.

Dr. Bravikov suggested he try to reintegrate himself into his old life, even if it was just to go through the motions. Even Bryce agreed to that, which was surprising since all they seemed to do now was argue. The days of them getting along and hiking together were long gone, obviously tainted by Eric's past trauma.

Eric turned the corner and pushed through the doors of the lecture building into the springtime breeze. The wind brushed against his skin and he took a moment to enjoy it. He closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. It filled his lungs and for a split-second, the memories, all of them, drifted from his mind.

Then, they all came crashing back. First, as a whisper. *Pet*. A crease formed in his brow. *Whore*. He frowned as the thoughts assaulted him. *Human*. *Slave*. *I'll kill you*. *I'll kill you!* *I'LL KILL YOU*.

Eric's eyes shot open and he stumbled backwards until he fell against the stone building exterior. He jumped out of instinct from the touch of the stone. It took him several breaths to calm himself down. They were just voices. They weren't real. It was over now. He was a student back in college.

The rest of the walk to his psychiatrist was a grim and brisk one.

He slumped into the chair that sat across from Dr. Bravikov and let out a long exhale. "Good afternoon, Eric," she said. "How are you feeling today?"

Eric didn't meet her spectacled stare. "Not great."

"Can you tell me why?" He heard her pen scribbling onto her notepad. Right down to business, which made sense since he was probably a basket-case level client for her. Nothing but damaged goods, though she hated it when he called himself that.

"The voices are still there." Eric sighed again.

"All of them?"

Eric swore. Eight months later and the Alonethan Empire still haunted him. He was free of Lord Aimar, but that sick bastard still tortured him. He could picture the sneer spread across Aimar's face at Eric's suffering.

"Yes," he managed. "All of them. It was mostly *him* today."

Dr. Bravikov paused her writing to peer at him over the bridge of her glasses. She was well put together every time he saw her. She usually wore monochrome power suits, or some kind of skirt and blazer ensemble. Without fail, her black hair was pulled back into a tight bun, highlighting her deep and rich skin tone. She was flawless, and today that bothered him—it reminded him of the same kind of flawlessness of the Fae.

"Lord Aimar?" she asked.

Eric grimaced. "Yes."

"Did he say anything new today?"

Yes. "No. The same."

Eric knew it was probably a bad idea to lie to his therapist, but he didn't see the point in spilling his guts to her. After all, no one would believe him if he kept on insisting the truth. Bryce almost had Eric committed to a psychiatric ward when their fights got really bad. If it wasn't for Bryce's wife, Ava, Eric would have been in a prison just like Alonetha.

That was when Eric met Dr. Bravikov. She was nice enough, but he knew better than to keep explaining he was abducted by a mythological species and forced into slavery. Still, he did his best to tell what truths he could.

It wasn't unreasonable for him to have been abducted into a human trafficking ring and into sex slavery. It also explained all of the scars that painted his body. Eric chewed on the side of cheek. He still hated seeing all those scars. He must have glared at the area rug pattern for too long because Dr. Bravikov changed the subject.

"How are your classes going? Are you enjoying Latin as your elective?"

Eric jerked his attention back to her. "He's still terrible with notes, but the subject matter is interesting."

Truthfully, he liked ancient studies as his electives now because it was the closest he could get to Alonethan texts. He wasn't about to admit that,

though. The longer the doctor prodded him with everyday questions, the more he felt himself relax.

After their session ended, Dr. Bravikov held the door open for Eric. Her office was empty. "I'll see you next week, Eric. Please ensure you keep taking your medication."

Eric nodded and gave a weak smile. "See you then."

It wasn't until Eric was almost off campus that he let out the breath he'd been holding. He was sick of those sessions and he was sick of his medication. He was so sick of it all.

Eric was free and he could finally put his horrible past behind him. Yet, he still felt lost. He kept walking towards the bus stop that would take him back to Bryce and Ava's place.

Even staying with them didn't feel right anymore. They'd gotten married in the years Eric had been gone and now Ava was pregnant. It felt like an invasion of their space being in their home when they had their own lives going on.

Still, Bryce insisted that Eric stay with them until he felt Eric was ready to get his own place. He wished belatedly that he'd pushed harder to spend the extra money and move onto campus .

Imaginary scenarios and "what-ifs" plagued Eric's thoughts the rest of the bus ride home. It wasn't until he walked up the front steps that he saw Bryce's car parked in the driveway. Eric's eyes darkened. He didn't want another battle tonight.

"I'm home," he announced as he slouched off his backpack.

"You're just in time," Ava called from the kitchen. "The chicken's almost done."

Eric kicked off his shoes and tried to sneak his way to his room, only to find Bryce waiting around the corner, still in his officer's uniform. So much for avoiding another battle.

"Hey, Bryce."

"How was your session today?" His brother ignored any pretense of normalcy.

Eric sighed. "I don't have to answer that." He brushed past Bryce and into his own room before he peeled off his T-shirt. "And you should know better than to ask that."

"I have a right to know how my little brother's doing. A lot happened to you, Eric." His words were soft but they only ever made Eric furious now. He hated the reminder from Bryce.

"Do you just choose to ignore doctor-patient confidentiality? Or do you have amnesia?" It stung sometimes to see Bryce, who shared a lot of Eric's features, except he wasn't covered in the same scars that Eric's body was. Bryce's face darkened and Eric sighed. "I know. Look, can we not talk about this for once?"

Eric dug for a fresh baggy shirt and pulled it over his head. Bryce stood in the doorway of Eric's room with his arms crossed. There was grimace on his face that he didn't hide from Eric fast enough. Even his own brother was disgusted by his scars. Bryce wasn't going to let it go. "Didn't Dr. Bravikov think it was a good idea to talk about things outside of therapy?"

"I don't have to tell you shit about my sessions and you know it," Eric snapped. He couldn't even handle Eric's scars. How the fuck was he supposed to talk about his past? "If you're so curious, why don't you go to your own sessions with her?"

Bryce opened his mouth to speak, but Ava appeared at Bryce's side. Her hand was on his arm, which was all the warning she needed to give her husband. Ava was probably the best thing to happen to Bryce. She had some kind of supernatural understanding. It reminded him of Lyari.

Eric squashed the thought as soon as it sprouted. It was thoughts like that one that led to screaming matches in the living room. Ava didn't know that Lyari was nothing but nice to Eric when he was a slave. For all they knew, any name Eric brought up was from the human trafficking ring. It was only an insult to compare them to people from his time in Alonetha.

"Dinner's ready, guys." Then Ava dragged Bryce off with her and left Eric alone in his room.

Eric spent the rest of the night tossing and turning as nightmares plagued him. He was glad they weren't premonitions like before, but now his mind forced him to relive his worst memories in his sleep. Some of the medication Bravikov gave Eric were sleeping pills, but they didn't always work.

Eric didn't say anything to his brother or sister-in-law as he trudged out of the house and back to campus the next day. His head was in a miserable

fog the entire time. It wasn't until he was halfway across the campus quad that he felt it.

There was a gentle breeze that drifted through the air, but it was different than the winds that ran through California in March. This one was the same breeze he felt months and months ago. Then the scent of citrus filled the air. Eric knew that smell.

Eric's heart began to race. The pounding rhythm was erratic in his chest and he spun around to scour the quad. His hazel eyes darted to anyone nearby until he found him.

Eric would know those platinum blond braids and arctic blue eyes anywhere. He still saw them in his dreams. And nightmares. This couldn't be real, it had to be a psychotic break. The familiar figure stepped closer, until he was close enough for Eric to touch him.

Eric reached out a hand, to prove he wasn't real. He was just another figment of Eric's imagination. But instead of passing through the figure, his hand pressed against the figure's chest.

"Holy shit," Eric breathed. This couldn't be possible, but it was. He was *real*.

The familiar face greeted him. "Hello, Eric."



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