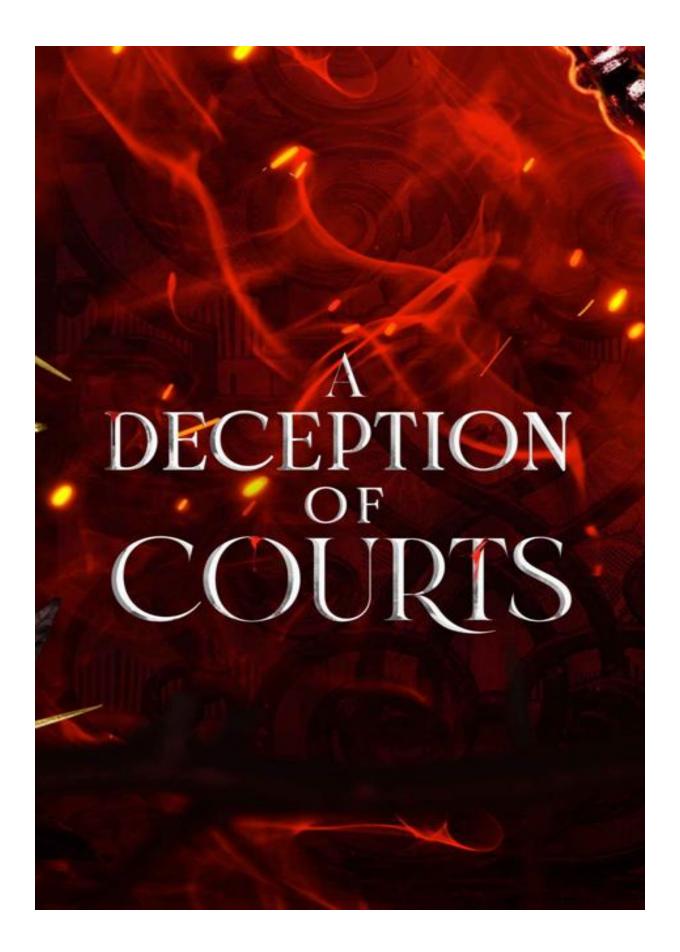


ADECEPTION OF COURTS

A REALM OF FEY SERIES

BEN ALDERSON



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Merlin, thank you for keeping this series alive in your heart, and mine.

T.W - Please be aware this novel contains scenes or themes of toxic relationships, murder, loss of family members, death, abuse, manipulation, anger, grief/grieving, depression, profanity, adult scenes, adult themes and blood/gore.

As much as I work with multiple editors, mistakes and typos happen. Please forgive any that have slipped through the net. If you have any concerns please do contact me on b e n a l d e r s o n a u t h o r @ g m a i l . c o m

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Also by Ben Alderson

he rancid stench of shit, ale and coal-infested smoke burned away at my nose as I navigated the slums of Lockinge city. Flies buzzed around me, but I had grown far too familiar with their presence, I hardly bothered to swat them away.

With my head bowed low and hood pulled over my brow, not one of the human patrons — cursed to dwell within the city's slums — cared to notice me. To them, me and the equally concealed figure beside me, were not out of place.

The Cage, as the slums had been aptly named, was rife with strangers harbouring secrets and dangerous desires. No one looked long enough for fear of being bottled by a drunk or captured by a vagrant, only to be sold on one of the many back-alley markets.

Although the dirtied streets and shoddy residences were full of humans at the best of times, The Cage turned out to be the best place for fey, a mutated human, and a nest of assassins to hide out in. Which, in our case, had been exactly what our band of unlikely allies had been doing in the weeks following the events with Aldrick and his demonic apparition of Duwar.

If Althea had gotten her way, we would have been back in Wychwood by now. Elinor Oakstorm, mother to the deceased Tarron and Lovis and widowed Queen to Doran Oakstorm, had returned to the fey realm safely, as her letter four days prior had confirmed. Accompanied by Cedarfall guards, the Queen of Oakstorm was required back in her court. A court that had believed her dead, killed by Hunters, many years ago.

Information my brief stay in Lockinge Castle's underground prison had uncovered was not the case at all.

Elinor's return to her home had many benefits. Mainly to rally aid. The aid we required back in the human capital city of Lockinge. Which, to Althea's great disdain, was where we had been hiding after we had escaped Aldrick's clutches.

I slept better, knowing Elinor was far from Aldrick. Her innate power of healing was crucial to Aldrick's ability to mutate humans into powered beings. Without her blood, Aldrick could not kill then reanimate any more foolish humans like he had with Duncan.

Duncan. The thought of his name alone conjured the feeling of his calloused hands rubbing up my back and his full, wet lips tracing secrets into the skin of my neck.

Every day which passed only added to the ever-growing panic in my chest. I expected him to break. If it was not for the iron band Seraphine, our gracious host who happened to be one of the lead assassins in the infamous Child of the Asp guild, had gifted him. It kept his power buried. But I could see, deep in his verdant eyes, it lurked. Waiting, like a snake, to strike.

Deep in the belly of the human city, this was not the place for explosions of lightning, which seemed to control Duncan more than he had control of *it*. There would be a time to understand what had happened to him, and until our plan was complete, it would not be now.

A shrill cry of a bird tore me from my mind, back to the moment at hand. I didn't need to look up to recognise the call. Lucari, Kayne's hawk, sliced through the night sky. A smudge of grey and white against the backdrop of obsidian. The creature moved with such speed the drunk men who sang from the steps of derelict taverns would have blinked and missed it. Its two sharp calls gave an obvious message. It was almost time.

"It is not too late. If you tell me you have changed your mind, I will stand by you and come up with another solution."

I peered to my side, catching the glint of hazel eyes beneath the faded burgundy cloak. Even within the shadows, Althea's presence burned as bright as the inner flame sang in her soul. Cedarfall power.

She had yet to reveal what she had promised the Children of the Asp in return for their help in rescuing me from the clutches of the Hand. The Princess of the Cedarfall Court could be as stubborn as a rock amidst a river. Over time, I may have worn her down for the answer, but it was not my priority. I was just thankful she was at my side.

Sighing, I lifted my gaze to the dark outline of the castle far ahead. Lockinge was built on an incline of land. Seraphine had explained the humans once believed the castle was built on the graveyard of a dormant volcano as a tribute to the Creator. A way of ensuring they were as close as they could be to his heavenly domain.

Just the thought alone made me cringe. The castle was once a signal of faith and love for the Creator, it now housed the being hellbent on bringing forth a time of demons and their vengeful God.

"There's nothing alluring enough to stop me from seeing this through, Althea."

Her fingers snaked from beneath her cloak and into the sleeve of mine, whereas she found my hand and held it. The moment of her touch was brief but comforting.

"This could end terribly; you understand the risks, don't you?"

I exhaled, my breath clearing space within the dank, heavy air. "And it could also work. It *has* to work."

"Alright then. Let's do it. I will be by your side until we see it through."

As I had said many times over the weeks, I repeated two words that began to lose all meaning. "Thank you."

My mind, as it did during every moment of silence I was awarded, drifted to the warren-like caverns far beneath Lockinge's castle and to the countless fey entrapped there. How could I have returned to Wychwood knowing what was left behind?

I thought of Jesibel often. Her face burned hot in my mind whenever I contemplated giving up on my wild idea of saving them. She, like the others trapped within the Below, had been stolen and used like cattle for Aldrick's fucked up wishes to create an army of powered human beings that would help bring forth a promise of a demon in a world that had turned its backs on its gods.

How many Icethorn fey had been captured because of my family's death? If I had returned to Wychwood, I would have been taken to my court only to find it empty and void of existence. Because they were here. In Lockinge, buried beneath the ground with iron cuffs around their necks.

Although, to Althea and the others, it may have seemed like a foolish choice. To me, it was the only choice.

My mistakes and grief had led me to this place. I refused to leave it without taking what was rightfully mine.

"You came back for me. What I am doing does not differ from your choice."

Althea kept pace at my side, boots slapping into puddles of Altar-knows what. "I know. Which is precisely the reason I have not snatched you by the short and curlies and dragged you back to Wychwood against your will. This is the right decision. Dangerous, yes. Slightly fucking stupid, but excellently planned, yes."

"Your mother is going to kill me," I exhaled, mind flashing to Lyra Cedarfall, who was a projection of what Althea would look like in the years to come. Burning red hair, eyes glowing with authority.

My comment was not made to make Althea laugh, but it did. She released a gleeful bark into the night, throwing her head back as she did so. "It is not her you should be concerned with, but Gyah. She has grown rather protective of me since our short, unpleasant stay in Finstock."

I found Althea spoke of Gyah a lot. As though her mind was occupied with her personal guard, which was something I had previously known well of myself. It warmed my stomach, watching how Althea's face would brighten at the mention of the Eldrae. Her admiration was abundantly clear across her expression whenever Gyah's name crossed her lips.

"Remind me to keep poking into what is going on between you both," I said.

I stumbled forward as Althea smacked a fist into my shoulder. "If we survive, then I may just tell you. For a trade with the details of you and your Hunter."

"Duncan," I corrected for the hundredth time. I had yet to hear Althea call him by his name.

"Yes, that one. Speaking of the devil."

My heart lodged in my throat as two shadows peeled from the wall of a building ahead of us. We slowed into a walk. If it was not for Lucari, who swooped down from a great height and perched on the shoulder of the shorter figure, I would have believed them to be a threat. When, in fact, they were both the complete opposite. In my eyes, at least.

Wooden shutters flapped in the icy winds, groaning and screeching on hinges that would not survive the night. Plaster crumbled away in patches, littering the cobbled street beyond it with snow-like mounds of worn paint and brick dust. The forgotten, abandoned building did not look like much else compared to the darkened homes which leaned on it from either side. There was no marker to suggest it was one of the many burrows the Asps used as a place for hiding and scheming. After tonight, it would never be used for such a thing again.

I thought of the thin, tired mattress. It had been rolled out beside a cracked oil lamp within one of the top rooms of the building, and felt no love lost for the idea of it going down in flames. Literally. I thought of the down-turned mirror, which had gathered dust since our first night. I found looking into them difficult now. Each time I passed one, I expected to see a molten, horned god staring back at me. Thankfully, Duncan made sure this was one less concern I had by removing the few that had been hanging within our base.

"Anything yet?" I spluttered, practically falling into the outstretched arms of Duncan. He held me close, my cheek pressed into the leather belts strapped across his chest in three lashings. It was dark within the shadow of the building. Not even the moon dared to provide me with enough light to see him. I inhaled deeply, allowing a moment to convince myself it was only him and me with no needs and wants. If I kept my eyes closed long enough, I could have pictured us during another time, another moment. One which didn't include the impending doom of what the night was to bring.

"Seraphine has confirmed the Hand has left Lockinge. But until the signal reaches us from inside the castle, we will not act. It is imperative that Aldrick is far away if we dare hope for success."

I pulled back from Duncan and looked back up toward the ugly outline of the castle far ahead. There was a tower which reached skyward, far taller than any other beside it. The point flirted with the dark clouds, which, now and then, would conceal the pointed tip from view.

The tower was dark. My sight may have been better if my blood was full fey, but I could still make out the slit-like etchings across the tower's walls. Windows. Dark and lifeless. Much like the rest of the castle had been since the night when the gryvern attacked. Part of me had hoped Aldrick's silence resulted from the fact he had died beneath the mirror Seraphine had pushed atop him.

Aldrick was a weak, crazed man. His power to leech into minds and smother another's will with his own was the opposite. It was strong as a web woven from silver. He could have enthralled us all if we got close enough again. It was essential to my plan that Aldrick had left Lockinge before we snuck back inside.

I buzzed with nerves. Not wishing to even blink for fear that I would miss the tower glow with firelight in signal.

"We are hours away from ships reaching us," Kayne warned, expression stiff. Lucari lowered her beak and dropped something small into his hand. "If anyone else catches wind of an armada of fey ships hidden on the horizon of the human capital, it will spark a war before we have a chance to even begin."

I looked him dead in the eyes every time he spoke, which was rarely. There was still trepidation in the way he looked at me. Unlike Duncan, Kayne's years of brainwashing had still yet to vacate his gaze. No matter if he may have believed he hid it well from me, he was wrong.

I had shared my concern with Duncan, who had planted a kiss upon my forehead and promised me Kayne could be trusted. Until he proved otherwise, I would have to let the red-haired Hunter prove himself trustworthy to our cause. His skills as a Tracker had been essential in getting us this far. Without Lucari and Kayne's knowledge, we would not have known of whispers suggesting Aldrick prepared to leave Lockinge.

The moment I felt he was a threat, no matter his friendship with Duncan, I would destroy him. The wary glint in Duncan's dark emerald stare spoke volumes. He understood.

"Show me," I said, trying to keep the harsh command from being too prevalent in my voice.

Kayne nodded, ginger-unkept curls falling across his brow. He outstretched his hand, unfurled his pale fingers and revealed the twig with three distinct golden leaves.

Althea exhaled audibly. "It is them."

I felt a swell in my chest as I regarded my friend. "Elinor did it."

"Never underestimate the bond of friendship. My mother and Elinor have been close since childhood. If there was ever a connection powerful enough to send ships to sea, it would be them."

Kayne fisted the golden leaves, a symbol of Aurelian city. Elinor's letter promised her aid but seeing the hue of the leaves and the golden dust it left stained across Kayne's fingers, it all became extremely real.

There was only a flash of excited anticipation before it all came crumbling back down upon me.

The winds shifted, bringing with it a sharper scent which cut through the smells of the slums. My eyes stung. I blinked away, unable to stop myself from wincing as the acidic scent invaded the back of my nose and throat and clung there.

I stepped away from the building and swallowed the urge to cough violently. "If the signal does not come from the castle, then we take faith in Seraphine's confirmation Aldrick has left the city, and we move. Too much is riding on this."

Soon enough, the horrific smell from the building would alert the intoxicated nightly wanderers of the Cage that something was wrong. This was not the only building which bled such an aura. Spotted around The Cage were other empty buildings now soaked with oil. Ready and waiting.

I felt as though I held my breath. No, the anxiety was more reminiscent of being suffocated. As though a strong, gloved hand held down over my mouth and another pinched at my nose. Someone was speaking, but my mind thundered as though an army of horses stampeded through it. I fixated my gaze back on the dark tower and waited.

"Robin?" Duncan said, with the tone suggesting it was not the first time he had spoken my name. "Tell me you are still with me..."

I ripped my attention from the still dark tower and looked toward Duncan. Even with the iron band around his wrist, I was certain I felt the cracking of sharp, white-hot lightning dance across his concerned gaze. His hand worked circles into my back to calm me.

It worked enough for me to fake my reply. "I'm fine."

"You have a lot on your mind, but do not let it drown you. Speak to me."

I swallowed, feeling as though knives filled my throat. "If I fail them..."

"They will know no different," he replied quickly. "Focus on what you can control and not what you can't. Okay? Keep a clear head."

I forced a smile. If Kayne, with his judging stare, and Althea, with her obvious distaste for the man who touched me, were not at our sides, I would have kissed him. Gods, I wish I could. The promise of losing myself to him was the reward I would give myself when this was over.

"Better?" He asked, dipping his face toward mine.

"Much—"

Perhaps fate was willing to join our band of unlikely allies. It would not have been an impossible thing, considering the group I stood among. A king, a princess, a tracker and a mutated human. Fate may have felt rather at home among our ranks.

Which is why she chose that moment to reveal herself.

A quick, three high whistles broke through the night. Shivers prickled across my skin as I threw my attention back to the tower.

Golden, beautiful fire sparked in existence. Glows of wondrous flame danced from within from one window to the next as though the tower had come to life. To anyone else looking up at the castle, it would have seemed normal. The occupants of the castle were simply choosing to occupy the tower this night.

But to me, it was a signal. One Seraphine had said the few Asps still inside the castle would provide when the time was right.

When the Hand leaves Lockinge, the tower will burn.

It felt as though time slowed to a near stop as I watched the tower burn.

The first explosion rocked the Cage. The sound was so jarring; it restarted my heart.

Far in the distance, buried deep within the belly of the slums, an empty building erupted in flames. I blinked and could imagine brick and glass raining down upon the empty streets. Heat searing across the dirt-covered roads.

Another explosion followed. This time from another pocket of the Cage. Then another. And another.

One by one, the slums of Lockinge shook beneath the destruction of fire. One small spark, it was all it took, and the oil-soaked buildings burst into flames.

"Should we toast to our success?" Althea asked from my side. Carefully held between two fingers, she displayed a corked vial of brown liquid.

"I think that would be a splendid idea," I retorted, joining Althea and taking the same vial from my chest pocket.

One by one, we each pulled free the vial of tonic. Our cork's popped in tandem, discarded on the cobbled street without a second thought.

Seraphine had revealed how she didn't succumb to Aldrick's mind control during her infiltration into his inner circle. The tonic the assassin twins ingested daily — *mariflora* — was basically a flower ground up into a paste and diluted with liqueur. The flora, although native to a particular

woodland in the Elmdew Court, was currently being framed in the basement of one of the buildings that now burned deep in The Cage.

After tonight, we wouldn't need to take the necessary precautions to keep Aldrick from grasping control of our minds. We would be far from this wretched city come morning.

"Bottoms up," Duncan said, winking at me. My breath hitched in my throat; scarlet threatened to overcome my cheeks.

"You wish," I whispered.

Duncan's tongue departed from his lips a second before he pressed the vial to them and cocked his head back. We all followed suit.

"Fuck," Kayne grunted, shaking his head like a dog.

Althea squinted at the vial, not an ounce of disgust across her face. In fact, she brought the empty vial to her mouth and licked the dribble of tonic that escaped down its side. "Grow a pair, Kayne. I'm sure you've had worse in your mouth."

The mariflora burned down my throat, not leaving an inch untouched. It took effort not to choke on a laugh as I watched Kayne's face turn as red as his hair.

"Now we have all had some liquid courage," I said, my mouth feeling like I was breathing fire. "Care to do the honours, Althea?"

She no longer held her empty vial. In its place was a bud of golden fire. It threw light across her concealed face, highlighting the wolfish grin contorting her freckled, beautiful face.

"I cannot even express how much I have looked forward to setting this place alight." Her fire grew in size, sharing in her excitement.

"We know," Duncan added, with a friendly roll of his verdant eyes. "It's all you've been talking about since you first stepped foot in it. Not up to scratch for a princess, is it?"

Althea's grin intensified, flashing teeth at Duncan, who only returned her smile — even if that was not the reaction she was looking for.

"Light it up," I said, secretly feeling the same as Althea. Even if the fire would burn away the grime, mould and stench of the dwelling, I don't think my skin would have rid its memory quite so easily.

"With pleasure..." Althea lifted her arm back as though the fire in her palm was a ball, and she was ready to throw it. "Time to break into a prison and free some fey. Just like the good old days."

I nodded, grinding my teeth with determination at the truth of what was to await.

Althea rolled her shoulders back, tilted her head downward and flashed teeth. "Run."

ockinge was bathed in flame. And I couldn't clear the smile from my face as the city erupted in chaos and fire.

Smoke billowed from the countless buildings engulfed in raging inferno. Its heavy presence blanketed the already obsidian sky until the moon and stars were no longer visible. If it was not for the mask of dark material I had pulled across my lower face, I would likely have tasted ash and charred oil across my tongue, for the air of the city was thick with it.

Duncan kept pace beside me, muscle-thick arms pounding at his sides. Kayne led the party with his hawk slicing through the sky. Althea drew up the rear, though I could not see her as my focus was pinned on the castle ahead. The slapping of her footfalls and laboured but controlled breathing informed me she was close.

Even as humans flooded, sleepy-eyed and terrified, from their homes, I could not help but delight in my excited exuberance.

It's fucking working.

I only risked a moment to glance over my shoulder to see our plan in fruition. Stretching wide across the cramped, dark streets and lanes of the Cage were buds of tangled flames as every dwelling belonging to the Asp burned.

Their sacrifice was meant only as a distraction. Something to draw the Kingsman and Hunters from the castle to investigate the destruction and manage the chaos. This was our way of clearing a path to allow entry back into the castle grounds. A place we had not long escaped. Our return was solely for one purpose. To break into the prison and free the hundreds of fey trapped far beneath the city.

And from the flooding of armoured men and women adorning the white-splashed symbol of the Hand across their chests, through the main streetways from Lockinge confirmed our plan was working.

My ears still rang with the explosive blast Althea had created once she threw her conjured flame toward the building we had called home during the past weeks. No love was lost for the cold, mould-covered rooms and the rats who had attempted to evict us. Even as we passed through the middle sector of the city, keeping in the darkened side streets, I recognised the small inkling of guilt for the lives of the creatures that would now be burned meat back in the slums. Their deaths were the sacrifice that had to be made for the saviour of others.

Sacrifice, the harsh truth of the word, being something I was all too familiar with now.

There was only so much I could have prepared for. And even more details were out of my control. I could not let the pessimistic worries cloud my judgement. There were only so many times I could have mapped out the precise route through the city toward the castle. My mind had reeled with my desire to free the fey from Aldrick's capture. For weeks, it was all I could think of. From the moment Seraphine smuggled us back into Lockinge until now, my focus was on them.

Sometimes, when the winds changed, I could still smell the sewers upon my skin. Clambering through the thick, unknown substances begrudgingly flowing into the ocean through a series of cavern-like tunnels beneath the city. We came back into Lockinge, covered in shit with even more to deal with.

It would all be worth it. At least that's what I convinced myself of over and over during the nights I lay sleepless beside Duncan on the roll-out mattress back in the now burning building far behind us.

First, I required Elinor to secure means of travel for a countless number of fey we saved. A way of returning them home. I'd believed it would have been the hardest challenge ahead, but I was wrong. Convincing Seraphine to give up the dwellings the Asps owned within the city took the most effort. I did it because there was no other outcome, but the cost was great. No matter how many times Althea asked, or Duncan raised a brow in inquiry, I hadn't revealed what I had traded for their help. But as it was with the guild of assassins, nothing was free except in life, only in death was money as useless as breath.

Seraphine had lost everything with her sister's death. Aldrick had taken her twin from her and left her as one piece of a set of two. But coin still bled a darker red than family. I was a fool to even think the assassins would have helped out of the desire to do what was right. As Seraphine had said, her words were still clear even now.

Saving the world from a demon god does not save us from poverty. That is another war in itself.

Right and wrong were simply two sides to the same coin, and the Asps did not care which side it landed on, only that it landed in their palm.

I felt as though we'd been running for only a moment before we came to our planned stop. Kayne pressed himself into the side of the building before it gave way to the main street. It gave the best view of the main parade that led toward the castle. The same parade Duncan and I had been dragged up when we had first arrived in Lockinge. Back when I didn't know the Hand's true identity. Before he revealed himself, the very thing he had petitioned his followers to hunt, capture and kill — fey.

"How many do you see?" Duncan questioned, hardly a breath out of place. He didn't look as though he'd run up the harsh incline of a city, whereas I fought the urge to fold over to catch my breath.

Kayne was silent for a moment, craning his head around the corner of the apothecary shop that provided us shelter. This was the last place to hide before we had to begin the more tiresome fight toward the castle's entrance.

"Forty, maybe fifty, from what I can see. Not counting for those surveying the walls or watching from within the bastard castle."

"Fuck," Duncan groaned. Reminiscent of another time and place when he had expelled the same word under different circumstances.

I pressed up behind him, running a hand up his hard back and lacing it over his shoulder.

"We planned for more," I whispered.

"And hoped for less," Althea interjected, pulling down the covering of material from her mouth. "What are the chances we are up against powered-up humans because that is what will affect our odds?"

Duncan stiffened beneath my hand. I squeezed my fingers into his shoulder, hoping to provide him with some grounding comfort.

"Your guess is as good as mine. I could get a better grasp of the number if you let me send Lucari to scout—"

"No," I snapped, swallowing the urge to shout. "That's not part of the plan. The second someone spots your hawk, it will give us away. Lucari stays with you until we are so close to the guards that your sword has already pierced through the first chest you find. Only then can she be free to tear their faces off."

If my hearing was as strong as Althea's, I would have been certain to catch the sound the lump made in his throat as he swallowed. His silence spoke volumes. I could see the trepidation in his unblinking eyes as he wrestled with himself internally.

"No one is forcing you to take part in this Kayne," I said, stepping closer to him.

Kayne kept his chin raised, looking down the point of his freckled nose at me. "I've made my choice. And I'm here, aren't I? If I didn't struggle with the concept of killing innocent people, I wouldn't be human."

He used his words with intent, and I felt their stab.

"Innocent isn't a word I would have described them as," I replied.

"Regardless, it's done. I fight with you."

"Will you feel the same if you face someone you knew? If the person at the end of your blade is another Hunter you were close to? I need to know that you will slay anyone that stands in the way."

My eyes flickered between his, trying to catch some hint of cowardice. If there were any of that emotion lurking, Kayne did well to keep it concealed.

"Robin," Duncan said, using my name to draw me back to him. Like an anchor, the deep alto of his voice had the power to gather me in his hands and make me feel safe. "Do you trust me?"

"I know where you are going with this," I replied, losing myself in his deep, forest stare.

"Then you don't need me to remind you I trust Kayne, so put your faith in me. Regardless of what his thoughts are towards your...." Kind. He wanted to say it but held back as he caught daggers from Althea. "What I'm trying to say is Aldrick is our common enemy. Ensuring he cannot do what he has done to me again is the first link in the chain that we must break. We can only win if we work together."

"Ever thought of trading in hunting *my kind* for a living and giving speeches to the downtrodden instead?" Althea questioned, head tilting

sideways an inch. There was no denying the sharp steel in Althea's voice. I winced as she sliced through the sudden tension between us.

"I haven't allowed for time to argue," I said before Duncan could retort with whatever lounged across his full lips. Turning my attention, I regarded Kayne and Lucari. The hawk scrutinised me through beady, wary eyes from her perch upon his shoulder. "Kayne, I trust you will do the right thing when presented with it."

"Only one way to find out," Althea replied for him, pushing past us all so she could get a look at the next barrier we had to get through. "So, who's ready for some rough and tumble?"

Duncan grinned, raising his hand to the two-handed hilt protruding from the cloak upon his back. It was his way of confirming he was, in fact, ready.

Kayne drew the twin swords resting patiently on his belt, twisting each in a full arc at his side as Lucari chirped with equal readiness.

I had weapons at my hip and others strapped around my arms and thighs. It was a miracle I didn't cut myself when moving a simple step. However, Seraphine had taken a keen interest in training me in the art of sharp objects. I may not have been accepted into the guild with my skills, or lack thereof. But I was more confident with the handle of a blade in my hand than I had been before.

Although tonight, those were not my weapon of choice.

Nor was a blade or axe something Althea wished to use. I recognised the heat spill from her skin as it reared its presence to the surface. Magic. We would fight with the power Aldrick longed to harvest.

I'd yet to release the hold on my magic, but still, I felt its hunger for revenge. It comforted me.

"Before we go," Duncan muttered, pulling me tight to him.

Our entanglement had been reserved from public displays of affection. It had not felt right to flaunt it around Althea, or Kayne for that matter. They both knew, but still, there was an unspoken rule which kept distance between us when others were around.

A rule which Duncan swiftly broke before we threw ourselves into the pending fight. He pressed himself to me, sword gripped in his hand, to stop himself from reaching out for my face, as I was confident he wished to do. With a quick dip of his head, I found his lips pressed into my own.

A wave of serene peace rushed over me. Before I closed my eyes, I caught the deepening of the single, lined scar which ran from the corner of

his eye to the corner of his lip. It was one of many imperfections I obsessed over. I didn't need to run my finger down its trail to know just how it felt. That was already embedded deep in my mind.

The kiss was soft and far too quick. It was not ridden with the usual tangling of tongues and nipping of teeth at lips. It was pleasant like a compliment, one which warmed my soul.

When Duncan pulled away, I gravitated toward him. My weight fell against his ridged, firm stance.

He breathed out a sigh that sang with a smile.

"My King," Duncan said.

"Shouldn't you bow when speaking to me?" I whispered.

Duncan's bright eyes flashed as he winked. "There will be time for that later once we free your people and amend some wrongs."

I stood, dumbfounded, as Duncan drifted away from me, nudged Kayne on the shoulder and strode out in full view of our enemies. For a moment, I almost called for him to stop, forgetting that this was all part of the plan. *My* plan.

With the confidence of royalty or someone who simply believed he belonged somewhere, Duncan strode from view toward the murmuring guards who first noticed him. Highlighted by the backdrop of the burning slums of Lockinge, Duncan called out with a voice conditioned with command from years of being his prior deadly self.

Duncan Rackley, the Hunter.

"Aren't you going to see what all the fuss is about?" Duncan's shout carried through the night, hardly muffled by the drawing of swords or the twang of bows being pulled taut. "Your city is burning, and you're standing around like you don't have a care in the world."

"Halt!" A Hunter shouted.

Duncan didn't stop.

Come on.

Althea gripped the back of my cloak to stop me from running out.

Where are you?

"Wait," Althea hissed into my ear. "Just wait."

"What was that?" Duncan shouted back. "Come a little closer and say it again. This time, put some effort and inject some confidence into your command... perhaps I might listen."

"Another step, and you'll find yourself pierced with arrows like a turkey during yule."

"Where is she?" I asked Althea, finding words difficult as my heart thumped in my throat.

"Seraphine will come," Althea replied. "Have faith."

Faith. Such a strange concept. It did little but encourage hate and spill blood. I was certain there was a beautiful side to such a thing as faith, but I had yet to find it.

I bit down on my lower lip, filling my mouth with the sharp taste of copper. It was the only thing stopping me from giving into my anxiety and shattering.

"Now, now, I have only come to have a chat. Hunter to Hunter." Duncan was out of view, but his voice was ever the more powerful.

"Hurry..." I said, my inner thoughts now controlling my words. Ice crackled across my closed fists, numbing my palms as my nails dug into them. An icy chill of wind gathered from the dark street behind us and pushed at my back as though to urge me forward.

A whistle cut the night just as it had back in the slums. I could have fallen to my knees as another returned the call, then another and another.

"NOW!" Althea cried, throwing back her cloak, where it fell from her shoulders onto the cobbled street like a puddle of shadows.

Lucari squawked, unleashing her cry of war as she took flight alongside Kayne, who followed with blades raised, into the main parade.

I released the breath I held, called out in silent prayer to Altar for support and followed my fellow allies to battle. All in time to witness the Children of the Asp reveal themselves among the crowds of unprepared enemies. One by one, the assassins drew their blades and spilled the blood of the unexpecting humans across the streets of their oh-so-great capital.

t had been three nights since I last killed a Hunter.

Even with the one, I held onto, skin turning to diamond glass before he could do so much as scream, I still felt the remnants of blood from the last across my hands. No matter how many times I scrubbed at them, the feeling of sickly warmth refused to leave.

After tonight, I would need to bathe in the ocean for an eternity to rid myself of the feeling death left in its wake.

Unlike the nameless Hunter, whose body shattered into thousands of star-like pieces across the courtyard before Lockinge Castle, the one I had murdered those nights ago had a name. One, I refused myself the peace to forget.

Peter Torr. He was a stout human man with black hair thick with grease. When he ran his hand through it, his fingers looked wet. He bore the symbol of his master, the Hand, across his chest. His stained tunic wrinkled as he sat down in the dirtied tavern in the slums. I imagined Peter simply expected that the mark upon his tunic would have benefited him a night of free drinks and free sex with any of the tavern's patrons he so wished.

It had been Seraphine who had provided insight into his whereabouts that night. And she had been right. Peter had sat upon one of the rickety bar stools whose legs screamed with protest at his unwanted weight. Big meaty hands slapped upon the bar as he demanded the attention of the young barmaid that pulled pints of ale for those who had the money to pay for it.

I sat and watched him in the darkened corner of the stale scented tavern, hood drawn over my head to hide the points of my ears from view. Before the Hunter had entered, I felt a thrill of being out in public after days holed

up with Duncan, Althea and Kayne in the dwelling that had become much more a prison than a home. That bubble of excitement for being... free popped the moment Peter barrelled in with his slurred yet demanding voice.

"Fill it all the way," he cooed across the bar, making the young maid wince. From fear or disgust, I was at too much of a distance to be sure of which. "Bet you're good at that girl, aren't you? Getting filled up... and I can certainly do that for you."

I could not hear what she mumbled in reply. A wash of red passed across her face, and she moved quicker to give the Hunter what he wanted just so she could move on to the next customer.

Peter drank and drank. The more time passed, I convinced myself just how easy this would be. I still could not touch a single drop of the amberhued liquid in my tankard for fear I would vomit or grow hazy when all I needed to do was focus.

Seraphine, as I learned to trust, was right about a lot. Perhaps that was what being an Asp was, more so than hidden blades and sleight of hand, but information. Knowledge.

Four drinks. That is all Peter handled before he dug his cumbersome hand into the pocket of his trousers and produced the very thing I had come here for. Keys.

I found my lips turning upward as he did what Seraphine had warned he would do. Men. Predictable creatures. Not all, but most from what I gleaned.

From his pocket, with swollen hands, Peter pulled free a large metal hoop and upon it, three slim keys rested. I recognised instantly from the night in the cage when Duncan had allowed Althea, Gyah, and me to free ourselves of the iron collars that strangled around our throats.

For the first time since ordering the ale, I gripped it and brought it to my lips. Over the lip-worn rim of the tankard, I could not take my eyes off them. Starving, I felt my desperate need for the keys constrict like a serpent deep in my stomach.

I needed them.

Peter swung the keys around as though they were a trophy. A sign of dominance that he was the Hunter and everyone around him was lesser than him. My heart gave a leap of hope that the surrounding humans viewed Peter with equal disgust. Then I remembered it was because of his state and

persona and likely nothing to do with the fact he hunted, captured and killed fey for simply existing.

I itched to throw myself at him. Take the keys from his hand and leave. Or take his hand with them, for it would stop him from doing whatever he contemplated when he glanced toward the barmaid as she passed.

But I waited. Patiently, as I had every day since returning to Lockinge. My end goal was more important than rushing, and I had prepared far too long to waste this moment or ruin it.

Peter left the tavern after his sixth tankard of ale. His sloppy feet stumbled over one another as he moved onto the street. Like a shadow, I followed. He was singing when I stepped up behind him, close enough to taste the bodily sweat that oozed from his hunched, round form. He awkwardly fumbled over his words. In his drunken state could hardly pronounce the lyrics clearly. He would never have known I was there. Peter didn't stop his slurred song until my blade pressed to his throat. It was impossible to discern if he gargled from the shock of the dagger slipping across his neck or if that was an ale-induced hiccup.

Peter Torr bled out into the night, unable to sing or scream as I tore the hoop of keys he held defiantly onto. His wide eyes had stayed open as gargling sounds erupted from the dark slice across his throat. Blood-slick hands grasped at the gash as though he could pinch it together to still the bleeding.

His efforts were wasted, the damage was done.

Peter watched me as I sauntered toward Duncan, who had lingered in the shadows of the tavern's back alley. I felt no remorse as I lifted my redstained fingers to display the keys to him. There was no praise waiting for me in that alleyway. Not that I required it.

Now, three nights later, as I swiftly threw out my hands toward a Hunter who ran toward me with his sword held high, I discovered the guilt. It had been hiding this entire time.

It had buried itself in my gut like a barbed knife. If I reached for it to pull it free, I would have suffered more pain and discomfort. So, instead, I pushed the guilt deeper and deeper with every life I took. But the weight of the keys in my breast pocket helped dampen the feeling, if only slightly.

It's for a greater cause, I reminded myself.

Wild, frigid winds conjured around me and burst forward with a gesture of a hand. It ripped across the ground, encouraging jagged shards of ice to race and burst up from the cobbled streets. The Hunter was not prepared as my ice devoured his feet and lower legs. It was so sudden his bones snapped through his skin as his momentum was ruined.

My attacker folded in on himself, dropping his sword where it skirted to a stop beneath my boot.

"You will only be remembered for being on the wrong side of history," I said, breath fogging beyond my lips. Then I blew out, forcing as much breath as I could muster to cover the Hunter's face until his skin hardened and lungs turned to shards of cold stone.

Two down, countless more to go.

Althea was a tempest of fire. Her flames hissed like snakes as they met the skin of those foolish to choose her as their victim. In contrast to the cold surrounding my body like a shield, I recognised Althea's power pressing against me with demanding force.

I winced against her heat, as bright as a dying star. A vortex of boiling flames that danced to her bidding. They took the Hunters and left them as husks of blistered skin and charred bone.

Althea was an unstoppable force of heat and destruction. The wicked smile that glowed across her face told stories of just how desperate she had been to do this. Like a bird finally released from an iron cage, the Cedarfall princess was free to unleash her magic and send a message to those who opposed her.

My distraction in the raging inferno meant a Hunter got too close to me. A blast of air sliced the side of my face as she swept a blade down toward me. I side-stepped, gasping at the sudden presence. I slipped across the ice-slick ground and lost my footing. If I hadn't, the blade would have found itself buried in the soft skin where my neck met my shoulder.

Duncan must have heard my sharp intake of breath. Such a small sound beneath the thundering of death and chaos, but he heard it. Because he was there, parting from the darkness with his long sword swinging with precise aim.

Unlike the Hunter, Duncan didn't miss his target.

Her head tumbled from her shoulders, dark blood spurting skyward from severed veins. There was so much blood. It spilled and flowed as though Duncan had opened a river and let it flood across her corpse. She stood, animated, before crumpling to the ground where her bodied joined the others that had fallen to our attack.

"Did she hurt you?" He asked, jade eyes wide with terror. I felt them search every inch of me for a sign that Hunter had touched me.

I shook my head, unable to form words, as Duncan's frantic worry mutated into a wild fury. My stomach jolted just watching him as his mind sped through the different circumstances in which those last moments could have ended.

"Good," Duncan exhaled, face paled. Then I noticed the three droplets of blood that trailed down his face like rain. There was no knowing if it was his or that of the woman he had felled. "Stay together now. I do not want you straying too far from me."

I raised my chin, ice crackling around my fingers and tracing my wrist like the bracelet that Duncan wore to keep his new power contained. "It was a moment of distraction. Not weakness. Let the bodies behind me be the reason to prove that I do not need someone to fight for me."

"I fight for you because I care you live, not because I do not think you are capable."

Another Hunter had gathered like a phantom beyond Duncan's shoulder. He had not noticed, failed to the same distraction that had almost lost me my life. Before the blood-covered dagger could plunge into his back, I threw myself into Duncan's unexpecting arms, shot my hand out over his shoulder and took the Hunter by the chin.

"He," I hissed through gritted teeth, "is mine."

Human skin turned grey beneath my fingers as I forced my freezing power across it. Into it. Soon enough, I could tighten my grip, fingers dug into glass-like skin. I tugged, and the lower part of the Hunter's face came away in my hand with little effort.

He stumbled back, eyes wide and bleeding red. Then he fell.

"What were you saying about staying together?" I whispered into Duncan's ear before drawing back, half a face still in my hand. Each tooth fell away from the mass of frozen flesh. They pattered across the street like hail, thudding mutely across the blood-soaked cobbles.

"Point proven," Duncan replied. His torso stiffened beneath mine, which pressed into him. I revelled in the feeling, allowing myself only a moment of enjoyment during such an event.

Then we were apart. Without another word, we threw ourselves back into the fray of battle.

It was impossible to find Seraphine among the small but deadly crowd of Asps that had exposed themselves. The assassins were deep in the courtyard, focusing on the wall of Kingsmen that had taken the rear of the fight, whereas the Hunters were left to us to pick off one by one.

Lucari shrieked, blood dripping from her beak as she dove and sliced down upon the heads, faces and necks of the Hunters she could reach. I still knew little of the bond between a tracker and their hawk, but Kayne had explained that the tips of a hawk's claws had been painted with liquid iron and left to dry. Its purpose, not that he needed to elaborate, was to weaken the fey the hawk found and to allow time for the tracker and their group of Hunters to catch up with them.

There was something poetic about the Lucari turning her metal sharp claws back onto the very humans she had once served.

Aldrick had to be far from Lockinge for my plan to work. But I almost wished he could see us now. Tearing through the mislead followers. When he heard of this, I hoped he felt the blow.

It was not long until every Hunter, who didn't have the sense to flee into the burning city, died.

Breathless, I stepped over a corpse of a silver-clad Kingsman whose face had been shredded; by a knife or claws, I could not determine.

"Is that all of them?" I muttered, unable to even comprehend the blood that flowed from the bodies into the groves of the cobbled streets, where it ran like rivers between each stone.

"For now." Seraphine's cool voice set my nerves on edge as she peeled away from the wraith-like bodies that paroled the dead, digging swords into hearts or necks just to make sure they had died. "Before sunrise, there is over three times the number of Hunters we have just dealt with who are currently sleeping throughout the castle's corridors. We need to be long gone before the drug wears out of their systems."

"And you are confident the dose is strong enough?" Althea asked, skin still sizzling from her expenditure of power.

"Princess," Seraphine began with a smirk. Her dark hair was tucked into the hood of her cloak, allowing only her eyes and bright features to be exposed to the night. If one were to illustrate an assassin without ever seeing one in the flesh, they would have painted a detailed portrait of the woman standing before us.

"Althea will do just fine, assassin," Althea replied, lips curling.

"The dosage would have been strong enough to put the giants of old tales into the deepest of sleep. So potent that a naked human covered in spices and oil would not wake them. Yes, the dosage is just fine." Seraphine bowed her head slightly, not drawing her eyes away. "Althea."

The assassin smirked. Her beady eyes traced me from face to foot and back again. "On your request, we move."

I was her current employer, and old habits die hard. No matter how I had tried to express my desire for the Asps to work alongside me, not for me, Seraphine still treated me like her boss.

There would be a time I would truly express how uncomfortable that made me feel, but now was not it.

"Enough time has been wasted," I said, eyes drifting toward the gleaming gate that would lead us upward through the interconnecting courtyard and toward the entrance to the prison. "Kayne, send our warning to the ships. I need them aware of every failure and success until our very heartbeats are in sync."

The whistle Kayne conjured, as his teeth bit down on his lower lip, was no different to a nod in agreement. Lucari dropped from the sky. Landing on the leather band around his forearm, he replied. "See that you all make it out alive."

"Suddenly care for the fey's wellbeing?" Althea questioned.

My skin prickled in reaction to Althea's backhanded question.

"How about I please you with an answer when you return?" Kayne bowed, stiff and forced but still a sign of respect.

Althea's head tipped in some form of acceptance.

I couldn't fathom that we had made it this far. Of course, I had hoped for success, but standing amid the dead with mere moments until we reached the prisoners, I could hardly contain myself. Part of me longed to release a cry of victory until every star could hear what I had done. My bones trembled with anxious energy which would not calm until I unlocked every iron collar and saw every fey captive on the Cedarfall ships.

As if reading my nervous energy, Duncan reached out a hand and gripped my shoulder. "Almost, we are almost there."

We. Such a beautiful and frightening statement, but I was pleased to hear it. Either way, I needed them all. This would have been impossible without the unlikely band of allies. Each who looked at me expectedly amidst the sea of bodies.

I was a King, and it was time I faced the responsibilities that came with that title.

I didn't wear the Icethorn crown but still, I felt the burden of its weight upon me. A constant reminder which ensured each foot stepped ahead of the other. Deep in my mind, there was another face. I had thought of her every day. *Jesibel*.

Duncan, Kayne, Althea, and even Seraphine, knew of the fey woman I had met within the prison. Her face represented them all. It was always at the forefront of my mind, as this plan had materialised out of a single idea.

Free them. Save them.

"In and out," I spoke across our group. My features hardened into a mask of determination. As I had before, I conjured an image of Jesibel in my mind, as if I included her behind the intention of my words. "Our peoples have been kept from their homes, their loved ones long enough. It's time we see them free. As they should be."

Althea bounced between one foot and the other. "It's prison break time."

"About *fucking* time," I exhaled, brows heavy with worry but lips quirking into a grin. "Remember, stick to the plan. And take as many Hunters down as you can."

he huddle of human guards did not notice our arrival until it was too late for them. We slaughtered them with ease. Duncan took the lead down the remaining steps. Blades met flesh, and blood splattered violently across the sand-dusted ground. Their dead bodies were left stationed beyond the iron gate at the bottom of the steep, narrow steps. Whereas the Hunters did not notice our swift arrival until our blades had already pierced through their chests, the fey witnessed everything. Not a single one gave us away.

Deep in the underbelly of Lockinge, the Hunters would not have heard the struggle that had occurred far above this place. The prison felt like another realm, all of its own merit. Hidden away beneath rock and stone, with no way of knowing what occurred in the world above.

The world above could have burned completely; this place and the hundreds captured within it would never know.

I surveyed the crowd of fey, eyes scanning frantically across every face. Even if I didn't wish to admit it, I already searched for Jesibel among them. I was thankful that Althea took charge, snatching a key from the slaughtered humans and stabbing it frantically into the lock. No warning could have prepared her for what waited beyond the gate she opened. Althea knew what lurked down in the pits of Lockinge, but the scowl she wore suggested she could not have imagined this. There were so many. Perhaps even more than there had been when I had last visited.

"Please, gather around and listen," Althea shouted as she swept into the prison, us following in tow. Her voice brimmed with command, but there was a soft undertone that could not be ignored. It had its desired effect. The

fey closest to the gate parted, like water around a stone, as she made her way inside.

I watched from behind her as the expression on the fey's faces relaxed in recognition. Not all of them, but most saw Althea for what she was. Recognising her as the Princess of the Cedarfall Court.

"We are here to free you." I watched the faces morph around me. Hope sparked behind tired, gazed eyes. "To ensure each of you makes it out of this place alive, I am going to need you to listen. For those that cannot hear, spread my message."

Althea stepped aside, turned her body, and gestured me forward. As her attention shifted to mine, so did the multitude of captives.

I swallowed the lump in my dried throat. There was an overwhelming urge to bring my fist to my lips so I could cough and clear it. I feared worse and expected I would give into the violent crash of waves in my stomach and vomit from anxiety alone.

"We thought they'd killed you," one of the fey admitted. It was a man I recognised from my short stay. He pushed his way through the wall of bodies to the annoyance of those around him.

The last time I had seen him, he was gasping for breath after Jesi had sprung upon him, slapping his neck and breaking his nose all within a blink. His dark beard was as wild as before, and the shadows of a blue bruise still haunted his now crooked nose.

I stiffened as he approached. Duncan noticed and stepped close to my side, which had the fey male stopping to a halt. Then he noticed Kayne, Lucari and worst of all, Seraphine, who lingered at the back in hopes she would be forgotten.

"He's finally sent for us all. Tired of keeping us down here, is he?"

"We have nothing to do with the Hand," I called, watching as the stillness of the crowd slipped into disorder.

"Then what?" he barked, spit flicking out of his dried lips where it clung to his wiry beard. The man lifted a calloused finger and pointed to Seraphine, who hardly recoiled at the hate that contorted his face. "She always comes to collect us. The Twins only come when the Hand needs us."

I pinched my eyes closed, wincing at the reaction I imagined would cross across Seraphine's face. Twins. Not anymore. Her sister had died all those nights ago. It was a topic that Seraphine had warned to be left alone. I only hoped, for our sake, she did not react.

"Why not ask your prison guards why we are here?" Seraphine snarled. "Oh wait, they are dead, aren't they? Shame, perhaps they would have clarified that we are here to save you... you ungrateful—"

"Not," I said, making my word as sharp as a newly forged blade. "Now."

"What do you want with us... King?" the man spat, still treating me as anything but the title he used for me. That word felt more like a curse. I couldn't blame his distaste for royalty when, collectively across the courts, they had done little to help him or the rest of the captured fey, who had been abducted, forgotten and killed over the years.

"Your name?" I said, offering a steady hand. "Let us start there."

He contemplated my question, confusion sparked across his fatigued gaze. "Names are earned."

"Then let me do exactly that." My hand snaked into my breast pocket. The slim crafted key that had been a newly made copy of the one I had pried from Peter Torr's dying hands met my fingers and slipped into my grasp. I pulled it free. The man's shoulders broadened as I stepped toward him.

"Allow me to earn it," I spoke as loud as I could muster, wishing that enough could hear me, and then spread my words throughout the crowd. "I made a promise to return and free you all. This is no place for the fey to be kept, and I was not willing to turn my back on you as others have."

Wide-eyed, the fey man looked down the length of his swollen nose as I raised my steady hands toward the worn iron cuff at his neck. It took a moment to find the hole in which the key should enter. It had been rusted over from years of being left. I found it. With little force, the key pressed inside and turned with ease.

It seemed the entire prison took an inhale at the same time, including myself. I withdrew my hands and allowed the cuff to break apart. It fell to the ground in twin pieces with a satisfying thud.

He stood there, dumbfounded, with his eyes fixated on the iron that rocked to a stop by his boots. If he blinked, he would have released the tears that clung desperately to his lashes. When he finally looked back at me, his skin had paled. Even his voice was broken as he spoke through a dry, clogged throat.

"Michal," he said. "My name is Michal."

My chest filled with an abundance of gratitude. I allowed myself a moment to swell with the realisation that I had done it. I had followed through and freed a fey. One of hundreds, but it was a start.

"Michal, you are free."

His dirt-covered hand raised to his neck. Disbelief crackled across his face as his fingers met the red raw skin hidden behind the iron for countless years. "Tell me what you desire of me, and I shall do it. For you, King Icethorn, I would travel the world if you asked it of me."

I placed my hand on his shoulder, thankful for the strength of his form. With my spare, I presented the silver key to Michal. Hidden within the inside pocket of my jacket, I had a fistful of spares ready to hand out. If we had a chance of getting out of this place quickly, then our small group would need all the help. It is why we had many copies of the keys cut, each ready to pass through the crowd when the moment was right.

"Help me free them all," I said, leaning my face toward his. The relief which filled me was so honest that it made my limbs shake. "Don't stop until every person within this prison feels the same freedom as you. Can you do that?"

Michal nodded, breath hitching as the silver passed into his hand. "It would be my honour."

The crowd buzzed with uncontrolled energy at what they had witnessed. I already heard the whispers spread like wildfire throughout the chasm of prisoners. Those closest to Michal begged him to free them first, swallowing him entirely into the throng of bodies until I could barely hear him over their pleas.

I gathered as much steel inside my lungs as I took a gathering breath before throwing out my shout across the cavern for all to hear. "Once the iron is removed from your necks, please gather yourselves by the gate. I know you wish to leave, but you must wait until we are all ready. There is no knowing what waits for us when we depart, so it is best we do so together. We are broken when separated but unstoppable as one."

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Duncan looking at me. I felt his stare before I saw it. Like phantom fingers, his eyes trailed me from foot to head. His prideful grin echoed in the glistening damp that clung to his dark eyes. My heart skipped a beat, and I packed that image of him away into the back of my mind. It was a vision I wished never to forget.

Time was inconsequential within the cavern beneath Lockinge. It should have mattered, but it didn't follow rules. There was no telling how long it took to work ourselves through the crowd. Althea, Duncan and I pushed ourselves deep into the crowd, hands aching as we gripped longingly to the key, moving it from one neck to another. It took no time at all for the pocket of spare keys to empty as others like Michal joined our effort.

There were tears. Shouts of glee. Some fell to their knees, and others displayed flashes of unlocked magic. I thought I heard the roaring of a beast, followed by the blur of deep, russet fur passing amongst the crowd. Looking through the moving swell of bodies, I was confident I'd seen a bear. Powerful thick limbs pounded atop the ground, which quaked beneath their force.

It was a shifter. A fey with the ability to transform into its animalistic form. The clamour shook the dust from the cavern's walls.

Althea noticed it, too, tears glistening like jewels across her hazel eyes. Pride swelled in every line and crease across her face as she moved her key from neck to neck until the ground was littered with broken castings of iron.

I risked myself a chance to look toward the gate of the prison. Kayne and Seraphine controlled the crowd, which boiled with the desire to escape this place. They had been forced up a few steps beyond the gate but did well to handle the crowd. I only hoped they could both keep enough control until we were all ready.

There was an undeniable panic that ate away at my nerves. I half expected a surge of Hunters to flood down from the ground far above into the prison to stop us. Every passing moment that they did not arrive did nothing to calm me. It only prolonged the impending doom of what could happen and urged me to work harder, faster, as I moved deeper into the cave.

My mind was a storm. Destructive and powerful, unable to focus on a single person as faces obscured before me. With every person I worked to free, another was at the forefront of my mind. A name slick across my lips.

Jesibel.

I searched for her. Looking to Duncan and Althea to see if they were the ones to find her and take the iron from her neck. They both knew of her. She had been pivotal to my brief stay in the prison. Her name is embedded into the story of my visit and the connection with Elinor.

Part of me knew I would not have survived without her intervention all those weeks ago. And every day since, her face had been embedded in my mind like a knife in the flesh of an enemy. Obsidian eyes and midnight hair, Jesi represented the Icethorn Court and everyone that had been exposed to this treatment after my mother and her family had been killed by Doran's Gryvern. I was doing this for her and every soul that had been affected by the chaos of the realms.

Yet I could not find her.

If I added that concern to my shoulders, I would have crumpled before unlocking the final cuff. I had to put my faith that she had been freed by Althea or Duncan and that we would be reunited once we left Lockinge far behind us.

I STOOD atop the podium that looked over the emptying prison as the sea of fey left up the stairs toward the surface level of the human city. Althea had taken up the front of the crowd with Seraphine once Kayne had returned with news that it was safe to leave. Hands reached out for me as they passed, eyes brimming with thanks that did not have the desired effect I believed it would have.

Relief had yet to settle. I expected to meet resistance. Not that I hoped for the worst, but everything had gone too close to plan. It unnerved me. I massaged at my lower stomach, turning to work out the knot that had settled within it. Duncan stood like a statue of stone at my side with his hand on my lower back. Even with the material separating his touch from my skin, I still recognised the slow, circular motion his thumb made.

"I am so proud of you," Duncan whispered to me. I tried to allow his words to fill me with some sense of clarity, but they did not. "It would have been easier to turn your back on these people and place your hope for their rescue in others. I admire the choices you have made."

"Don't speak so soon," I replied, focusing on the thinning crowd as the final fey clambered up the steps at the back. Michal was there, helping the older fey and making it his sole purpose to make sure no one was left behind. I nodded, face stoic, as he passed.

"Until every single one of them has boarded our ships, I will not mark this as a success," I continued. Duncan's hand lifted from my back. The lack of his touch had me turning to look at him, which was exactly what he wished for. He took my chin between his thumb and forefinger, lifting my face up to look at him. The prison was empty. Michal and the final fey already disappeared into the shadows of the stairwell, leaving only Duncan and me alone. The quiet was so sudden it left my ears ringing.

Duncan lowered his face toward mine, cool breath brushing across my skin as his lips closed in on me. I exhaled, expecting to feel the brush of his feather-soft mouth upon mine. But the feeling did not come. I opened my eyes to look deep into his. The green was so vivid this close that I could have felt as though I was lost in a forest with no way out.

Not that I would have ever wished to escape his entrapment.

"Take a moment and allow yourself to truly understand what you have just accomplished."

"We," I muttered, gaze flickering between his mouth and his narrowing eyes. "Nothing about this has been solely my doing. Without you, Althea, Seraphine and even Kayne... well, I would have failed before even beginning."

"There is something endearing about your inability to see what you are capable of, Robin, but one day you are going to learn to reflect on your actions and recognise the effect they have on others."

I lifted onto my toes, reaching a hand up to the back of Duncan's head. My fingers coiled through his thick, chestnut hair; my nails traced dangerously across his scalp. I felt Duncan melt into a bundle of pleasured shivers.

"Do me a favour and tell me this all again when we reach... home," I said, staring deep into his soul.

"Is that what you are calling it now?" Duncan tilted his head, allowing my hand to bring him closer to me to close the small gap that was left between us.

As my lips pressed into his, I replied. "Maybe."

The kiss was brief but deep and passionate. I allowed myself a moment to forget the world around me and focus only on the man in my hold. Duncan, who had turned his back on the indoctrination that he had been subjected to, fell willingly into my hands. We had found each other during a time when neither of us was looking. I would never let go of him, even if there was another name that still lingered at the back of my mind.

No. Don't. I pushed the thoughts back, keeping them away like wolves to a burning torch. Not him.

"Are you ready to see this through?" Duncan asked, pulling away. My hands tickled across the short hairs that shadowed his jaw until he fell completely from my touch.

The corner of my lip turned upward as we both looked toward the stairwell. My stomach jolted as the darkness beckoned me forward. Far above, the fey would file out into the courtyard littered with the slain bodies of Hunters and Kingsmen. How would they react when they looked up to see the sky and the stars and feel the kiss of freedom as the nightly wind enveloped them in its embrace?

I looked back to Duncan, feeling the swell in my chest and allowing it to steal away my anxiety, if only for a moment.

"Race you?" I said, pushing his chest until he was an arm's length away. His smirk lit a fire in my belly, his deep chuckle fanning it into an inferno. "What is the prize if I win?"

I pushed off, feet slapping against the steps as I took my head start. There was no need to look back as I answered him. My answers echoed across the barren stone walls.

"Me."

he dawn sky bled through thick clouds of smoke blocking the rising sun. It left the world awash with the brush of dark russet. Beyond the impenetrable clouds of ash, the dawn fought hard for its rightful place. Although the hue of deep orange and red replaced the usual blues, it still allowed some light in to know that we had spent far longer than expected in the deep caverns of Lockinge's prison.

And something was very wrong. Clear the moment, Duncan and I escaped the staircase and flooded out into the chaos beyond.

The courtyard before the rise of Lockinge Castle bustled with fey gripped in the throes of panic. I pushed through the swell of the crowd, suddenly aware of the stench that poured from the bodies of the captured fey as the winds whipped among the crowd. The smell of stone and musk did well to combat the heavy presence of burning wood and charred stone that wafted up the incline from the slums. The Cage still burned, hot and violent.

It was impossible to understand where I was when the majority of bodies around me towered far taller than I. But it was Althea's booming voice that acted as my guide. The harder I worked through the squashed bodies, the louder her shouts became.

"Stop!" Althea roared. "It is not safe for you out there."

I saw her the moment I broke free from the wall of fey. Her skin was pale, her eyes wide as concern practically poured from her. She did not shout at the crowd that I had fought my way through but toward the outlines of figures that broke away from it and ran toward the city instead of away from it.

"What is happening?" I said, stumbling toward her. My heart lodged in my throat. I dared blink to miss the figures giving into their flight as they sprinted toward the burning human city.

Althea raised her hands and placed them at the back of her head. "There was nothing I could do to stop them."

"How many?" I asked, breathless.

"I don't know, Robin, they just ran. There was no stopping them."

There was a part of me that longed to remind her she was wrong. She could have, in fact, stopped them. My mind raced with ideas of how her power could have conjured a wall and kept the fey penned within the courtyard.

From one captor to another. Aldrick's voice taunted across my mind. Since his power had invaded me, he had occupied my thoughts countless times, even if it was only the memory of him rather than his amplified, controlling presence. I knew it was not actually him this time, but more a figment of his presence that lingered on my consciousness like a demon upon my shoulder, whispering into my ear.

It was Kayne's voice that tore me from my destructive thoughts. Looking sidelong at the wall of the fey, Kayne had gripped one by the forearm as though to stop her.

The young woman in Kayne's grasp fought hard to get free so she, like the others who tried to break away from the remaining crowd, could flee into the city in hopes of freedom.

Kayne saw the powered fist fly toward his face a moment too late. As he gripped for his nose, catching the burst of red gore in his hands, the fey woman escaped and ran for the raised gate.

Time seemed to slow as I made my decision deep within my subconscious. I followed the woman as she ran for her freedom. A shiver of cold passed across my arms. My breath thickened into a silvered cloud beyond my parted lips as I moved my eyes ahead of the woman and toward the open gate.

Althea made it two steps forward, hoping to catch the fearful woman before I opened the floodgates to my magic and let it free.

Duncan called my name somewhere, but it was faint. All I could focus on was the woman now steps from leaving the courtyard to join the others who had fled, not from danger, but into it. I dropped to my knees and slapped my palms across the street. The moment my fingers touched the stone, my power left me with a raging hunger.

I closed my eyes as euphoria filled me. In the dark, I saw an image. The bloodied bed of grass around the axe scored stump of a tree. Another image came next of the spreading of ice as it crawled up the legs of the executioner, turning skin to glass and blood to rivers of frozen diamonds.

When my gaze flew open, I could hear the body of the executioner as it snapped in half and crumpled before me. This moment was very similar to the time my magic first revealed itself in the field full of fey captives and Hunters who longed for fey deaths. I was not in control of my emotions or power then. Now, I commanded both as the rightful King I had been forced to become.

Ice spread across the courtyard. It cracked across the stone, turning the ground white as it swept toward the gateway. The fey cried out as my power burst before her. It took effort to encourage it to flow around her whilst focusing on my end goal. The gate.

As my icy presence reached it, I threw my hands upward. I conjured a wall of pure, diamond-cut ice to fill the gateway until the city beyond could no longer be seen. Curls of mist danced across the view before me. Tendrils of frozen air stung pleasantly across my skin as I admired my creation.

You and I are no different.

"Keeping them trapped hardly sets the example of freedom that our effort has been focused upon," Althea said beside me, her innate flame working to melt the ice closest to her feet. "There are other ways, Robin."

"No," I said, glancing only for a moment toward her. "For the safety of everyone, I cannot let them run into a city full of people that hate them. I did what I had to do."

I could see from the pinching of Althea's mouth that she had more to say but kept it to herself. But the sharp glint in her eye also revealed that she would tell me, eventually.

Facing back toward the crowd, I looked over the wall of dirt-smeared fey as they, too, regarded me with an expression I had yet to see on them.

Trepidation.

"The city is full of people who would see you nailed on pikes for the birds to feed off your flesh. I cannot allow you to wander blindly into your enemy's arms. They'd treat you in far more hateful ways than the imprisonment you have experienced this far. The freedom you seek is close,

but we must act as one to see this through. Please, I beg you. Know I don't wish to stop you from fleeing this place but simply wish to ensure you do so in a way that sees you survive long enough that Lockinge becomes nothing more than a terrible memory."

I waited for some reaction. All I could hear was the thundering beat of my heart in my ears. Urgency propelled me forward, looking toward Seraphine and the figures of her fellow Asps as they had wormed their way around the crowds to prepare for the last hurdle.

"Freedom is close," I spoke out again, hoping those at the back of the crowd would hear me once my words spread through it. "I promise."

Seraphine took this as her signal. She whistled. The high-pitched sound cut through the murmuring crowd and stilled them into a state of momentary silence. The Asps began calling out with simple instructions and guidance about what was to happen next.

I stepped back and allowed the assassins to sink their claws of control into the fey and gather them in an orderly fashion that would see us toward the shoreline at the back of Lockinge Castle. To the boats which should stand by, ready to collect us and take us all... home.

"If you instruct me to go into the city and locate as many of the fey who've escaped, then I'll do it."

I had not heard Duncan as he stepped in beside me until his hand was upon my shoulder and his voice warming my soul from the outside in.

"Say the word, Robin. I'll do it."

The hairs on my arms stood on end. The determination that crackled across his face had that reaction to me. What had I done to deserve his loyalty after everything my presence had done to him?

"I trust you do not need me to tell you how foolish you would be to approve that," Althea added.

I nodded softly in agreement with her. "Duncan, we are so close. I cannot save them if they do not wish to be saved."

"Then I wish them luck." He offered me a sympathetic smile, then lifted a gaze toward the expanse of fey the assassins begun shepherding toward the direction of the castle's docks.

"They'll need more than luck," Kayne offered, still clutching at his nose. I could tell from the shadow behind his gaze that he meant every word with little sincerity. Already the freckles beneath his eyes seemed to

disappear beneath the darkening bruise the fey woman had gifted him. Blood spread between his fingers, some even smudged across his chin.

"You should really get that looked at," Duncan said, knocking his friend with a bump on his shoulder.

"Fuck you," Kayne replied, searching the skies for Lucari, who would have squawked with delight at his broken nose.

WE MADE it around the castle without a single interaction. There were no Hunters who came out to stop us. The presence of Kingsmen was also non-existent. The further we made it toward the rear of the castle, the more dread settled within me. Amplified by Althea, who seemed to pluck the worry from my mind and speak it into existence.

"This should not be so easy," she said, keeping her voice low to prevent the fey from hearing her concern.

"Thank Altar it is," I replied, trying to force confidence into my tone whilst clinging onto the presence of my magic in case the moment required it.

"Admit it, something is not right," she continued. "The castle is too quiet. We have met no resistance when there have been many opportunities for it. I can't help but feel that Aldrick wants this to happen. He practically opened the door and allowed us in. He may have offered us a warm meal and a soft bed to sleep on."

I didn't wish to agree aloud for fear that what she spoke was true. Instead, I kept my gaze fixed on the mass of fey that thundered through a corridor deep within the castle. As Seraphine had previously confirmed, we passed heaps of humans who looked as though they slept on the floors, others in a deeper slumber with throats sliced and bodies covered in blood.

But where was everyone else? Where was the human King, who had become a puppet for Aldrick? He had not been confirmed as another number to the dead in the days that followed our initial escape. What of the servants and body of staff that should have filled a castle? Perhaps hiding within many of the rooms, or had they run when the first signs of our ambush had occurred? It could not have been the latter as the Asps had seen no one flee the castle when we had been deep in the prison beneath. And the castle, as Althea had said, was far too quiet to suggest that anyone was within it at all.

Burying the dark thoughts deep in the pit of my being, I focused on keeping each step ahead of the other.

"We cannot afford to contemplate failure," I said, pinching my nails into the skin of my palm. It was the only thing to keep them from shaking. "It is not an option."

"Tell me that again when we are safely aboard our ships. I wish to never look back at this place again," Althea replied.

"I get the impression you still don't forgive me for refusing to return to Wychwood."

"It would have been a lot easier than this," Althea glanced my way, lips pulled into a thin line as she contemplated her next words. "But not nearly as thrilling. This will forever be the bravest thing I have known someone to do. I admire your decision, I only wish it never had to happen. All these years and the courts... my mother has done nothing to save all these lives."

I raised a hand and placed it above the place on my chest. Far beneath the leather material, I recognised the scar Althea had left upon me. The burned outline of a hand that had cauterised the wound Tarron's attempt on my life had gifted me. "So much has changed in such little time. I'm scared to blink for fear of what else will happen."

Althea focused her gaze forward to the glow of light that signalled the exit that we moved toward. She did not recognise this corridor like I did. Althea had not been with us as we escaped Aldrick. After Seraphine had buried him beneath the haunting mirror that had shown a glimpse of the demonic presence which caused all of this. Duwar. Talking with her did little to keep the dread that had lodged itself in my heart from piercing it completely. The scorned god and its threat to both realms always lingered at the back of my mind. It is what made looking in mirrors hard for me even now.

I was not a fool to know that the moment we finally left Lockinge upon the ships that waited for us just beyond that door, it would not be peace we faced. But the genuine threat of Aldrick and his promise to bring forth the demon god into this world. Tonight, was merely one step closer to solving the actual devil at hand.

"We must keep your focus on the horizon," Althea said softly. "One step at a time, and we will one day reach it."

I exhaled, feeling the pressure in my lungs fade. Duncan walked ahead of me, aiding an elderly fey woman by taking hold of her arm and offering her support. He was my horizon. As if sensing my attention, he glanced over his shoulder. We always had this way of sensing one another, as though we were the same.

Duncan kept me going, at least, one step at a time.

I returned his smile with one of my own but stopped. A hollow bang sounded far beyond the castle's walls outside the doors. Right toward the rear of the castle were the Cedarfall ships waited for us.

The crowd came to a collective stop suddenly. My breathing hitched as though talons wrapped around my throat and squeezed. The shuffling of feet faded into silence as the thunderous song of my impending doom chorused in my mind.

Then I was running. My mind focused on the blue expanse that raced toward me. There was a ground-shaking boom followed by the scream of wood as it exploded beneath the force.

I knew before I burst out into the world beyond and looked at the ocean that our ships were under siege.

But what I didn't expect to see was an armada of monstrous vessels cutting across the ocean toward the line of Cedarfall ships. Nor did I think it possible when I saw the white-winged figures that flew through the skies with hands full of gleaming weapons of gold splendour.

rand ships of perfectly carved timber were scattered across the ocean's disturbed surface. From my position, they looked like wooden toys floating in a tub of water. Ready for a large hand to depart from the skies and move them to its own will.

Closest to the shore, vessels of russet-stained wood formed a walled barrier. Atop masts, Cedarfall banners trembled in the winds which whipped across the ocean. I could taste the bitter salt across my dried lips.

I should've felt a swell of relief at seeing the fey ships. Instead, heat coursed through my chest. Bile crept up my throat. I watched as a wall of far larger, far grander ships cut across the dark, foam-tipped waves toward the shallow waters.

Toward the fey ships.

I lifted a hand and covered my eyes. Squinting, I focused on the ivory sails which billowed in the winds. Across the cream material was a symbol I recognised with sickening clarity. Not even its violent rippling could hide the mark of black stitching.

The wheel of the Creator. The same symbol I had seen nailed above Abbott Nathanial's church. I distinguished its two inter-crossing lines, which overlapped the circular symbol and pointed east, south, and west. The northern line tipped like an arrow and pointed skyward to the Creator's heavenly domain.

Horror froze me. I couldn't move. All I could do was drag my gaze from the wafting sails to the winged figures that swooped through the clouds as though the sky itself had birthed them.

They dove with grace. Like birds, they folded their feathered limbs and dove toward the ocean in a spear-like formation. Except the creatures didn't disappear beneath the surface of harsh waters. Wings were thrown out, catching their fall before they skipped across the ocean's surface like stones, directly toward the Cedarfall ships. The dull-dawn light caught on blades. They glittered in their hands as though forged from light itself.

Then I heard them. Their haunting cry of war carried across the winds like a siren song.

"Are they...." Kayne said, breathless at my side. Lucari flared her wings upon his shoulder but didn't dare become airborne. I didn't share the same connection Kayne had, but I sensed her fear as sour as my own.

"Gryvern?" Duncan questioned, equally taken aback by what we witnessed.

"No," I replied confidently. "Those are not Gryvern."

I narrowed my eyes, trying to discern details which would help me give them answers. My mind was numb to thinking. All I could do was watch as the creatures speared toward the fey; helplessly.

Seraphine was suddenly there, peeling from the swell of freed prisoners who waited, audibly panicked, by the display they too witnessed. "Well, we're fucked. Until now, I have followed your every move, Robin, but I cannot risk the lives of those fey by taking them out of the castle to this."

Her words settled over me like cold rain, hissing off the anger boiling across my skin.

"Our only chance at leaving Lockinge is moments from sinking to the bottom of the ocean. Look!" Seraphine pointed outward, turning my attention to something I had yet to see within the chaos. One of the Cedarfall ships already lifted at an awkward angle as though a monstrous creature dragged it down into the deep. Whatever had caused the ship to sink had torn a mass of wood from its hull, leaving a gaping hole for water to gush into.

As though our attackers waited for our full attention, an explosive bang echoed across the waters. I snapped my head at the sound. A blur of black metal shot across the seas with furious speed. There was nothing I could do but watch as it burst through the side of another Cedarfall ship.

Fey soldiers threw themselves into the depths as their ship exploded in a storm of wood and flame.

"We have to stop this." My plea burst out of me with little thought. A violent shiver took over my body as I witnessed bodies disappear beneath waves amongst the carnage. Our saviours sailed all the way around the continent on my order. But, once again, I had led them to their death.

"Robin," Althea muttered, her voice broken yet fierce. "Those are my people. I cannot turn my back on them. I have got to do something."

My jaw ached as I ground my teeth together. "We will do something. Together."

A plan formed in my mind. It was rushed. Given the chance, I would have likely discovered multiple problems with it. But I didn't have the chance to think when unknown creatures, bearing the symbol of the Creator attacked us.

Duncan was already looking at me as though he sensed where my thoughts had gone. Deep lines had furrowed across his brow as the winds whipped his length of dark hair from his face. The scar on his cheek created a devastating shadow from his eye to his lip, which curled into a sneer.

"I know that look," he said, frown pinching harsher.

"Those... things in the sky. Bring them all down." My command was vague but clear to Duncan. His eyes softened, and cheeks flushed. Then Duncan followed my touch and glanced down at his wrist.

I held it in my hand. My thumb dusted across the thin-iron bracelet that reminded me painfully of the one and only item I had been given by my mother.

"Robin. I don't think I can do it."

My fingers gripped tighter as I urged him to look back up at me. He needed to see the desperation in my eyes, so my words plea made its way into his soul.

"You heard Seraphine; those ships are our only chance. We must stop this before any more are destroyed."

"There is no saying what we are up against..." Duncan replied, chest heaving with each breath. He fumbled as he spoke. His hesitation poisoned every word that passed between his lips. "There is one thing trying to save them, but what if I hurt someone? I can't control this."

"Try, for me, if not for them. Do it because I asked. For the sake of everything we have put ourselves through these past weeks. Please, don't make me beg you."

Sorrow creased Duncan's expression. He closed his eyes for a moment, stilling as though he hardly required to breathe.

"Tell me you will try." I could not conceal the panic as I spoke to him.

When Duncan finally replied, it was not with the resistance I expected. "You could ask me to jump from this very spot, and I would do it. How could I ever refuse you, Robin?"

It was more a statement than a question.

"Thank you," I replied, not wanting to blink to miss the storm in his dark eyes.

Duncan exhaled through a weak smile. It didn't reach his eyes. He pressed a kiss on the crown of my head. I thought the spark I felt was simply from the shock of his touch. But as he pulled away, his eyes glowed a molten blue. His wrist naked of the iron bracelet. I knew the spark was from something else entirely.

The iron bracelet fell from his clutch, allowing the electrifying strands of his new power to coat his skin like snakes of bitter, fiery light.

"Go," he whispered, urging me away from his body, which sparked and cracked. "Run!"

I STOOD before the stretch of dark waters, the wind whipping at my black hair. Ominous clouds flooded the sky at an unnatural speed. Thunder rumbled in warning, roaring as though a creature of nightmares hid among the clouds, waiting to burst through and devour the world.

Looking back up toward Lockinge Castle, I could see the cause of the phenomenon. Stood upon the worn-stone wall of the balcony we had not long left stood Duncan with his hands raised to the sky. Like a child willing for their parent to pick them up, Duncan would have looked no different from afar. But the bolts of blue light that burst from his hands suggested something darker.

Duncan's mutation, a result of the concoction of fey blood Aldrick inserted into his heart, had cursed him with powers that should never have been possible. He called for the wild storm to close over the world. He enveloped the world in shadows, only illuminated by sudden tongues of forked lightning. Duncan seemed limitless.

"It is working," Althea shouted above the storm. It took a strong will to look at her. Back straight, chin raised in defiance. The Cedarfall heir

watched the horizon with boiling intent. One may have wondered if she was in control of the storm that brewed ahead of us from the look in her eyes alone.

I could see exactly what she meant. The white-winged creatures scattered among the skies as the bolts of light whipped down upon them. Duncan's lightning was chaotic, clashing into the ocean without prejudice.

Since our escape from Aldrick, Duncan had been adamant to keep the power buried by the iron bracelet. He told me he didn't want it. But I knew he was wrong. He simply didn't trust it. Yet. Duncan was uncontrolled and fuelled purely on desperate instinct.

Although he looked like a god, calling down streaks of light from the skies as though they were his strings, and he was the puppet master of the storm. He would reach his limit.

That was when Althea and I would act.

I bit down on my lip until I tasted blood. Although unpleasant, the distraction stopped me from looking back at Duncan.

"If this doesn't work, we risk everything," Althea reminded, rolling the dark sleeves of her form-fitting tunic up to her elbows. Freckle covered arms now exposed; she shook them as though stretching them out in preparation.

"We lose everything if we don't take the risk," I replied, my heart jolting at the sight of the strange, winged creatures dodging with poise and ease through the lightning strikes. There was something familiar about them. I could not focus on one long enough to claim answers, for they swooped and dived, flying with a speed that made them blur into figments of ivory and gold. "I refuse to fail after everything we have done. For our sakes and theirs."

I thought back to the freed fey who waited in the castle. Kayne, Seraphine and her small army of Asps would have their work trying to keep some sense of calm amongst the crowd when a war quite literally raged outside of the castle's protective walls.

Confident pleasure sparked in Althea's gaze as she locked her eyes with mine. She nodded first. I replied with a curt tip of my head.

"Then let's not let them down," Althea said, rolling back her shoulders. "Ready?"

I took a step toward the water that rushed back and forth upon the shore. Foam and seaweed tumbled over with the tide.

"Set fire to the sky," I said, facing out at the waters toward the pandemonium. Duncan's power had separated the fight but had not stopped it entirely. That was our task.

"Oh, how I have wanted to hear those words."

Heat exploded behind me, but I was already running from it. I didn't need to look back to know that Althea had released her power completely as Duncan had.

Now it was my turn.

The shallow waters turned to solid ice beneath my feet. It was as though winter seeped from my body with no thought or physical action. My power devoured the ocean surface willingly, flooding across the dark blue until it glistened like diamonds. There was no room for hesitation as my boots met the layer of ice.

I didn't stop. There was only the single thought of keeping one foot in front of the other and the desperate need to ensure no more ships fell to this siege.

My feet slipped as I chased the spreading of my ice out into the ocean. Stiff wind lapped at my cheeks with admiration. It caused tears to roll down my face but catch in frozen droplets before they reached my jaw.

The closer I became, the clearer I saw the creatures. Two arms, two legs. A body no different from mine. Despite the magnificent, feathered wings bursting from their backs.

Humans. They had to be human. At least something similar. Not like the Gryvern in their monstrous forms and leathered wings. And, like the sails marked with the symbol of the Creator, they also adorned the mark upon the drapes of ivory material across their chests instead of plates of armour.

Althea threw flames into the skies. Lifting them higher and higher until they billowed far past Lockinge's tallest peak as she scorched the clouds. My feet stumbled beneath me as I glanced back at her. From a distance, she looked more like a bird from stories old, thrusting wings of fire across the world until it burned it wholly.

Althea's display of power encouraged my own. I felt in competition, expelling the winter I housed within me and freeing it across the world.

My confidence didn't last long.

Slicing downward from the sky before me was a woman of ethereal power. Rich Black skin glowed in contrast to her dove-grey wings. She moved with such speed that her outline became unclear. Until she stopped, throwing out her impressive span of feathered limbs to catch her downfall. Braids billowed around her frame like coiled strands of shadow. In her hands, she held a hammer of sorts crafted from gold. This close, I could see its surface swirled with decorative symbols. It took both hands for her to hold it. Her muscles bulged with restraint.

As she hovered before me, feet barely above my floor of ice, I drank in the vision of her. She wore a garment that would have been well suited for a place within a church. Similar to Abbott Nathanial's shawl, except hers was cut to fit her body for not only the purpose of prayer but battle too.

"Never did we expect to find the fey allied with The Defiler?"

Her words did not seem to make sense, not as I was enthralled with the way her hands twisted around the leather-bound handle of her weapon. I felt her intent to use it upon me just as I felt the breeze her wings created.

"I don't know what you are talking about, but if you wish to survive, I suggest you stop this attack."

"Where is he?" she asked, ignoring my threat.

"Call off your attack," I repeated, feeling the edge of anger that provided me comfort and confidence in the face of this winged human. "I shall not ask you again."

I reeled back as she laughed. The sound was melodic and sweet.

"Is this the resistance The Defiler sends to greet us?" she asked. "Pathetic. We expected more from you."

"Who?" I asked, clawing at what she had previously said but not quite catching it. Still, Duncan's lightning raged on through the skies. It thickened in the air. The other creatures struggled to keep pace as his lightning exploded the world in light and heat.

"We have travelled too far to entertain the likes of fools." Her lip curled upward as she swung the hammer with ease. It must have been made from feathers or something softer than metal for it to move with such effortless grace.

I threw myself backwards, falling upon my ass and skidding away as the hammer fell into the body of ice that my feet had not long touched. It exploded into shards. A crack wove toward me.

One brush of my hand and the water froze over, stopping the webbing of cracks from spreading any further.

"We do not wish to fight," I pleaded.

"Tough," she said, swinging her hammer again.

Refusing to back away, I lifted the chill of winter from the water and into the moisture-laced air. Like Duncan's power, it sparked, but from a destructive cold instead of boiling light. It met the head of her weapon and clashed with it. The force sent her off kilter for a moment.

"Who is the Defiler you speak of?" I asked before she could right herself.

"Do not play coy with me," she spat, annoyance slashed across her beautiful face.

I took my chance of peace to speak before she swung the hammer downward. "Do you serve the Creator?"

Her arms tensed, wringing her hands upon her weapon once again as though it were a habit of comfort. "The Creator. Our Light. He has tasked us with stopping the Defiler from freeing the demonic entity Duwar with the precise instructions to take any life which dares stand in the way. Which, as it seems, is you."

I looked beyond her, to the shattered Cedarfall ships that scattered across the ocean, then to the winged beings that dodged Duncan's lightning as she continued their attack.

"You've got this wrong. The person you speak of is Aldrick, and we do not stand with him but against him."

Her face did not change. It was stoic and unmoved, clear that my words did not have the effect that I wished them to.

"Lies born on the tongue of a snake."

I shook my head, ready to fall on my knees and plead for this to end. From the sickening distrust in her obsidian eyes, I knew it would not make her believe me.

"I am Robin Icethorn, King of the Fey Court, and I beg you to hear my words and seek the truth in them. We are not allied with Aldrick... The Defiler, The Hand, whichever name you wish to best recognise him as. Those ships you send to the ocean floor are rescue vessels for the fey that wait, in fear and desperation, in that castle. Fey whom we have promised to save. And I swear to Altar, on the Creator, on anything worth naming, that if you stand in our way, I will stop you even if it destroys me."

My entire body trembled. I felt my chance for peace slip away, and she shifted her hammer in a sharp motion. This time, it was not the head that she brought down to me. It was the handle.

I looked up the length of polished gold until my gaze settled back on her face. Her expression, although still filled with something that would spark fear in the weakest of souls, had seemed to soften.

"Take the Hammer in your hands, and I will pursue the truth or unveil the deceptions you sputter toward me," she said. "Do so, and you may save them all or seal the doom to which we have arrived to provide them."

I didn't need to be told twice. Swallowing back my hesitation and pride, I reached out and wrapped my hands upon the handle of her hammer. It was warm to the touch. Alive.

The nameless woman held the head of her weapon in her hands, tethering us both until we were connected by the length of gold.

Instantly, I felt its hefty weight. If she had released her grasp on it, then I would have fallen beneath its mass. Crashed through the ice at my feet and sunk to the bottom of the dark ocean with no hope of coming back.

"One question, that is all I will give you."

Nodding, I gritted my teeth and waited for what she had to ask me. I could not understand how touching a weapon would grant me the safety of my people, but it was a chance I was prepared to take... for them.

"Are you allied with the Defiler, aiding him to bring forth Duwar to this realm?"

It was the easiest answer to provide. My mouth opened so quickly that I hardly took a breath before. Then I felt it. A strange, drawing pull from within the weapon that tugged at my very bones as I spoke.

"No."

The winged woman hesitated, looking down at her weapon as my single word settled over her. With bated breath, I waited for her to speak as she contemplated something silently. The sound of battle still raged behind her. It seemed louder than before.

"That is the truth," I reiterated, my fingers tightening their hold on the handle. "You would be the fool to think otherwise."

Suddenly, she pulled the weapon from my grasp. The powerful pull I felt in my chest disappeared as my hands met empty air.

"The Creator has recognised your truth."

I expected something more, but then she turned, wings almost knocking me backwards. She faced toward the remaining Cedarfall ships and her own armada. Not once had I questioned her authority. It seemed to seep from her pores, leaving no room to deny it. "Wait," I spluttered. "Do not do this."

"It," she replied. "Is done."

She threw back her head and released a sound that I had not heard another make before. It was the mix between a scream that had the power to curdle blood, but also a song. A pitched note that soon became one of many as the other winged beings stilled in the air and returned her call.

I watched, stunned, as the fighting ceased. The clouds broke apart, and the bolts of lightning diminished. My heart pranged as I searched for Duncan on the wall far behind me, but I couldn't see him. His presence within the air faded quickly, so much so that I knew he had finally discovered his limitation.

"Robin," the woman spoke, turning my attention back to her. Sorrow pinched at her face as she lowered herself down upon my stretch of ice to stand before me. In the air, she seemed tall, but standing before me, we were similar in height. "I fear our grave misunderstanding has cost you."

Fury coiled within my chest, but I forced it down long enough to get my next words out. Carefully chosen and full of demand, I spoke as softly as I could force. "As penance for your mistakes, you are going to help me fix this. And then you are going to tell me exactly who you are."

idden away within the great cabin on a Cedarfall ship, Duncan moaned beneath my touch.

His skin was drained of colour. Its pale hue exposed a webbing of blue and red veins lingering just beneath the surface. It had been a few hours since the attack had ceased, and still, there had been little improvement in Duncan's health. At least he was awake. That was something I supposed. Although it took an immense effort for him to hold his eyes open for longer than a few seconds.

Despite the chill that clung to him, Duncan's body was coated in a thick film of sweat. Each time he gathered enough energy to open his mouth and speak to me, his jaw trembled, and his teeth clattered. Exhaustion clung to every inch of Duncan's appearance, making it painful to look at him.

Duncan had squandered his new powers to the limit. Powers that should never have belonged to him. It had weakened him greatly. It took both Kayne and me to haul Duncan from the outer boundaries of the castle to the smaller vessels that waited upon Lockinge's shore. I still felt the imprint of his slack, idle body across my side.

"You must stop doing that," Duncan moaned, attempting to push himself from the slouch he had slipped into within the chair. "You'll have no fingers left at this rate."

I pulled my fingernail from between my teeth. If Duncan had not made the comment, I wouldn't have noticed I was even chewing my nails at all.

Needing to give my hands something to occupy themselves with, I drew the damp cloth out of the bowl. I rang the water out and then reached to hold it to Duncan's feverish forehead. "Duncan. It is not the time to worry about me. You are being unreasonable, and to make matters worse, you are in *no* state fit enough to refuse me."

Although his body was still weak, his demanding nature burned brighter than the midsummer sun. "I would hardly refer to it as being unreasonable. My duty is to keep you safe, so tell me how I can't worry about you?"

I wished to remind Duncan he was not my personal guard. The words dredged across my tongue, which I held back behind gritted teeth.

"Says the man who can't even sit up straight," I replied. "Duncan, please. I will be fine."

"I know you will because I'm coming with you, Robin." Duncan shrugged off my attempt to trail the damp cloth across his sticky forehead for the fourth time.

"And what are you hoping to achieve with your stubbornness?" I asked, winning the fight with little effort as Duncan flopped back upon the captain's red-velvet chair in the centre of the room. "You have taken yourself to the limit. Practically reached the edge and threw yourself over it. Duncan, if you don't allow yourself to rest, then you will be no good to me or anyone."

He peeked open an eye and looked directly at me. Haloed by the shadows that hung with pride beneath his stare, the green of his eyes seemed equally dark. Never-ending.

"Just give me a minute, and I will be fine. I've been through far worse than this," Duncan said, glancing around the cabin with a single, raised brow. "Do you think the captain has something strong to drink? The right liquor, if sharp enough, could raise the dead... just imagine what it could do for me."

"I hardly think alcohol is your saviour," I retorted. The truth was, I didn't know what would help him heal. Duncan was a rarity. A human with access to magic that should never have been possible. There was no knowing how his body would react to the power, and from the state of him, it didn't look promising.

Humouring him, I glanced around the mahogany-decorated room. The walls had been hand carved into one complete picture of a woodland, with trees, plants, and small birds balanced on thin branches. The room was a work of art. Heavy crimson curtains did well to block out the light from the large bay windows that gave a view of the ocean beyond. Everything about

the cabin was handsome, besides its scent. I had taken to breathing in and out through my mouth. Anything to avoid the eye-watering aroma of salt and dried fish that seeped through the wooden body of the ship.

Duncan was not the only one who would benefit from a drink. If it didn't answer his aliments, perhaps it would answer mine. Even if the burn of alcohol allowed my mind to wander away from the winged humans for a moment. It would be worth it.

If I was not worrying about Duncan, I was dreading the meeting that would soon begin. A meeting with the humans that had almost sunk all the Cedarfall ships. Humans who now waited on their own vessels for us to arrive. It was hard to discern if my want to vomit was from the gentle sway of the moored ship or what waited out across the waters.

I had never found the concept of answers so frightening. Selfishly, I didn't think I could cope with unveiling more secrets that each linked back to Aldrick and Duwar. It only solidified just how serious he was as a threat to both realms. If beings from another uncharted place joined the effort to stop him, Aldrick's threat was more widespread than we first believed.

"Never mind the drink," Duncan said, drawing me back from my thoughts. He reached out a shaking hand and took my wrist. "I have other suggestions that may be a better remedy for me."

"What you need is a healer," I said, rolling my eyes at the mischief that rolled from him.

"What I need," Duncan winced as he attempted to pull me to him. "Is standing right before me. You."

I allowed him to guide me until I sat on his lap. Duncan was weak, his effort feather-light, but I desired to feel his reassuring touch, so I bowed to his wish. Duncan flinched as I sat upon his outstretched thighs. He didn't complain with words, but the shake of his leg and the way his teeth bit down into his lower lip suggested that it was a struggle for him.

"Be careful," I warned, wrapping my arms around his neck and resting them on his shoulders. "This is not the type of resting I had in mind for you."

Duncan's hand wound itself around my waist and anchored me to him. As fingers drummed on my side, my anxiety slipped away. This was something we had learned in the weeks passed. Using one another's touch to distract us from the world and its realities.

"Then we finally agree on something," Duncan replied. "I thought it was impossible."

"I know what you are trying to imply, and you are not getting anywhere with it," I said softly. Worried that if I spoke too loudly, it would shatter.

"Let me indulge myself, if only for a moment," Duncan exhaled, resting his head back on the gold-painted wooden frame of the chair. His eyes were closed now, and he was smiling. Grinning to himself like a cat who had uncovered the lake of cream all for himself.

"Speak then, or forever hold your peace."

Duncan's fingers gripped tighter into me. My heart leapt wildly in my throat.

"There are so many things I wish to say. None that would be suitable in such a place. What I wish to do and what I will do, are two separate matters."

I lowered myself to his cheek and pressed my lips to it. His skin twitched upon impact, and his smile widened. The kiss was brief.

"That's all you are getting," I whispered, lips brushing the damp skin of his cheek.

"More," Duncan demanded.

Lowering myself to his face again, I aimed my lips at the corner of his mouth. Where the scar met his smile and gave the impression that it was never-ending. This kiss was as gentle as the first but lasted a heartbeat longer.

"Better?" I asked.

"Ask me after another," Duncan replied, gravelly voice rumbling with a chuckle.

"Do you enjoy demanding things from me?" I asked, smiling too as I moved back to his face again.

Duncan seemed to find some strength as he held tighter onto my back. I had no hope of escaping him, not that I cared to.

He raised his neck from the chair and opened both eyes. Our faces were only inches apart. "Believe me, Darling, what I want from you is far more than closed-mouth kisses. Until I locate the energy to do what I desire, a kiss here will suffice."

He pressed a finger to his lips as though telling me to quiet.

My mouth pressed to his, lips urging one another's apart as our kiss quickly dissolved from its softness to desperation. I groaned into Duncan's

opened mouth. His tongue lapped against mine, fuelled by the noise I made. My fingers coiled within the locks of dark hair, tracing across his scalp that conjured a shiver to spread across his exposed arms. He had hold of me, too, ensuring the kiss would not end before he wished for it to. One hand grasped onto my side, and the other gripped the back of my neck with force. In that moment, he was not the weak man that had pushed himself to the limits of his power.

Our kiss might never have come to a natural end if not for the knock at the door.

Reluctantly, I pulled away to a string of displeased groans from Duncan.

"It had to be too good to be true," Duncan growled, his grip on my side still preventing me from standing. "Let them in, and there is no going back. Tell them to fuck off, and we can continue where we bluntly left off."

Upon the door that led out to steps down from the main deck of the ship was a circular porthole of frosted glass. I recognised the shadowed outline beyond. They were tall. Wild curls of hair. Twin points of ears.

"Once this meeting is over with, there will be plenty of time during our journey to Wychwood where we can pick up where we left off." I patted his knee and stood. Duncan's hand traced the curve of my ass as he dropped his arm, reluctantly, away.

"I don't feel comfortable letting you go to them without me," Duncan attempted again, circling back to our original discussion. "The humans have proven themselves volatile. I don't trust them with the most important person in my life."

A warmth spread across my chest as his words settled upon me. I had my back turned to him as I faced the door that sounded with another knock, this more impatient than the last.

"You can come in," I called out.

"Robin. Don't ignore me..." Duncan started.

I glanced over to him as the door screeched open, allowing the rush of salt winds to fill the room.

"If by the time we leave, you can stand without aid, then you can join me."

Duncan's lips narrowed into a thin line. It was the last thing I saw as I turned my attention to Althea Cedarfall, who led the party of three into the room.

"So, he didn't perish after all," Althea cooed, sparing Duncan a quick glance. As she did, there was nothing caring about her expression. However, when she looked back my way, her face lit from within as her freckle-covered lips turned upward.

"You would have liked that, I'm sure." I stiffened at Duncan's reply, but Althea showed no sign she heard as she continued.

"We have a matter of minutes before Rafaela sends a vessel to collect us. Are you prepared?"

I opened my mouth to reply before Seraphine cut in. "Still think it's wise we tell them to drag their sorry arses to us. We shouldn't be at their beck and call."

Althea rolled her eyes, not even trying to hide her disagreement.

"I can't expect our people to welcome the human's aboard after what they've done." My hair had grown considerably over the past weeks that when I shook my head, dark strands of black fell before my eyes. It was becoming second nature to run my fingers upward through my hair to lay it away from my face. "It would be best that we discuss matters on their own ground."

"All the more reason for them to come here. Let them face us!" Seraphine added, leaning against the doorway to the cabin with her arms and legs crossed. "They should feel uncomfortable surrounded by the people they tried to slaughter! Three have died because of them. Forgive me, but breaking bread is not as exciting of a thought to me as it is to you."

"Three?" I repeated, allowing the number to settle over me.

Seraphine's grimace was enough of a confirmation.

"At least," Kayne added. "It may take some time to make sense of the census, but so far, three are unaccounted for."

I stepped forward, offering a hand toward the scroll that was gripped in Kayne's fist. "Not that I do not believe you."

Kayne didn't hesitate to hold it out for me. "Before you ask, no, she is not on my list."

My heart sunk into the pits of my stomach just like the Cedarfall ship that Rafaela and her fellow assailants had destroyed.

"Are you sure?" I asked, unable to take my eyes off the roll of parchment now in my own hands. Dark ink scribbled across the yellowed parchment. Names, so many names, hand-scribed in wonky lines. It all blurred as my eyes traced over the mess of ink.

"Checked it over more than once," Kayne replied. "Jesibel is not a name that has been given."

Despite Kayne's history, I trusted him not to lie about something so trivial. He had proven himself. Kayne's efforts and help had been vital to our plan from the moment it was forged after our escape from Aldrick. Seraphine had no trouble trusting in him, like Duncan, either. It seemed only Althea and I still had difficulty in that department.

"I promised her," I muttered, swallowing the lump that suddenly invaded my throat.

Althea stepped to my side and placed a hand on my shoulder. Her touch made the scar upon my chest twitch.

"This is beyond all of our control," she said. "Like everything that is happening around us, we can only face forward and deal with it together."

Despite her attempt to reassure me, Althea's words did not have the effect she wished them to have. Instead, I clung to the painful feeling that failing stabbed me with.

"Those from the prison who cared enough to speak with me said something about Aldrick visiting the prison days ago." I was aware Kayne was speaking, but his words only tickled my consciousness. "They said he took a large group of captives with him. They never returned."

Could she have been one of them? Out of all those fey, how had Jesibel been the one he chose?

"And this is the first we've heard about it?" Duncan spoke up, leaning forward in his chair. "Seraphine, our eyes and ears. It doesn't seem like you to have something so important go unnoticed?"

I snapped my attention to the assassin. "Care to elaborate?"

Seraphine held my stare. Her jaw tensed; her eyes burned with determination. She no longer leant against the doorframe but stood tall and narrow. Her entire body was tense as she faced me down. "Is that accusation hidden behind your words, Robin?"

"I don't know, is it?" I glowered in return.

"My informants tell me the moment Aldrick so much as pisses. This, if you can find it in yourself to believe, is news to me."

I searched the assassin's face for a lie, but if she had one, she concealed it well. It made little sense that Seraphine would hide something from me. I was her sponsor, and that meant more than any bound to the Asps. With the price I paid for her aid, I knew she wouldn't lie.

"I believe you," I said, fingers strangling around the crumping parchment.

Her lips thinned into a line, but the lines across her forehead softened. "I'm glad you have sense, King."

"I don't know what to believe," Duncan added behind us.

"Finally," Althea added. "Something we agree on. There are currently winged humans waiting, not a stretch, away from us. Now is not the time for distrust. As a group, we need to stand as one if we want so much as the chance to see this to the end."

Althea made sure she glanced at each one of us as she spoke.

"Said like a bona fide royal," Seraphine replied. "Your kind has a knack for motivational speeches, as I remember."

"Remind me, what court was your home?" Althea asked chin raised.

"Not yours, sweetheart," Seraphine replied, blowing a kiss that turned Althea's cheeks red with fury. "Elmdew, the court of Spring is not exactly a home for me. It hasn't been for a long while. I turned my back on that place many moons ago."

"Which explains why you struggle with authority," Duncan added, closing his eyes. He didn't see her scowl but smiled anyway.

"Seraphine, your insight has been pivotal to getting us here. I do not doubt you were not aware of Aldrick's last movements, but do you think your Asps can locate any hint of where he may have taken the fey? Just because Jesibel is not with us now doesn't mean I wish to stop searching for her. I made a promise. I take that seriously."

"What is to say he took them anywhere?" Seraphine replied. "He needs their blood, not their flesh. He may have drained his supply and taken it with him to conduct his monstrous mutations. I will send word back to Lockinge and to those who are staying behind. If there are bodies to find, they will locate them."

The ground swayed beneath me. I opened my mouth to speak, but it filled with a rush of sick that slipped over onto the floor. I folded over, hunched over my knees. Althea jumped back. Duncan called my name. But all I could picture was Jesi, a stranger who I had fixated on helping... dead.

"That," I managed, spitting out the last dregs of bile from my mouth. "Is not an option."

Kayne was the only one not to move to help me. I waved off the others' attempts as I cleared my lips with the back of my sleeve.

"Jesi is alive, as are the others he took from the prison. If he has left Lockinge, he will need a lasting supply of blood to keep affecting his followers. He needs her alive."

"Then we will find them all," Althea said, eyes wide with determination. "Your promise to Jesi will be met. I guarantee it."

I couldn't explain to them how much of a profound effect Jesibel had had on me. Jesi represented the Icethorn Court's people. Alone, lost and then stolen, whilst fleeing a broken court left in the wake of my family's death. It was up to me to put it right. Her face had been at the forefront of this rescue mission, and the burning hope I coveted in my soul had been doused completely by the realisation that she was still lost to me.

Seraphine shifted, sensing movement at the door before anyone else.

We all turned to the captain of this ship. Flanor was an older man with sun-spotted cheeks and meaty hands that looked as tough as the bottom of a boot. The Cedarfall captain had bright sun-yellow hair and a rugged beard that likely harboured stories from years at sea.

"A small boat cuts across the sea," Flanor said, throat thick with age. In his hand, he gripped a brass spyglass. "You asked to be informed the moment we saw them coming, and I have. The crew is growing restless at their arrival."

"We will be up shortly," Althea replied curtly, already pacing toward the doorway in which Seraphine prepared to leave.

Flanor bowed his head to Althea, offering her the spyglass as she swept to his side. "For giving up your cabin, Flanor, I will see that my mother thanks you generously."

His rosy cheeks swelled at that. "It's my pleasure, truly."

Duncan had slipped into sleep, his eyes fluttering. I was thankful he was not awake to argue his point again. It was easier this way, at least, that is what I told myself. Each step from his tired body only clenched at my gut.

"Robin," Kayne said as I moved for the door.

"Yes?"

"I'm going to stay back with him," Kayne gestured toward Duncan, who had begun softly snoring. "It doesn't seem right to leave him alone among

"You don't need to say it." And he didn't. Kayne was the only one who still carried his sword on his hip. The handle was never out of reach.

Duncan and Kayne were Hunters. Regardless of what had been done, I knew Kayne still felt that his presence among us was threatened.

He didn't trust us.

"Make sure he rests as much as he can," I said, offering a smile that was not returned.

Kayne's lip curled over his teeth, only slightly. I blinked, and his stoic expression returned. "You may think you need to tell me how to care for him, but you don't. I have been by his side far longer than you. Remember that."

I swallowed my words as Kayne stalked away from me. Looking around the cabin, I wondered if anyone else had heard. Althea had already drifted up to the main deck with Flanor, and if Seraphine had overheard, she showed no sign.

It took everything in my power not to look at Kayne as I walked away. As I reached the door, Seraphine blocked me. "Haven't you forgotten something?"

Seraphine tipped her head toward the grand desk that waited back in the cabin's heart. "If you are to meet with the humans, do so as you truly are."

There was an underbelly of discomfort when she spoke. As my eyes fell upon the item she spoke about, a bitter touch of ice spread over my spine.

The Icethorn crown sat within the open-lidded box. Elinor had made sure it was sent to collect us. I last had it in the Cedarfall Court, so it must have been provided by Queen Lyra.

I had brought it with me to see Duncan, allowing it to become an afterthought the moment my eyes had settled upon him. Now, it was the brightest thing in the room.

"Feels like part of a costume," I admitted.

"Why?" She asked, screwing her lips.

"Because I don't deserve it." I turned my back on the crown and moved to leave, only to be stopped by Seraphine's firm hand upon my arm.

"Swallow your pity, Robin, and put the damn thing on," Seraphine scolded. "I am the last person who cares about titles and crowns, but what you have achieved is not something to be dismissed. And what you are going to continue to do suggests, even to me, that you are a King."

I held her stare until she dropped my arm.

"I've paid you to say this to me," I said to her.

"Oh," she replied with a laugh. "I may do many things for payment, but lying is never one of them. Even you couldn't offer me something for the use of that skill."

"That is comforting," I replied, slipping the silver-toothed metal upon my head. The crown fit perfectly. The cold kiss of metal flattened my blueblack hair down to my scalp and rested just above my ears.

"Glad to have been of service." Seraphine slapped my shoulder and looked me up and down with an expression I had not seen on her before. I didn't have time to place it before she was moving.

here was a clear divide in the dimly lit cabin. The tension was so thick that each inhale was like breathing in mud. It weighed heavily on the air.

The candles could hardly conjure a halo large enough to defend against every shadow in this room. There was only enough orange hue to see the three-winged humans sitting around one side of the table, and the three of us sat opposite.

"I speak for us all when I thank you for accepting our appeal for a meeting," Rafaela said, sitting straight in the backless chair that gave room for her folded grey wings behind her. Since having our interaction out upon the ice I had conjured across the sea, Rafaela had not changed out of her gold hemmed robes of white. Rafaela's sleeveless tunic exposed arms crafted from defined muscle. She kept her hands joined and rested on the table before her.

"And, of course, our expressed and utmost sincere apology for what has occurred today."

"Tell us what you are, and then we can contemplate accepting your apology," I replied, keeping my face void of expression that would soon betray me and the discomfort I felt being here.

Rafaela rolled her shoulders back, enticing her wings to shiver for a moment. "We were warned that this realm has forgotten of our existence, so I cannot blame your ignorance. It would seem the lack of belief runs deep in both the fey and the humans."

"Answer the question," Althea added, speaking before I could utter a similar sentiment. "Please."

"Altar was not the only god to make beings in his image. It was clear the humans would not stand a chance against the power of the fey. So, the Creator crafted warriors. We are Nephilim. Our purpose is to spread His word and protect it, no matter the cost."

"Nephilim," Seraphine barked, seemingly the most relaxed out of the three of us. Her boots were moments from resting on the glass-topped table as she slouched down in her seat. "Never heard of you."

"Precisely the problem," Rafaela confirmed, hardly caring for the assassin's presence. "Our kind were dismissed from your realms many moons ago. So many that even the moon itself has forgotten of our presence."

"Why?" I asked. My voice filled the room and echoed back at me.

"I am prepared to answer any question you have, but you will need to be more specific," Rafaela replied. She stood from her chair, her wings twitching with unspent energy. Even folded, I could recognise the pure strength and span of her feathered limbs. If she were to extend them here, they would likely break out on either side of the cabin's wooden walls.

"Why do we not know of you?" I extended my question, following her as she skirted the table toward us.

"You may expect a story of jealously, conflict of power, or perhaps hate. But I'm afraid I am going to disappoint you. The Creator did not require us among Durmain. After the great divide, it was agreed the fey would linger in Wychwood and the humans in Durmain.

"The humans are safe from us." Althea shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

"Indeed," Rafaela nodded. "The Creator's word, we had been entrusted to spread, had already spread like wildfire across the humans. Our purpose had been met."

"So, the Creator filed you away like ancient books in a long-lost library, ready to call upon you when the world finally forgot about him?" Althea suggested.

Rafaela shook her head, braids of deep brown hair twisting around her shoulders. "Not quite, Althea Cedarfall. The Creator does not wish to force his presence on humans. Faith must be found, not forced. If it was not for the threat of the Defiler's return, we might never have sailed across the seas to find this land again. Some of us even feel disappointed in our return, but we have a purpose."

"To spread his word," I said. "Does it hurt his ego to find that no one thinks of him anymore?"

"Ego is a mundane affliction," the other female said. Her voice was light with youth. I could tell from her sharp tongue I had offended her with my suggestion. "Unlike the Nephilim of the past, our purpose this time is very different."

"If you are not here to inspire faith back in the humans, then why bother coming?"

"Did you miss the second task he bestowed upon us?" the younger girl said, tilting her head to the left.

"Protect his word. What little of the faith remains, it is our duty to protect it," Rafaela said.

"From the Duwar?" Seraphine asked, brows furrowed and teeth bared.

Rafaela nodded, grimacing as the name of the banished god seemed to fill every quivering shadow of the cabin. "The demon god is coming. For the sake of us all, we must ensure the gate to his dimension is left untouched, secured, and closed. His return will affect us all, no matter what lands we live upon. It just so happened that you found yourselves in the crossfire of our visit to meet with the Defiler's chosen subject."

"Well, you are late," I added. "Aldrick left Lockinge in search of the keys. If you were hoping to catch up with him, we better end this conversation and let you go."

"You know of the keys?" There was no discerning the worry in the younger girl's voice. I looked at her face, seeing how the emotion betrayed her across it. Her hair was golden, as though the sun itself laid its presence upon her head and gifted her with a head of its own light. Piercing blue eyes set nestled upon her face like jewels. Unlike Rafaela's wings, hers were a dark brown. Among their feathers, I could see other beige tones that reminded me of an owl. And her wide eyes only added to her appearance of wisdom.

"I know of them, but not what they are or where," I replied. "Aldrick enjoyed boasting about his plans but giving only enough away that still kept him steps ahead."

"He is blind in his search," she replied. As though reading my mind, she quickly answered my thought. "My name is Gabrial, and I am the Creator's script. Memory of his word in flesh."

"What an introduction," Seraphine mumbled beneath her breath.

"Gabrial," Althea added, quickly drawing the young girl's attention from the assassin back to her. "You believe Aldrick does not know where to look for the keys that will unbind Duwar from his imprisonment?"

"Aldrick had one key in his very possession and let it slip carelessly through his fingers, all without knowing. I know Aldrick believes he knows where to search, for the Defiler will whisper many lies in his ear. However, they are both as lost and blind as a lamb without its mother. Pity that."

I stood without realising. "He had one?"

Gabrial smiled knowingly, tracing her bright stare from the crown upon my head to the polished toe of my boot. "Once he recognises a key for what it truly is, the rest of them will easily lay themselves before him for the claim. It is our duty to ensure he never discovers them."

"Then we must get to them before he does," I spluttered. "Destroy them so Aldrick or anyone weak enough to allow a demon to fill their minds can attempt this again."

Gabrial looked to Rafaela, who shared the smirk. Without uttering a word, Rafaela seemed to communicate something to the girl.

"Destroying the keys is not an option," the male Nephilim said. It was the first time he spoke. However, his judging, mistrusting stare didn't waver.

Did anyone else notice the smile diminish from both Rafaela and Gabrial's faces?

"We would all be liars if we did not admit that destroying the keys would be the easier route to stopping Aldrick from freeing the Defiler. However, doing so would simply unlock further problems that even we do not have the power to stop. I am the Creator's hammer. Enforcer of His word. And if I can recognise that destruction, is not the way out of this, then know it for truth."

"Do you all have fancy titles?" Seraphine asked, her voice slipping into the right moment of silence that not a single person could pretend not to have heard like the rest of her comments.

"I," the man with the slitted cloak and ivory white wings said. "Am Cassial, the Creator's shield, guard of His word."

His hair was midnight black, his face shadowed with a beard that matched. The silver of his eyes was so bright that they looked almost entirely white.

Cassial was clearly the oldest of them all, with a broad figure and towering presence that gave him the impression of the offspring of a giant. His giant fists were balled at his side. One slam of them upon the glass table and it would have shattered into countless pieces, that I was sure of.

Seraphine pulled a face, brows raised into her hairline. "Do the rest of the Nephilim share titles given to them by a god nobody cares to remember?"

I blinked and glimpsed a vision of Abbot Nathanial. His body broken beneath the rubble in the church all those miles away. He was devoted to the Creator in a place where others were not. His memory alone had me turning on Seraphine.

"I knew someone who believed in the Creator. He was a good man. A kind soul. He remembered. So did the humans that visited his church to hear him preach. Seraphine, perhaps we don't offend our hosts, especially since we know what they are capable of?"

A stain of scarlet crept up her neck and shaded her face with ferocity. "My distrust and annoyance that they have simply turned up now after already so much has been lost is beyond me. Do not ask me to show them respect when they have spent years hiding away in Altar knows where doing who knows what when I am sure the Nephilim's presence in this realm may have prevented us from ever getting to this point."

Seraphine stood abruptly. Her chair clattered to the floor. The sound of its fall was uncomfortably loud. She hunched over the glass table with her arms locked beneath her to keep her upright. The weight of her grief was so sudden and overwhelming that it almost brought Seraphine to her knees. I knew the feeling well.

"My sister died because of your tardiness," Seraphine continued, eyes glistening with tears. "Forgive me if my welcome is not as warm as you are expecting."

I had no right to ask Seraphine to grasp onto her rationality when my lack of it had led me into Aldrick's hands. Grief was an emotion powerful enough to execute decisions without a second thought. It latched onto fury and fuelled it. Seraphine was in her right to respond to the Nephilim in such a way.

"Loss is the ugly truth of conflict," Rafaela said. A sympathetic warmth burned through her deep eyes as she refused to drop her attention from the heavy-breathing assassin. "I wish I could ensure you that our presence will prevent more, but I dare admit it will only incite further harm. The Nephilim's presence will enrage the Defiler. Make the demon desperate and rushed. Our being here presents a challenge, and the Defiler's desperate need to be freed will probably encourage them to counter that challenge."

Seraphine's gaze flickered across Rafaela in search. Of what? I was unsure.

"You are confident in your hopes of stopping Aldrick from releasing Duwar?"

Rafaela contemplated Seraphine's question for a moment, glancing across the three Nephilim that sat, stone-faced, at the table. "There is no other choice."

"If that is the case, then we must work together. We know more about Aldrick and what he will do to ensure his task is completed. You have the knowledge of Duwar," Althea said, slapping her hand on the table. Smoke curled around her fingers as the surrounding air hissed. "We have power."

"If you share what you know about the keys, we can help protect them whilst Aldrick is found and dealt with," I said. "Aldrick is a powerful fey with the ability to invade one's mind and control his victim from the inside. If we are to stand a chance at stopping him, it will be together."

"History has not looked kindly upon the union of fey and humans," Gabrial said. "As you are well aware, Robin Icethorn. Robin Vale. You are the son of such a union."

I speared my gaze across the long table toward the younger Nephilim, who seemed to study her open palms as though they were pages of a book. Her attention on them interested me like a moth drawn to a flame. Looking through the dimly lit room, I pondered why her eyes ran back and forth as though she read from pages. Then I saw it. Beneath her skin, moving with fluid grace. There were shapes I did not recognise. Until I focused harder and saw the shapes shift to words.

The marks were a darker tone to her skin, like ink upon pale paper.

"I do not remember telling you of my past" I said, unable to draw my eyes from the Nephilim's skin.

"Nor do I know by asking," Gabrial replied, lifting her attention to me for only a moment. "The Creator has humans past and present written in scripture. You, Robin, are as much human as you are fey. Your heritage places you in favour of the Creator. He sees your story and remembers it. As he does with all his children. I see your origin and everything that has come after it."

"How?" Althea muttered, watching the scripture move like a raging river beneath the girl's skin.

"I am memory of His word. My purpose, as the Creator's Script, is to remember what was and is. History of all born in his image is remembered on my skin. Answers and memories that even you, Robin, have forgotten. Ah, see here when you were shy of your fourth year, and you fell from the tree and snapped your ankle. Your pain is remembered. As is the memory of when you woke to two intruders in your home who took you and sold you to the Hunters. I see, as the Creator does, everything. That is my burden."

My cheeks burned with the thought of the young girl seeing my past. Especially when some scenes were not suitable for someone so young to see.

"We all," Rafaela added, walking back to her seat. "Have a purpose in His name. Just as you, Althea Cedarfall and Robin Icethorn have a purpose for the fey. Children of Altar..."

"It would seem you have a way of diverting the conversation swiftly away from the keys," I said, shaking the confusion Gabrial's revelation had cursed me with.

"For good reasons," Cassial said, casting his silver eyes across the three of us.

"If you are unwilling to answer our questions, why call on our council in the first place?" Althea asked. It was clear, like I, Althea was growing bored with the circular motion of our conversation.

"The human that waits on your ship," Rafaela said. "His story should have ended, yet still, his lungs are filled with life. His heart beats but not by the will of the Creator."

"Duncan." My body hardened in my seat, skin turning to cold stone. It was undeniable that the Nephilim shared an unspoken interest in Duncan, for they each glanced at one another.

"Duncan Rackley," Gabrial confirmed his name. "He should be dead, but he is not. Why?"

"Can't you gleam that information, Script of the Creator?" Seraphine spat.

"His story ends with his death," Gabrial replied, unbothered by Seraphine's sarcasm.

"Well, you can thank Aldrick for that," Seraphine added.

"And what are we thanking him for?" Cassial asked, his voice clicking as though he crunched the bones in his knuckles.

"He is—"

"No, this conversation ends here." I felt the flow of cold air seep out of my mouth as I spoke. Rafaela looked at me and my display of power. A single brow lifted as she did so.

The concept of the Nephilim asking after Duncan did more than simply unnerve me. I felt a shiver of disgust at the idea of him filling their interest. Defensive jealousy was so intrusive that I lost control of the frozen power that twisted deep within me.

"We mean him no harm," Rafaela said.

"Why do I not believe that?"

Gabrial reached out a hand across the table. Ink swirled across her palm. "Let me show you."

I studied her palm, mesmerised by the words shifting just beneath her pale skin.

Her fingers curled, beckoning me to take them. Gabrial must have sensed my hesitation as she saw my hands grip onto my thighs in defiance. "The human side to you allows me to share the word with you. Please, if this does not help you trust us, at least you can see that we do not lie."

I gritted my teeth. My jaw ached as I reached out for her hand. "If you do anything to harm me, I could shatter your hand with a single thought."

"Not everyone is out to harm you, Robin Icethorn."

I stared deep into her azure sky eyes as my fingers brushed her palm. On impact, the world faded.

My mind was filled with images. I saw a young boy with obsidian hair throwing himself into the arms of a man. My father. Before my heart crumpled with pain, the image shifted like ink in water.

I saw... stones. Four black pillars formed around a symbol etched into the ground. This new vision felt different. I sensed power there. The image moved quickly, but not fast enough for me to recognise the symbol of the Creator. It was scored on the ground between the four stone pillars. Except it was upside down. The northern arrow upon the wheel, pointing south. Down.

My ground shifted beneath me. I felt myself fall sideways into the next vision before I could make sense of the first.

Out of the shadows, a balcony formed. Upon it, two men stood. One was small, and the other was tall. The vision defined until I recognised the steel-silver eyes and close-cut hair. As I recognised what I was being shown, I wished to pinch my eyes closed. To block out what was unfolding before me. As though sensing my wishes, the shadows exploded once again... not before I heard two words spoken by the taller man.

Little bird.

I drew my hand back from Gabrial as though her touch burned me. She held her eyes on me. Her resolve was powerful across her youthful face.

"How?" I breathed.

"What did you see?" Althea asked. Out of the corner of my eye, I felt her concern rush over me.

"I showed Robin his past," Gabrial confirmed for me.

I was not prepared to dwell on the last image I had been presented. Or dare contemplate the name of the man Gabrial had shown me.

"The stones..." I began.

"You've seen the gate we have left behind. What our kind have spent centuries protecting."

"It will take more than that for us to trust your intentions."

Rafaela shrugged, fighting a smile. "Your emotion is for you to explain, not for me to speculate. We simply wish to understand what Aldrick is doing in his task of freeing the Defiler. Why he keeps your kind prisoners and how his followers have access to powers that should not be possible."

"Perhaps we find him," Althea started. "Then you can ask him yourself. If you say that Duncan is no longer human enough for you to see his story, then he is no longer your responsibility. Leave him to us."

Heat coiled in my chest at Althea's words. I was thankful that she had adopted my concern for Duncan. If anyone could protect him as well as me, it was her.

"Or, you answer our question about the keys, and we give you what you seek." Seraphine had her arms crossed over her chest, leaning back in her chair without a care in the world. "Seems like a fair payment. A trade, if you will."

There was a silence in the room that stretched and devoured us all. No one dared speak first, not when it signalised the forfeit. I waited, willing to encapsulate every single Nephilim in the room in ice to ensure they could never even think of Duncan again.

"Your trust in us must be earned," Rafaela said finally.

Abruptly, I stood, followed by Althea, who grimaced in silent agreement that this conversation had ended. "Thank you for your time, but I have ships full of fey who I have promised to return home. You have a demon god to stop from destroying the world."

I turned on my heel and moved for the door. "Good luck."

"Unfortunately, I cannot let you leave." Cassial stood before the door, his hulking frame blocking out the glorious light of late afternoon. His sudden presence was unexplained. He had shifted from his seat to outside the room in a blink.

"Out of the way," Seraphine growled, setting herself before me. Like Cassial, she had moved unseen and now held two curved blades in her hands. Weapons should not have been brought into the meeting, but of course, the assassin had means of slipping in a few. "Next time, I won't ask, I will make you."

Cassial chuckled, glancing at the assassin's knives with a lack of fear. "Pretty, I use blades bigger than those to pick food from my teeth. What is it you wish to do with those?"

Althea was behind me, facing back into the room. Fire danced around her wrists, building with its heat and intensity with each passing moment. "What is the reason for this?"

"Your protection," Rafaela added quickly, both her and Gabrial sitting calmly at the table as though we were not moments away from a fight.

"Do you need us to prove that we do not need it?" I asked, stepping to Althea's side. Ice crackled across my fingers, bringing the temperature of the room down.

"We do not wish to argue with you." Rafaela had her arms up at her sides in surrender.

"Had us fooled when you sank one of my ships," Althea said, knees bowing slightly as she readied herself.

"That was before we knew who and what you are."

"What we are?" I asked.

Rafaela looked to Gabrial, who shook her head in silent refusal. Whatever Rafaela was about to say, she swallowed it, took a deep breath in and shifted her gaze to Cassial. "Let them leave if they so wish."

"That would not be wise," he replied, refusing to move.

"They may leave, but not alone." Rafaela's voice brimmed with control. The leadership she held among their group was clear. Cassial did as she asked and stepped aside from the doorway, not without a snarl at Seraphine, who, in return, snapped her teeth at him in play.

"Ready our fleet and prepare them," Rafaela called out after us as we slipped out of the cabin before another could stand in our way. "It would seem our journey is not over yet."

"Where will you go?" I asked, turning back to see Rafaela's full attention on me.

"Wherever you go, we shall follow."

I tried to swallow, but my throat seemed to have closed up. I only managed one rasped word. "Why?"

"Because you are crucial to ensuring Duwar stays locked in his dimension. Your survival is our survival."

I stared up at the ceiling, bedsheets sticky around my naked limbs. No matter my desperation for it, I had no hopes of getting back to sleep. The sour taste of the nightmare I had dredged myself out of still haunted me. A dream of black-stone pillars, winged humans and a demon god trapped behind glass.

The worst part of it was seeing Jesibel. The context was strange. But it felt so real. As though Jesibel made me recite everything I had learned whilst weighing up if my failing her was worth it.

Now, trying to steady my breathing as I focused on the carved details of the wooden ceiling, I couldn't answer the question.

Deep in the belly of the Cedarfall ship, the air was thick with moisture. The cabin must have been buried beneath the surface of the ocean. Damp seeped through the oiled planked walls and filled the dank air entirely. The overwhelming scent of salt soon became an afterthought when my mind and stomach cursed the constant swaying on the boat. It was no surprise that I fought to keep down the measly plate of hard bread, cured meat and cheese that waited for us when we returned from Rafaela and her fellow Nephilim those hours before.

Duncan's rhythmic breathing was the anchor I required. It prevented me from losing myself in the maddening sway of the ship and the dream, which worked in tandem to curse me. I latched onto the deep, rasping inhales and the slight whistle he made at the peak of his exhale. His closeness didn't help the heavy, sweltering warmth that encompassed me. But I didn't desire there to be any distance between us at all. In fact, whilst one of my arms

was resting behind my head, the other was pressed next to Duncan's with our fingers intertwined.

My hand ached from being linked with his for so long, but regardless of the discomfort, I kept it where it was.

It was better he slept. He needed it. Even if he had put on a brave face and joined in with our conversation about what was discussed with the Nephilim, he still suffered. Duncan had fallen asleep only moments after his head hit the pillow. One minute we had been weaving out of conversation and kissing, the next, he was quiet. His dark lashes fluttered as he entered his dreamscape. I hope his dreams were not as haunting as mine had been.

There was another part of the vision Gabrial had shown me, which I had kept from repeating. Although it had not infiltrated my nightmare, as if the information was not important to the phantom of Jesibel, now it was all I could think about.

Erix.

I would have lied to myself if I had pretended not to have thought of him often. The plans of freeing the captured fey had been more demanding of thought, but he always lingered. Now, surrounded by the ships that beheld those we have saved, my mind seemed to have found the capacity for Erix. Encouraged by the two tormenting words that would always remind me of him.

Little bird.

What happened to you? I screamed into the darkness. My fingers tightened around Duncan's as the feeling of panicked desperation for the answer overwhelmed me.

When Queen Elinor Oakstorm killed her husband, Doran, I wondered if it had somehow killed Erix as well. The Gryvern had been an extension of Doran's will. His twisted offspring. And they had not been seen since they attacked the castle that fateful night. Seraphine shared reports from the Lockinge civilians, which told of the Gryvern fleeing. They did so at once, in a cloud of pale limbs and leathery wings. I had not heard them, but from whispers throughout The Cage, the Gryvern sounded as though they wailed when they fled. Not from pain or fear.

I did not believe the Gryvern made noises because of physical ailments but from grief for losing their sire.

Part of me hoped Erix grasped enough control over his own will and body to get as far from Lockinge as possible. Or that he found peace, in whatever form that would have been.

Just as I often did and grew extremely efficient at, I shelved the dark thoughts and moved on to others.

The list of my torments was long and ever-growing.

I had not revealed to Duncan that Rafaela inquired about him, nor had Seraphine and Althea. Rafaela and her fellow Nephilim could look anywhere else, but Duncan was mine. I recognised the feeling for what it was; territorial. However, this was not a feeling I buried easily. After what I had lost, no one would take him from me.

I hated we were not already sailing for Wychwood. It was not my choice. But one I had to go along with. Althea had told, rather than requested, that we would allow the Cedarfall soldiers two days to rest and regroup. There was little room for me to argue. With the Nephilim sinking two of our ships, we had supplies to restock before the journey. I would be thankful for the breath of relief that waited for me when we finally left Lockinge behind. The further Duncan was from the Nephilim's intrigue, the better.

Duncan shifted beside me, his breathing breaking its pattern. I turned my head to look at him, to find his narrowed, tired stare on me.

"How long have you been awake?" he asked, voice groggy.

I let out a sigh, suddenly relieved. Hearing his deep, rumbling voice edged with exhaustion was the relief I required from my mind. As always, it had the power to expel the tension that built up in my chest. "Unfortunately for me, it seems my head is refusing the idea of sleep. Sorry if I woke you."

"I'm only sorry you didn't wake me sooner. Come here," Duncan groaned as he encouraged me closer to him. "Would you feel better talking about it?"

He had let go of my hand to allow me to get as near as possible. My fingers were stiff; my wrist ached from being stuck in one position. All those feelings melted away as my cheek pressed into the hard curve of his chest. He had shaved the hairs from his torso with a wet blade only days ago. Already the hairs had grown enough to prickle me. Not that I cared. In fact, I was slightly disappointed when he had shaved at all. Although I did not admit that to him. There was something about seeing his muscles sculpted by the shade of dark hair that set something ablaze in me.

"Oh, you know," I said, laying my hand on his stomach. He was warm to the touch, both our bodies equally sticky. If he did not look so exhausted,

I would have suggested a stroll to the main deck for the welcoming kiss of fresh air. "Same old concerns about demonic gods and their mind-controlling puppets searching for the keys to bring forth a world of damnation and death. Nothing too consuming."

It was easier to blame all my anxiety on Aldrick instead of bringing up Erix, Jesibel, and the empty Icethorn Court that waited for me. There were so many other concerns that if I did not slot them each into their own place in my mind and give them attention, one at a time, I feared I would implode.

Duncan pressed his lips into my hair and kissed the top of my head. He pulled back enough to speak but still kept close that his breath tickled my scalp. "One day, we will be sleepless for other reasons without a care or concern in the world."

I closed my eyes, trying to conjure such a time up. It felt impossible. "Say it again, and maybe I will believe you."

"I believe it," he replied as he laid back on the pillow. His eyes had closed again, but his fingers slowly trailed shapes upon my upper arm as he held me to him.

"How do you feel?" I was scared to ask for what he might reply, but I did so anyway.

"Don't you have enough to worry yourself with than my well-being?"

I laughed, catching the hint of his sarcasm from the sly grin he forced upon his face. His dark hair had been swept from his forehead to reveal it glistening in the dull glow of the swaying lantern on his side of the room. Some colour had returned to his face, but he still looked fatigued.

"You are all I think of," I lied. "Which is more a pleasure than a pain. Anyway, I need you to get better because you owe me something."

"I do?" Duncan's smile widened as he surveyed me out of one open eye.

"Yes, something that requires you at full energy... at least that is what I recall you saying. I mean, lots has happened since then. We successfully broke into a prison and freed countless fey. That, and now there is currently a sea full of ships with winged humans who name themselves after the Creator's favoured inanimate objects... and not to forget the mystery of keys and missing fey. In fact, perhaps my mind is playing tricks on me, and you promised nothing at all."

Duncan's fingers no longer traced my skin but gripped it. His thumb pressed down into my arm with a pleasuring force. "No, no. I still seem to

remember a promise."

"Enlighten me," I replied quickly, the insides of my cheeks pinching as they filled with spit.

I longed for Duncan. His touch, his taste. There was a need to feel him, which I also caught in the glow of his eyes. Mischief and hunger coiled in his dark gaze made clear by the parting of his lips and the flash of his tongue caught between teeth.

"Are you using me, Robin Icethorn? Because if you simply require of me to tire you out, I am certainly up for the challenge," Duncan said, spare hand reaching down for the bedding that covered his modesty. At first, what I believed was a mound of material revealed itself to be a peak caused by the swell of his hard cock.

"You can hardly keep your eyes open," I said, trying to be coy but failing. "I hardly believe you have it in you to ruin me."

"Ruin you?" His eyes narrowed.

"Was that not the promise you made, to ruin me? I could have sworn it was."

Words seemed to fail Duncan as his mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water. Giving up on finding the right thing to reply, he surprised me with strength as he rolled me on top of him.

A giggle escaped me as he forced me atop his waist, straddling his proud body with legs bent on either side of his hips. I felt him thrive beneath me, hips rocking in tandem with the ship's natural movement. The press of his cock upon the thin material of my undershorts turned my want for Duncan into a feverish need.

Part of me felt wrong about doing this here. With everything that had happened since my head last touched a pillow, this moment of distraction felt undeserved. As though this prize had not yet been earned.

But I could not wait for the return to Wychwood to take Duncan. Not when he was beneath me now, hands gripping my thighs and encouraging me to roll my hips upon his cock. His eyes had shed the tired gleam. He hardly blinked as he looked up at me. Waves of dark hair spread across the pillow, fanning out around his head like a halo of shadow.

"I missed this," Duncan whispered. "I missed you."

"How could you miss me when I have not left your side?"

Duncan stared me dead in the eyes as though searching for my soul to judge it. "You may have been beside me, but your mind has been elsewhere.

Every time I have looked at you, I have seen heavy clouds flooding your mind. I don't blame you, of course, not with everything you have done. But for the first time." Duncan lifted a hand from my thigh and brought it toward my face. I kept still as his fingers glided across my cheekbone, inches from my left eye. "They're clearer than before. Not blue skies, not yet. But the clouds are thinning within you. I am glad."

I couldn't face holding his attention, so I dropped my stare to the outline of his chest, where both my hands were placed. "I'm sorry..."

"For what?" Duncan quickly added, dropping his hand to my chin and lifting my face back up so I could not hide from him. "Focusing your attention on saving hundreds of innocent people? Never apologise for doing what is right. Not to me."

"I'm finding it hard even imaging a time when things will be normal," I muttered. "It is like I am punishing myself, constantly thinking about what comes next, and if I am honest, I haven't thought this far ahead. Returning to Wychwood is the next step, but why does it feel like such an impossible leap?"

I felt as though I stood on the precipice, staring down at the sharp drop into nothingness. This far, everything we had achieved was because I took a leap into the unknown. But this one. This last jump to return to my court, empty and void of family and life, felt like the hardest part.

"Whatever is to come in the days that follow, know you are not alone. I am here." Duncan buzzed with determination. I gave him props for just how much effort he put into making sure it reached his eyes. For a moment, I believed his confidence in me. "Outside the doors to this room are hundreds of fey indebted to you. And I hardly get the impression Althea is going to leave your side again. I understand what Wychwood and the Icethorn Court represent for you."

"A lonely place."

"No, I refuse that statement. When we return, we do so as a family. Albeit a found family of misfits. A king to rule over reformed Hunters, mutated lovers, a nest of assassins and a host of fey who never believed to find home again."

I leaned over Duncan, lowering my face as close as I could to his without our lips touching. "How is it you have such words of wisdom in times when I need it most?"

"Perhaps our brief stay with Abbot Nathanial had a profound effect on me," he replied.

"He would be proud of you." I blinked, drinking in every detail of his face. From his dark lashes that framed his forest-green eyes, to the scar that linked from the corner of his left eye to his lip that deepened when he smiled. The way the stubble of his beard sharpened his cheekbones and jawline as though a painter shadowed the right parts of his face to make him exude masculine beauty.

"Nathanial would be proud of us," Duncan said, reaching his hands over my shoulders and lacing his fingers behind my head. He wedged me in place, ensuring I could not move away from him. "And I hope, in his peace, he knows just how much I love you."

I practically sagged beneath the words, unable to keep my bones and muscles strong enough to hold me up. Duncan had a way of melting me into a puddle with his words and touch.

In hindsight, Duncan may have wanted me to say those words back to him. But I felt my actions would prove my love for him over three measly words leaving my mouth could.

With fierce lust, I crashed my lips into his. The kiss was sudden and full of passion. Duncan kept his hands behind my head, keeping me to him. Although there was no way, I would break away from him. Not now, not ever.

Our tongues encouraged one another into the dance. I tasted mint with the undercurrent of strong spirits. Whisky perhaps. Its sharp bite glossed across my lip as his tongue trailed it.

Duncan brought his hips up beneath me. The press of his cock fuelled me. My fingers ran up the back of his head, coiling among his thick, chestnut-brown hair until I was locked in place. He hissed as I tugged, stretching the hair at the scalp to where pain and pleasure mixed as one.

He liked it. As did I. With Duncan, I had discovered ways of pleasure that he could provide me. Things I never knew were possible. There was a pride in uncovering a partner's desires, and this was one that shifted the control of sex into my hands as Duncan willingly gave himself to me.

I pulled at his hair harder, tearing his mouth from mine, leaving my lips tingling from his pressure. My jaw itched because his beard rubbed close against my smooth skin. Duncan cocked his head back, stretching his neck out as he expelled a groan that shuddered the very seas.

He knew what was coming.

I drove into his neck, tongue wetting his skin first to ready the place as I sucked and nibbled. I trailed the entire stretch of his neck until it was pink and moist.

Duncan's hands fell from the back of my head. His thick fingers trailed down my spine and found their place on either side of my ass. He pinched the fleshy skin as he gripped each cheek with desperation. I returned his rough touch with a sharp nip at the soft skin beneath his ear.

"You," Duncan said, voice deeper than it had been before. "Don't you dare move from this position. Am I clear?"

"Loud and clear," I replied, whispering into his ear. The brush of my lip against it conjured a shiver across Duncan's chest and arms.

"I'm going to fuck you where you sit."

Ensuring he knew that was what I wanted, I pressed myself down into his member. It twitched beneath me.

"Look at you, Duncan Rackley. It would seem the promise of my tight ass has brought you back to life."

"Such a naughty tongue. Perhaps I should put it to good use. You want me to fuck you, don't you, my King?"

I nodded. "I'm that readable, am I?"

"Indeed, you are."

Duncan's nails pinched through the thin material of my undershorts. I gasped before he yanked hard and ripped the shorts into two wasted pieces of fabric. The cold salt breeze brushed against the exposed heart of my ass. The feeling only intensified as a finger slipped across it.

"Remember, I am still not feeling completely well," Duncan purred, eyes wide and burning with unbridled desire. His nail traced circles around the heart of my ass. The touch reduced me to a puddle of breathy moans. "I am going to need you to do the work. Are you up to that?"

Just the thought alone had my knees trembling. It was a shame his cock would not greet the insides of my mouth because it salivated profusely. Such a waste of spit.

"I will do my best."

"That is all I can ask," Duncan replied, lifting his fingers to his mouth. As he brought them away, a link of spit pulled between his hand and lips before snapping. My stomach hardened as his wet fingers wiped across my ass. I leaned forward, always breathless at his touch.

Duncan did it three more times until he offered his glistening fingers to my mouth.

"Spit," he demanded.

I did as he asked, glad to provide the lubrication that had filled my mouth.

Not such a waste, after all.

"Good boy," he said, his hand falling from view. This time his hand did not touch me but himself instead. I felt Duncan pull the sheet until his thick flesh was free. A monster released from its prison to wreak havoc.

The next moments happened so quickly. There was no warning as his thickness pressed into my ass and filled me. I cried out, throwing my head back. I closed my eyes and arched my back instinctively. Duncan entered me, urging me to sit back down until my cheeks pressed into his hips.

"Ah," he cooed, biting down on his lower lip as his eyes rolled into the back of his head.

He sat me like that for a moment, allowing my body to return from euphoria before continuing. Our heavy breathing synched. I was certain I felt the drum of his heart inside me, matching mine with every beat.

"I am yours," Duncan said finally, lifting his hands from my ass and resting them behind his head. He wiggled into a comfortable position beneath me, the muscles in his stomach rippling. I counted six mounds, with hints of two others that hid beneath my thighs. It was so easy to lose myself to him. To distract myself with the way he had been crafted. The faint marks of scars, new and old, only added to the patchwork of stories that covered his skin. I loved every single one and wished I had time to kiss them all.

"Robin," Duncan spoke my name, drawing my attention back to his face. He had done little work so far, but still, his forehead glistened with sweat. "Ride me. Do it until I fill you. Pleasure me, and I will do the same for you in return."

He did not reach for my cock, not this time. As though reading my mind, he spoke again. "You will not need to do anything but fuck my cock, and I promise you, you will race toward the end without touching yourself. Do you trust me?"

"More than you could imagine."

"Good." Duncan smiled. "I am all yours."

And he was. All of him, body and mind. He was mine.

I bounced upon his length. At first, the movements were small as I grew familiar with his stretching presence inside of me. Then the momentum built. I threw my ass down upon his cock, lifting it higher and higher with each thrust so his entire length could fill me. The wooden bed creaked and screamed. It echoed that of my legs, thighs and knees, which cried out.

But I did not stop. Not as Duncan lost himself in the maze of pleasure, hardly able to keep his eyes open as I fucked myself upon his long, thick cock.

Deep inside me, the tip of his member found the point of divinity and slammed into it over and over. Soon enough, the world fell away from me as I could only focus on that feeling and ensuring I did not lose it.

"That's it," Duncan encouraged from beneath me. As though he knew I had found what he had suggested. He willed for me to grip a hold of the feeling and never let go. "Keep doing that, just like that. Fuck my dick. Darling..."

I believe I said something in reply, but I was so far into the divinity within me that everything seemed muffled except Duncan's voice. His deep tone guided me through it, only making the force of his cock inside me more intense.

Suddenly, I took a deep breath of freezing air. No longer did I linger within the divine feeling inside, but I became it. I shouted out as the feeling overwhelmed me, spread its warmth across my stomach and raced down the end of my member until it burst out of its end.

I knew that Duncan also found the same feeling. As the ring of my ass tightened around his cock, and I slowed my bouncing, Duncan was calling out with the same groans as me. His were deeper but equally uncontrolled and overwhelmed with gratification.

It took a moment for the chaotic feeling to dissipate. I left the dreamlike state and returned to the world, exhausted, happy, and fulfilled.

Still, with Duncan inside of me, he brought me down to his mouth and kissed me softly. My damp palms spread across his chest.

"You did not lie," I said quietly, forehead pressed to his. "If I was not so tired, I would demand you show me that again."

I had finished without the need to touch myself. The feeling was impossible but possible. Clear from the spread of cloudy liquid that dripped from the tip of my cock onto Duncan's lower abdomen.

"We have an endless amount of time ahead of us," Duncan replied. "And I have an equal number of things to show you until you grow bored."

"Duncan, I will never grow bored with you. Not in this life or the next."

"I demand that you repeat that to me every morning and night," He replied through a yawn. "Just so I never forget."

"If you can't get some sleep after that, then I have failed in my duty to you." Duncan pressed a final kiss to my forehead and helped me off of him. I rolled next to him, unable to forget the physical memory of his cock inside of me. Nor did I wish to forget it. "And in the morning, I will wake you and remind you of what I said."

"Promise?" I asked, glad my eyes fluttered closed, and my mind was empty of anything but him.

There were no stone pillars or wings. No Erix or Jesibel.

Duncan's hand slipped into mine once again. "You'll just have to see in the morning."

wo long days, and equally drawn-out nights, had passed since I last spoke with the Nephilim, yet their words were still loud in my head. Perhaps it was because my dreams repeated them. Over and over, replaying the vision, Gabrial had revealed to me. If I could have gotten sleep uninterrupted by the same repetitive nightmares, I may have been able to concentrate on other matters. Alas, I found no reprieve when my eyes closed.

The yawn racked my entire body. My mind sluggish and footing awkward, I stumbled into the crowd that dominated the main deck.

It was impossible to discern the time of day when impregnable clouds blanketed the sky with a multitude of greys and silver. I only hoped the rain, which had staved off this far, would leave us be. Morale would not benefit sodden sailors, finally preparing to embark on days' worth of travel.

Seraphine surveyed every Cedarfall soldier that passed us with eyes narrowed in distrust. Leant up against the railing, her leg bent at the knee and her arms crossed over her chest. Everything about her demeanour screamed that she wished to be left alone like a hawk stalking in peace.

Peace which I'd shattered as I paced across the busy deck directly at her.

"When did you get back?" I asked. I felt awkward at the way she completely ignored me. Undeterred, I took my place beside her. My back pressed into the polished wooden railing that gave way to a drop into the dark azure of the ocean.

"My apologies. I didn't think that I had to check in at my every movement, Your Highness," she replied, tone equal parts dry and distant.

"Usually, my sponsors are not so... suffocating."

"Touchy. Sounds like you have had a long night," I retorted, trying not to show how her tone chipped away at my ability to keep the silver from my tongue. "Are you annoyed at me for something, or more pissed that you came back empty-handed?"

"So, you heard?" Seraphine surveyed me with a raised brow.

"I've learned gossip spreads quicker than scurvy on a ship," I replied. "That and I keep checking over the census, hoping more names are added to it."

"Not a single fey found to add onto Kayne's little list, I'm afraid." Seraphine exhaled, neck clicking from either side as she continued watching the busy crew. "Lockinge is lost to bedlam. Humans enjoy the lack of authority in the city. The few Hunters who stayed have now fled. Driven out, I've heard. The human's King is nowhere to be found. I give it until nightfall, and the city will be lost to chaos that even Aldrick could not grasp his hands back on."

"Where have they all gone?" I asked, fighting the urge to chew on my already ruined nails.

"Escaped, hopefully."

Seraphine stood tall, both feet on the deck. Wisps of her thick hair caught in the wind, tugging free from the loose braid that snaked down her spine. She wore matching form-fitted trousers and a top made from the same cut of black material. It extenuated every length, curve, and muscled mound of her body. The outfit was held together by a web of leather straps that concealed weapons in almost every place she could reach on her person. Perhaps her decoration of blade and steel was the reason no one seemed to approach her.

"I appreciate your attempt. It didn't feel right leaving without at least trying to find those who ran," I said, reaching into the pockets of my trousers as though searching for something.

Seraphine shrugged. "A lesson in life is you can't help them all. Trust me."

"Then I'm wondering why you seem concerned about the humans and Lockinge?"

The corner of Seraphine's red-stained lip turned upward. "Believe me, Robin, I couldn't care less if the city burns to nothing but ash. But I understand the importance of balance, and it does not sit right with me that

Aldrick has swept in behind a veil of lies and deceit, only to leave again with nothing but turmoil behind him. It has little to do with my care for the humans and everything to do with fixing the damage left by a common enemy."

"Even if the humans don't recognise Aldrick as that very thing? Their enemy."

"Oh, they will if he succeeds with his plans and the world becomes a playing field for demon gods," Seraphine replied. The humour that had not long graced her expression melted into something darker.

"Do you think Aldrick knows of the Nephilim?" I asked, tipping my head to the quiet outlines of boats that waited across the landscape behind our fleet. Two days, and we'd heard nothing from them. I had not seen nor had report of much activity from Rafaela and her fellow winged, human holy warriors. They had kept themselves quiet, but regardless of their silence, their presence was still felt. Even now, one glance across the sea, and their fleet still lingered.

"The Nephilim were never mentioned," Seraphine added, stare gazing over in thought. "Not that there was much conversation when me and my sister aided him. From what I can say about Aldrick, he is one-dimensional. He has little ability to focus on anything but the task at hand. It has consumed him."

I looked across the deck, eyes falling upon a familiar figure. Duncan moved among the crew, two large sacks gathered on each of his shoulders. Extra supplies Seraphine had returned with.

He had not yet seen me, but my attention gravitated toward him. Duncan was laughing at something a Cedarfall soldier had said. Perhaps they joked about how Duncan could carry twice the weight without showing a sign of struggle, whereas the soldier was practically dragging one sack across the deck like a stubborn child in the throes of a tantrum.

Duncan's health had improved dramatically. Each morning he woke with more colour in his cheeks and more desperation in his touch.

"I get the sense that Aldrick knows more than we think he does," I replied. "We have underestimated him this far."

"You believe Aldrick knows about the Nephilim?" Seraphine asked, drawing me from my distraction.

"His timing is all too sudden. Aldrick showed no signs of completely abandoning Lockinge. Even we believed he would only leave enough for us

to have a small window to get in and out. For such a great fortitude, I do not understand the reasoning in his plans to leave it behind. Hardly protected at that. Unless he was running from something..."

I noticed Seraphine's lips pinch into a pale lip. Her brows drew downward, casting lines of concern across her forehead. "Speculation. I know everything he does. I would have known if he was preparing to flee."

"Would you?" I asked, discouraged by her blatantly inflated ego. "Then give me an explanation that makes sense."

"You haven't paid me enough for explanations," Seraphine retorted.

A sour taste pinched at the insides of my cheeks. What more could Seraphine have asked for in payment than what I had already given her? Just the thought of the price I had paid was enough to encourage a storm in my stomach.

"Someone is looking better." Seraphine changed the conversation abruptly. I believed she had the power to read my thoughts. "Amazing what sleep can do for the body after it nearly destroyed itself using power that doesn't belong to it."

"Yes," I replied. "Thank Altar for sleep."

Not that I could relate. I had very little of it.

"I pity you, Robin."

Her comment slapped my cheeks red. "Pardon?"

"What will the courts think of King Icethorn when he opens his home to Hunters and assassins?"

"Would you keep your voice down?" I hissed, eyes flickering around the deck for anyone that may have heard.

Seraphine delighted in my reaction, both corners of her lips turning up into the brightest of smiles. "You haven't told him, have you?"

I turned my back on Duncan and faced Seraphine directly. I saw her gleeful expression and the outlines of the Nephilim's ships far in the distance behind her. "There has not exactly been the time to discuss such things with Duncan. Not that it would matter to him. As you so put it, I am the Icethorn king. My decisions are mine solely to make."

"Such an awfully long-winded way of saying no."

"No then, happy?"

Seraphine took the end of her braid in her hand and twisted it around her fingers as she studied me. "And Althea, did you ask for her judgement before you signed into my deal? Nothing better than some royal advice when making a deal with the Asps. I know members of the Cedarfall family are well attuned to how we work. That and I have Asps everywhere. They burrow into every nest, all but yours. Until now, of course."

"Would you stop!" I hissed through gritted teeth.

"Robin, please let me watch when you tell them. I'd love to see their faces when you reveal what you gave us..."

The sky exploded with a thunderous crack. I thought it was my power that had burst out of my chest from pure desperation. But when I looked down, there was nothing.

And noise rocked the world. This one was far louder than the last. The boom burst within my ears, rocking my skull with the force. One moment I watched Seraphine's smile grow, the next, my face was pressed against the damp floor of the ship's deck with nothing but the crystal ringing filling my head.

I forced myself up, hands pressing against the slick wood, as more sprays of cold water rained upon me. Spread across the deck were bodies. Some were still, with wide eyes looking skyward. Others withered across the ground, hands pressed to their ears or their mouths. It was strange to watch someone scream without a sound. I focused in on one soldier closest to me. His lips were moving, but I couldn't hear anything above the ringing.

In a stupor, I sat myself up. Lifting my hands to my ears, I felt warmth. When I pulled them back, the tips of my fingers were coated with blood. The ruby glistened like jewels against my ivory skin. Rivers of it raced down my hand, circling my wrist before dripping upon my wet trousers.

Suddenly, two firm hands gripped my shoulders. I was aware of the touch before my mind could provide me with the command to look up.

Duncan knelt before me. His pale lips were moving, but I could not hear him. Not clearly, at least. I narrowed my gaze on his mouth and could hear a faint but muffled barrage of words. They seemed to be buried so deep beneath the incessant ringing that I could hardly focus enough to understand.

I almost laughed. The feeling was strange, but it seemed easier to give into deliria and laugh at my confused state than let it panic me.

Something caught Duncan's attention. He looked up into the sky, falling back away from me. Horror crept across his expression. His mouth gaped open, his eyes unblinking.

It was his reaction that tore me from my feverish state.

I followed his attention and looked up. Far above, a wave of obsidian cloud rumbled across the sky with a momentum that should not have been possible for such a thing. Billowing and monstrous, the cloud passed overhead and moved toward Lockinge. It cast a shadow across the ground.

The ringing in my ears calmed. Another sound replaced it.

"What..." I began, swallowing my words as the Nephilim joined the view with their wings outstretched, in contrast to the dark state of the sky. I blinked, capturing the image in my mind like a painting.

Rafaela took the lead of the flock, slicing in an arch toward our ship, which the rest of her kind followed. Even from a distance, I felt her stare upon the place I sat slouched. She held her golden hammer between two powerful hands, ready to use it.

"Robin, say something to me," Duncan asked, although more a command. Panic edged beneath each word, still muffled but now clear enough to make sense. He knelt before me once again, his entire focus on me. His verdant eyes flickered between the dripping blood from my ear to my red-tipped stained fingers on my lap.

"What happened?" I replied, breath caught in the back of my throat.

Duncan traced his hand across my face. His touch felt cold. I recognised the slight tremble of his fingers. "Nothing good if they are coming."

I winced as Rafaela was suddenly in the air above us. She threw out her wings, slowing her descent before her boots smashed into the deck.

"Are you well?" She strode forward, offering me a hand. I caught her eyes flicker toward the blood that dribbled out of my ears. Her attention lingered on it only for a moment, genuine concern etched across her face.

"Been better," I replied, contemplating taking her hand or not. My decision was made for me when she retreated. "I get the impression you know what caused that..."

Rafaela nodded ever so slightly, biting down on her lower lip before responding. "I think it best you see to yourself and your people, and then we discuss matters in a place without an audience."

"Can we wait for answers?" Duncan asked, annoyance rolling off him.

I tried to catch my breath as it suddenly felt as though it had tried to escape from me. Panic clawed its way down my throat and made its presence known among my bones and blood.

"Something terrible has happened." A shadow passed behind Seraphine's wide eyes. "Nothing good will come of speaking about it and causing hysteria."

"No shit," Seraphine groaned. Until now, among the chaos, I had forgotten about her. She was hunched over at Rafaela's side, shadowed by the proud wings. Red leaked from the corner of her mouth, only visible for a second before Seraphine cleared it with the back of her hand.

"Where is Althea Cedarfall?" Rafaela asked, ignoring Seraphine's glower.

I pressed my fingers to my temple, trying to calm the thudding that had overcome me. "She... she was on another ship with Kayne—."

Rafaela was airborne before I could finish. Duncan raised an arm against the force of winds her wings conjured. I turned my face into his chest, pinching my eyes closed. One moment she was there, the next, her outline fading off across the sea of Cedarfall ships in search of Althea.

Something about her sudden, desperate departure only fuelled my worry. I pushed myself from Duncan's embrace and moved for the railing to follow Rafaela's flight. "If something has happened to Althea..."

"She'll be fine," Seraphine replied out the corner of her mouth. "It is best you show those watching that you are calm. There is nothing more detrimental to leadership than allowing panic to seep beyond your own control. Deep breathe, turn and face them and show that everything is in order."

"What if it isn't?" I replied, gripping onto the railing for support.

"Until Rafaela returns, we will not know exactly what has happened," Duncan added, laying a hand on my shoulder and squeezing.

I looked between them both, unable to stop myself from speaking aloud what my mind had already made up.

"Aldrick," I spoke his name as though it was the most disgusting thing to grace my lips. "This is his doing. It has to be."

Seraphine looked out across the sea toward Lockinge and the rolling dark wave that had thinned into what looked more like mundane storm clouds.

Duncan didn't offer me a lie to douse the flames of panic within me. But he also didn't shy away from my gaze, instead greeting it with haunting defeat. "I think he found what he was looking for."

A key.

Something that the Nephilim had said repeated in my mind as though Duncan's comment had drudged it from the deepest parts of my

subconscious.

"Not what?" I muttered, fighting the urge to empty the contents of my stomach into the ocean beneath me. "Who."

Istared out the circular porthole, marvelling at the piercing blue sky. It no longer beheld even a wisp of the ominous cloud. The sun beat proudly upon the ocean, making its surface glisten like diamonds. The gentle lull of water against the boat and the quietness of the deck beyond the room only added to the atmosphere of serenity. If I closed my eyes and placed my hands across my ears, then I may have even tricked myself. Convinced myself that I was not in the cabin, listening to the Nephilim as they turned everything we knew on its head with a single sentence.

"Aldrick discovered a key," Rafaela confirmed what I had already guessed. She rested her weight against the hammer, which she used more like a staff than a weapon. "We hoped Aldrick searched blindly, but it would seem he has means to information that no others have been since us."

"And you are certain his discovering caused the phenomenon?" Althea asked, sitting straight-backed in her chair. Her entire posture was rigid and stiff, whereas I felt the urge to give myself to the exhaustion and crumple in on myself.

"What happened was only a warning. A sign that the bindings keeping the Defiler entrapped have weakened," Gabrial added, her gaze never leaving the skin of her arm. Symbols and words flowed, moving in tandem with her eyes that scanned her skin like the page of a book.

"Much like Robin, Aldrick is half-fey, meaning his story is scripted among the Creator's words. I can see what he has achieved and how. There is no denying his success." Gabrial lifted her attention from her skin and sighed. "And our failure," Cassial growled, mountainous arms crossing his chest.

"What can you see?" Seraphine asked, unable to hide the demanding in her tone. "If he has one, there are three more to get. Surely we can keep Aldrick away from the rest of the keys?" The assassin lurked in the shadows of the cabin, fiddling with a short, serrated knife to keep her hands busy.

"I cannot see what is to come, only what has come to pass," Gabrial replied, unaware of the bloodthirsty assassin who watched her as a cat stalks its prey.

"Tell us how we stop him," I asked, finally breaking my silence. "What good is waiting around discussing matters when we need to find and stop him? It is clear you know where the keys are and keeping them from us will benefit no one. Aldrick knows. Level the playing field and tell us what you are keeping."

Gabrial and Rafaela shared a look. Cassial grunted in his own form of silent communication.

Duncan had remained as hushed as I had. Only did he provide me with a touch upon the shoulder, or brush of his stomach, against my back as he stepped in close to me. At first, I wanted to refuse that he join this conversation, especially with the way the Nephilim's gazes always seemed to linger on him. But there was no keeping Duncan away, not after what had happened. Nor did I wish for anything but his proximity in a moment such as this.

"Believe that we have no interest in allowing Aldrick to lay his hands upon another key. There is no saying what will happen if the gate keeping the Defiler imprisoned is weakened again."

"Where is the gate?" Duncan asked, taking the words out of my mouth. "If such a place exists physically, should it not be guarded at all times?"

"Oh, it is." Rafaela tilted her head, eyes trailing Duncan from head to foot. "The Isle of Irobel is not only our home but the very land in which the gods fought and won against the Defiler. Generations ago, when mortals and gods communed with ease, the Creator sent the Nephilim to live and guard the gate, never to leave unless the threat of the Defiler's freedom became a possibility."

"Does the fact that Irobel not being chartered on any map have anything to do with upholding the same air of secrecy for both your kind and the gate itself?" Althea asked. "I can only guess that removing all traces and stories of Duwar from both the fey and human's history was important to upholding his imprisonment. But the lack of education about the demon has only led us on the path of being unprepared. Frankly, our lack of knowledge has set us up to lose."

Rafaela nodded, mouth edging into a frown. "If anyone ever said the fey were not clever beings, they were wrong."

"Care to clarify if that is a compliment or something that warrants a complication?"

Rafaela placed a hand over her heart. Regret pinched at the corners of her mouth. "I did not mean to offend you, Princess Althea Cedarfall."

Althea sucked her tongue across her teeth. The smack of it was the only sound she replied with.

"Gabrial," I said, trying to ease my way through the tension. "Can you tell us how Aldrick found the key? If you share, it may help us keep him from the rest."

"That is not information necessary for you to be privy to," Cassial growled, tensing in his broad frame as he spoke. It seemed even the veins in his neck bulged as though strangled between muscles.

"Cassial, if Aldrick has discovered the truth, then there is nothing stopping us from sharing it with them." Gabrial looked to Cassial, exuding the same demeanour of power without all the muscle and brawn. "As Princess Althea has aptly suggested, perhaps we have been led down this road of failure because of secrecy. It has not brought us any luck."

I could see Cassial's want to refuse Gabrial, but one look at Rafaela, and he seemed to retreat. "So be it. On your head be it the Creator's judgement."

"May I remind you, Shield, I am the Creator's judgement, and I say we tell them."

"Get on with it then!" Althea snapped, displeased by the sibling-like quarrel.

Rafaela cleared her throat. The act was enough to command all eyes to be on her. "When Altar forged the lock upon the gate the Creator had constructed, it weakened both gods greatly. They lost immense levels of power entrapping the Defiler in his prison, which can be felt to this day with their lack of physical presence among the realms. In a weakened state, both gods used the remaining essence they beheld and crafted physical

beings in whom they could entrust the banishment of the Defiler to last eternally. The Creator, as we explained, crafted the Nephilim in his image. It was his last act. Altar took his power and placed it in four of your kind. Burying his essence within them with the purpose of stowing his power and spreading it out as a fail-safe to keeping the gate sealed. What I am sure your god did not account for was those four beings he had chosen would take their new power and use it to fashion a realm to benefit them. All whilst forgetting their initial purpose."

Deathly quiet settled over the cabin. I took a breath in, only to find my heart bundled in my throat. I almost choked on it. Rafaela's words repeated as though a puzzle that I attempted to piece together. The edges of my vision darkened as the world seemed to melt away. When I blinked, it seemed the darkness only insisted on drowning me entirely.

"I do not understand what you are alluding to," Seraphine snapped.

I wished to look at Althea, but I was frozen in place.

"What is it you're trying to imply?" Duncan added. The warmth of his voice reminded me of my control. As always, it calmed me. At least enough to lean into his hand that was spread across my shoulder.

"She means..." I started, voice harsh and throat dry. "The fey courts. We're the keys."

"Yes. Robin, you are the key. One. One of the three left remaining. Althea, your mother, protects another..."

"Which leaves Elmdew and Oakstorm," Althea muttered, gaze lost to a place upon the desk before us.

"From our understanding, the Oakstorm key has recently exchanged place from Doran Oakstorm to his wife Elinor upon her return," Gabrial said softly, whilst spreading her sorrowful stare across the room.

"Yes, Elinor claimed it," I confirmed, thoughts drifting to the instructions I had shared with her. Instructions I had to uncover myself when claiming the destructive power of the Icethorn Court, which I now recognised as something else entirely. "It is why she returned to the Oakstorm Court. If such power is left unclaimed, it has the destructive ability that would put not only Wychwood but Durmain at risk. As an Oakstorm by marriage, it was Elinor's power to have."

"Except, it is not power." Rafaela's grip tightened upon her hammer. "It is the part of a doorway keeping a demon from entering this world and

destroying it. A key being the simpler of terms to refer to it as when in reality, it is far greater than such a mundane title."

Althea's chair screeched as she pushed out of it. Her force was so great that the chair tumbled, crashing into the ground away from her. "Who did he kill?"

Dread traced its talon up my spine. A wave of pure sickness overcame me.

"Aldrick?" Duncan spat the name out.

"If a key has been destroyed..." Althea's eyes filled with tears, but her resolve kept them from spilling. Her entire body trembled, encouraging streams of heat to twist from her skin. Cassial flinched from her suddenly. "I hardly imagine the fey he has encountered would give the... power. The key, whatever it is. They would not have given it to him willingly. Who did Aldrick kill!"

Rafaela recoiled at Althea's shout. Duncan did not stop me from going to her side. I brought my icy chill to encase my skin as I wrapped my arms around her shaking frame. Our powers clashed in a hiss. I didn't let go.

"Your family will be safe," I whispered into her pointed ear, trying to convince her and myself.

"If he touches them..." Althea did not need to finish her threat for me to understand it.

"I know," I replied.

"Aldrick has not destroyed a key, simply its host," Gabrial confirmed. "Destruction of such a power is detrimental to his end goal."

"Do not make me ask you again," Althea seethed.

Gabrial stood slowly from her chair, pressing her hands dutifully before her as though holding a flower between each palm. Across her skin, the symbols had stilled, fading to a faint silver until they looked more like old scars. Regardless, I knew they were there, waiting to be read by the Nephilim when required.

She lifted her azure stare, a single tear tracing down her rosy cheek in a procession of sadness. "With a heavy heart, I confirm the death of King Peta Elmdew and his husband, King Consort Dai. The spring court has fallen."

Gabrial paused. Her silence allowed us to take in her revelation. It burned, settling over my conscience like molten ash.

Gabrial's sorrow made sense now. This explained why her stare lingered on her skin, rather than us, at the beginning of our conversation. She had known. Maybe even seen what Aldrick had accomplished. She may not have known Peta and Dai, but her grief was as real as ours.

"Can you show me?" I asked. My throat burned with anguish. It took effort not to give in and allow it to overcome me completely.

Rafaela read Gabrial's body language and spoke for her. The younger Nephilim dropped her chin to her chest and stepped back.

"It is not suitable for you to see. Their death was not kind."

I read the emotion in Rafaela's open stare and knew her refusal was a way of protecting me.

"It would seem Duwar shields Aldrick. Gabrial can only see glimpses of what has occurred. What she can view seems to be what Aldrick wants her to see. How he has got such knowledge of the keys, and of us... I cannot yet comprehend."

"He's going to win," I muttered, gaze lost to a place on the wall beyond Rafaela's head. "Every move, every step. Aldrick is always ahead."

"Can you tell us how this has happened?" Duncan questioned. "Only days ago, he was in Lockinge. How has he got so many steps ahead?"

Gabrial cleared her throat, then lifted her reddened eyes back to the group. Gone was the sadness. Now anger replaced it. "Aldrick's ties to the Elmdew Court root deep. Reading his past is messy, as though it has been tampered with. It would seem he left Lockinge long before you think he had." I shot my eyes to Seraphine, whose hardly masked the abundant surprise from Gabrial's explanation. "Aldrick, alongside an army of mutated humans, crossed the border and infiltrated the court. What I know, which is the clearest part I can see, is that Aldrick used his power to ensnare King Peta and make him give up his power somewhat willingly. What followed is..." Gabrial smacked her hand to her mouth. Her skin took on a greenish sheen.

Rafaela shot forward to fuss over Gabrial but was waved off.

"I am fine," Gabrial spluttered. "Give me a moment."

Edging on the side of caution, I thought it best the conversation was taken away from what Gabrial had learned. The horror she had seen had affected her greatly. It aged the young girl before my eyes.

There would be a time we would demand answers, but for now, it could wait.

"What does this mean for us?" I asked, shifting my attention to Rafaela. "It means that Aldrick is going to stop at nothing to get the remaining keys. Robin, he is going to come for you. For all of you. But I... we will not allow that to happen."

hree excruciatingly long days of travel. That's how long it took my body to finally adopt the natural sway which mirrored the ship's as it sliced across the ocean. The terrible sickness, which the sailors had warned about, had only just passed. In its wake, I was left with a thudding ache deep in my skull. It sang in synchronicity with the smashing of water against the ship's hull.

I spent more time on deck, surrounded by open salt winds, than in the dark pits of the cabin in which Duncan was currently left sleeping. Although I craved the warmth of his body and the soft grace of his touch, I would happily forfeit it for the feeling of freedom the open seas provided.

Dawn had not long graced the skies with its brush of lilac and rose. As it was common that the deck was of life by mid-morning. The buzz of the fey snatched away the peace I craved. So, I grew used to slipping out whilst they slept. Moments like this, small pockets of quiet when there was nothing but me and my thoughts, were not as terrible as I once believed.

The silence gave me time to contemplate what had passed and what also waited for us when we arrived in Icethorn in a matter of days.

I was not the only one who frequented the early hours of the day to bask in its clarity. Rafaela wove throughout the thin wisps of cloud with her wings outstretched, casting a shadow across the deep azure waters below. As we did each morning, we recognised each other's presence with a glance and left each other alone. She kept to the skies above her ship.

Rafaela and Gabrial joined our journey to Wychwood, whereas Cassial stayed in Lockinge with an army of Nephilim. Cassial hoped to gain control of the human city. Faith of the Creator had dwindled to a dying flame

thanks to Aldrick and the wildfire that was his lies. However, Cassial believed in the power that was spreading the word of the Creator back among the humans. I imagined once the humans saw the winged warrior, they would not need much reminding of the faith they'd not long traded for Duwar and his promise for power.

Both Rafaela and Gabrial hadn't even paid thought to join Cassial. Both had made it their duty to protect the remaining three keys, plain and clear. Which meant, proven by the shadow I had gained, Rafaela never strayed too far. When I was awake, she was awake. Even hidden within my cabin with Duncan's limbs entwined with mine, I sensed her.

My stomach groaned, sending a sharp stab of hunger across my torso. I pressed a hand to it, massaging the ache in hopes it faded. Food was not something the Cedarfall ships had an abundance of, so what little we had, I preferred knowing it went to the fey we had risked everything to save. The ship the Nephilim had sunk to the bed beneath the waves not only took one valuable vessel, but the stores of food Queen Cedarfall had sent to last our return to Wychwood. And it was mine and Althea's joint decision not to stop along the Durmain coastline to restock since leaving Lockinge city. Not with our unknowing of what lurked among the human landscape. Their hate for our kind would take longer to repair, and it was best we returned to our realm as soon as possible. Both to return the fey back to their rightful homes but to enter the chaos that was left in the wake of Aldrick's destruction of the Elmdew Court.

What little food left in our dwindling supplies had to last. There was no other option.

Footsteps sounded across the deck. It was unusual for someone to be up so early. I turned, gathering myself, and prepared to leave the sailors to their tasks.

It was Kayne who emerged from the shadowed stairwell that led into the ship. The look of surprise across his freckled face told me he, too, didn't expect to find anyone awake.

"Rushing off?" He asked, voice thick with a yawn.

Suddenly, I felt awkward. I fidgeted with my hands, kept in place as Kayne stood at the exit of the lower decks. He was not broad, and wide but opposite. Tall, thin as a reed with long legs and arms, which he stretched away, the tiredness settled in his bones.

"I left Duncan a while ago. It would be better that I'm with him when he wakes up," I replied, trying to read the trepidation in his narrowed eyes. "Unless you would prefer my company?"

Kayne laughed but said nothing else to combat my question.

Lucari gleefully swooped from his shoulder, wings flapping in a blur as she shot skyward toward Rafaela, giving chase. Once the hawk drew close to the Nephilim, she recognised Rafaela was not prey and quickly dipped away from her. Her squark practically screamed with fear.

"Can't sleep?" He asked, breaking the silence between us. I hated how short he was when he spoke. I wasn't the one starting the conversation, yet I still felt like it was an agony getting any more than two words out of him at a time.

"I have been awake for hours," I replied, feeling the usual awkwardness that thickened the air when Kayne was around. After our last interaction, it seemed Kayne did everything to only be around me when Duncan was there. Even the hesitant glint in his eyes revealed he would have preferred I had not seen him. He could've slunk back into the shadows. But alas, I caught him.

"The moment my feet touch the solid, unmoving ground, I might cry," Kayne said, focusing his attention on his hawk and not on me. "I've heard we have two more days of this hell to get through."

I picked at my fingers, picking at the skin around the nail to give myself something else to focus on. "If winds permit, we will reach Wychwood late evening in two days. At the earliest."

"Oh, I can imagine the warm welcome now," Kayne said. I could practically hear the roll of his eyes without the need to look.

"You were a Hunter. Forgive the fey for treating you with caution, which I am sure you can understand they will have."

Kayne huffed, stretching his neck backwards and then to either side. Besides what his words suggested, nothing about him seemed concerned. "Duncan, too, right? What is to say you are not leading us blindly? To reach Wychwood only to be met with a trial for our heinous crimes?"

"After everything we have been through, and you still do not trust me," I replied. I savoured the harsh copper tang as my teeth gnawed down into the inside of my cheeks. The pain and taste were the distraction required to not say what I truly wished.

Kayne shrugged, smiled and walked right past me with the confidence of someone knowing where they wished to go. Which, on a deck surrounded by stretches of ocean and nowhere to go, confirmed he just wished to get away from me.

"Is there a problem?" I asked, rooted to the spot.

"I don't know, should there be?" Kayne said through a smirk I caught at the side of his profile.

"No, which is why I don't understand your hostility toward me. I don't want to have this relationship with you, Kayne," I said, chasing after him like a fool. In another world, I would have walked away, cursing his name under my breath. But Kayne was Duncan's closest friend. His brother of soul, not blood. It was imperative we both got along.

I needed Kayne for other means. Selfish, yes, but important. Kayne's skills as a Tracker were highly desirable with the problem I had.

"Do you want me to pretend to like you?"

My throat tightened. "Ah, he finally admits it."

"I thought I had made it obvious. Guess I should have tried harder."

"If you don't care about me, then why are you here, Kayne? Nothing was stopping you from leaving. You could have turned your back on all of this, but you helped. Is it to boost your ego or make yourself feel better for the terrible things your time as a Hunter has caused?"

Kayne spun on me. All of his humour melted from his face. I rocked back a step. "Do you truly need me to spell it out to you?"

"Well, it might help me understand you."

Kayne's chest rose and fell with each breath. His eyes bulged, veins protruding from the temples of his head. For a moment, I thought he was going to expose all his truths, but then his chin dropped to his chest, and he took a shuddering inhale.

When he looked back again, he was in control.

"I'm sorry, Robin. It has been a long couple of weeks and... I shouldn't take it out on you."

I searched among his tone for insincerity but came away empty-handed.

"If there is something you wish to get off your chest..."

Kayne shook his head and continued before I could prod again. "There is no excuse for my behaviour. Duncan would tell you, I'm a prick. Born and bred. Ignore me. Plus, Duncan would tear my throat out if he heard how

I spoke to you, and I am rather fond of it, so please, you know, maybe keep my hissy fit between us."

I zipped my finger across my lips and threw it over my shoulder in a gesture. "Not a word."

At least not yet, I thought.

He sighed, genuinely relieved. "Great."

"Great," I echoed.

Kayne whistled for Lucari to return to him. "Best be off. I find the best time to sleep on the ship is when everyone else is awake. Less snoring to keep me up. A bit more rest might even improve my mood."

He went to move past me, but this time I stopped him. My hand pressed against his chest. "I need to ask something of you."

Kayne glanced sideways at me, then down to my hand, before he stepped back to remove my touch. There was no ignoring the grimace that lifted his lip into a snarl. It was gone before I could make sense of his reaction. "Should I be worried?"

"It's Jesibel," I said, repeating her name as though everyone else was as familiar with it as I was. Which, in this case, Kayne was. After he had taken the census of the fey names, he knew who it was I longed to find among the lists. "You're a Tracker. You have more skills when it comes to locating someone, especially a fey, than anyone else I can think of. Lucari has helped you find hundreds of fey in the past, and all for the wrong reasons. What if I asked you to help me find one, but for the right reason?"

Kayne paused, digesting my words as though they were something hard to swallow. He chewed on the insides of his lower lip, stare tracing every inch of my face as he conjured his response.

"I can't do it."

My heart sank into the pit of my stomach like a stone in a river of anxiety.

"Would you rather I beg you?" I said with urgency.

Kayne shook his head gently. "It is not safe for Lucari to travel such long distances without me. There is no saying that she will find Jesibel alive alongside Aldrick, who will use Lucari like a beacon as she guides him back to us. To you."

He almost seemed pleased with his excuse. A flash of pride passed across his eyes, if only for a moment. It soon replaced with an emotion

more empathetic, like forced relief. He was not quick enough or slick enough for me not to notice.

"I'm worried about her," I forced out, almost ready to tell him how she invaded every dream I had in the days passed. If only to free myself from her haunting presence, I longed to do something, anything, to help find her.

"Are we done here?"

I swallowed hard. "Very much."

I turned my back on Kayne, feeling the pressure of another attention on me. As I looked skyward, Rafaela was looking down as though she had heard the entire interaction.

"Robin, I am sorry for, you know... earlier."

I had to stop myself from turning around and shouting at Kayne. His refusal to even consider helping me had encouraged a lump of frustration to fill my throat. If I had unclamped my closed lips, what I had to say would not have been so kind.

I flashed Kayne a fake smile to complete our conversation just as a noise sounded from the sky above us. When I glanced up at Rafaela, she was no longer looking at me. Instead, she glanced toward a dark shadow in the distance, one that shot above the line of clouds with incredible speed.

My blood thrummed with ice as the shadow grew larger the closer it became. It moved with speed, slicing above the cover of the cloud. No matter how I tried, I couldn't make sense of what it was.

Rafaela stopped flying. She hovered in place with the hammer gripped in her hands. The call she had sounded had purpose behind it. Clear as more winged Nephilim shot skyward from their ships to join her.

Each held weapons that caught the light of dawn and winked with the kiss of illuminated gold.

"What is that?" Kayne grumbled.

"Get Duncan."

"It looks like it has..."

"GET DUNCAN NOW!"

A deafening roar drowned out my shout as the shadow closed over the fleet of ships. Between the weaker wisps of cloud, obsidian scales flashed. Great wings cast darkness over the boat, blocking out the sun completely as it moved overhead. I couldn't breathe. Not as I saw leathery wings thrice the size of the sails that flapped behind me. And a tail as thick as the trunk of the oldest of trees.

My mind drifted to Gyah, pulling forward an image of her in her Eldrae form. But this was not Eldrae. Fearsome, its presence weighed down on the world. It let out another sound, grumbling from the pits of his hulking body.

The Nephilim readied themselves for an attack.

Kayne had not moved. Lucari was silent as death on his shoulder.

I gripped the edge of the railing, ice crackling across the wood. Not once did I take my eyes off the creature as it flew overhead. It was a risk to even exhale for fear of drawing attention to myself.

As suddenly as the monster's presence became known, it passed. Flying out of sight toward the faint outline of land in the distance.

I was left, gripping onto the splintering railing, with the inability to move. Part of me waited for the monster to turn back around, realising what it had just passed over. Surely it would come back to devour us. Its body was at least the size of two Cedarfall ships stitched together but covered with leather and scale.

We were no match for such a beast.

Whatever it was.

"Do NOT WORRY. The Draeic will not return," Rafaela confirmed, wringing her hands upon the handle of her hammer. Knuckles paled beneath her tension.

I turned to look up at her, blinking away the shadow the beast had imprinted into my consciousness. "You know what it is?"

"A demon." For the first time, I saw fear in the Nephilim's eyes. "I had hoped such nightmares would be kept at bay, but the Defiler is making the most of the weakness Aldrick has gifted to the gate. I imagine more will come if they haven't already."

I did not recall stories of creatures, such as the one that had just passed when Duwar had been mentioned. From my knowledge, although limited, I understood Duwar was banished to a realm alone. But the echo of the beast that still rang in my head had proven otherwise.

"What was it?" Kayne asked, voice on edge with a subtle tremor. His skin had turned ice white with fear. "And why is it all the way out here? I thought the gate was in Irobel?"

"There is much we do not know of the Defiler. There is no saying what the demon god has accomplished during his banishment. The Draeic are like hounds. Pets, if you will. They go to where they are called."

"To Aldrick," I muttered, aware that my breath fogged beyond my lips as my power coiled out of my control.

It took a moment for my mind to catch up. I still reeled from what I had witnessed. Commotion spread across the ship as the fey tumbled out to find out what had happened. Across the sea, I saw the smudge of figures leaning over the railings in search of the thing that had woken them.

"It's going to Aldrick... isn't it?" I fumbled over my words. Panic had truly taken over. "He is behind this. The keys, the gate. This is just another string he can add to his bow. Soon enough, the bastard will have enough to balance the arrow that destroys us."

"It would be the most plausible of answers," Rafaela replied. Lines had etched themselves across her forehead. Deep-set and aggressive, so much that they looked like physical scars of her concern. I knew that feeling well enough to recognise it.

"Are you alright?" I asked as Rafaela dropped her wide eyes to the ground.

"If... if that monster made it this far from the gate, it means it got past the Nephilim stationed there."

The sudden understanding of her visible distress became clear to me. She was concerned for those she had left behind.

"I am sure they are—"

Before I could finish consoling Rafaela, her wings burst outward. It took only two powerful flaps with undeniable force, and she was skyward, shouting down one last command. There was not an ounce of sadness or concern left in her eyes. "We must reach Wychwood. It is no longer safe. Urge your ships forward. We must not allow for any delays."

rifts of snow fell upon Duncan's head, tangling with his dark hair. It was mesmerised by him. Flakes caught in his eyelashes and littered his broad shoulders. It took a moment for them to melt upon impact with his warm skin. Once evaporated, it left a glistening sheen of moisture across the sharp lines of his face. Now and then, a snowflake would fall on the end of his nose, forcing him to twitch. No matter the annoyance it caused him, he did not remove his stare from the view ahead. Whereas, I couldn't take my eyes off him as my court laid blessings across his skin.

The muscles in Duncan's jaw were set with concentration. His brows furrowed over narrowed eyes as he tried to make out the shapes through the mist and darkness before they revealed themselves as our ship drew closer to the land.

Wychwood loomed ahead. It was only a shadowed smudge across the landscape, hidden by a cloak of late dusk and the blizzard that ripped across the landscape. Regardless of our inability to see what waited for us ahead, I knew with no doubt that we were in Icethorn territory.

I felt it deep within me. The cord that tied me to these lands had thrummed back into existence earlier that very afternoon. And it tugged within me ever since. From that moment onwards, I could think of nothing but reaching our destination and letting my feet touch solid ground. My land. My home. A place I had spent little time in yet was intrinsically linked to. It was as though my skin was Icethorn's earth, my blood was its waterways, and my bones were the rocks that stitched it together.

I raised my face skyward, closed my eyes, and exhaled. The kiss of cold snowflakes against my face was refreshing and calming. I smiled against their graceful brush, revelling in the cold bite that pinched my cheeks and turned them red.

"You're smiling."

I tilted my face until I could see Duncan again. He was looking at me with the same intense concentration he gave the land ahead. His gaze flickered between my eyes and my lips as though he could not decide which was more interesting than the other.

"Regardless of everything we have left behind and still have to face ahead, the relief I feel knowing I am almost home is enough to make me feel happy. If only for a moment."

A silver cloud of breath burst beyond Duncan's lips as he sighed. His hand snaked around my side and pulled me in. His warmth was as clear as one of Althea's conjured flames.

Duncan turned his attention back to the view ahead, clenching his jaw and sealing his lips closed once again.

"What's bothering you?" I asked, sensing something brewing beneath Duncan's surface.

His fingers drummed across the side of my waist. "The unknown has always been a terrifying concept for me. And we are about to dock into the heart of it."

Reluctantly, I tore my gaze from his tensed profile and scanned the shadowed outline of my court. "At least we will face it together. As much as this place is my home, it is still a strange place. My experiences in Icethorn have not been as..."

I almost lied and said memorable. The memories I had of my court were far opposite. There was the pyre I had lit that burned my father's body to ash. Another image overwhelmed me. Erix. Berrow. Both of us, entangled as one as a winter storm, whipped the abandoned town beyond the rundown house he hid within. Such little time I had spent this side of the Icethorn border, and it had brought nothing but a sour taste to the back of my throat.

"You're shivering," Duncan accused. He didn't ask if I was cold. He knew that my affinity to winter prevented such an ailment. "Here."

Duncan lifted the thick cloak and draped it across my shoulder. Its brown and grey fur edging nestled into my cheek. I pressed in closer to his side. He closed the heavy swash of material over me like a wing and kept me in place. "I wish I could promise you that everything will be alright," I replied, fingers weaving among his, which lay upon the ship's railing. "But lying to you is not a habit I wish to take up."

"Nor do I want you to ever feel you need to lie to benefit me."

I had not exactly lied to Duncan, but neither had I been entirely truthful. Something about what he said wedged its way into my soul like a splinter. With everything going on, I didn't wish for the added discomfort of half-truths.

"Has Kayne spoken to you at all?" I asked, pondering about our last encounter days prior. I hadn't seen him since.

"Nothing of credit. I plan to interrogate him when we reach safe land. He has been avoiding me. I don't think there has ever been this distance between us. I'm not sure what I have done, but it must be something. At least he has the fey to focus on. It seems he is making up for lost time. Never thought I would see him so interested in helping before."

"That's odd you haven't spoken," I replied, nibbling at the skin on the inside of my cheeks. It was odd, but I knew why Kayne had kept his distance.

Guilt uncoiled within me. Conjured from putting a wedge between them.

Noticing my lax expression, Duncan dipped his chin toward me. "Should he have said something to me?"

I contemplated lying, but that would go against everything I had promised him mere moments before.

"I asked for his help with something to do with locating Jesibel. He refused. It's nothing serious, but I get the impression if someone else asked the same thing of him, he may have been more willing to offer his help."

Duncan paused, taking a moment to read the underlying accusation woven through my comment. "You think Kayne has an issue with you?"

I shrugged, feeling strangely awkward discussing matters of Duncan's closest and oldest friend. Especially with him. I hadn't even voiced my concern with Althea. I waited to see how Duncan reacted to the conversation. Searching for a hint that Duncan may already know what I was suggesting.

"Do you think I'm being sensitive?"

"What has he said?" Duncan couldn't hide the low growl that emanated from within him.

I tore my hand from his and placed it over his chest. His heartbeat thundered up my arm. "Nothing to merit you to react like that. Forget I said anything. What matters is I trust Kayne. I do. He has been pivotal in seeing our success up to this point. Perhaps what I asked of him was too much. I am just surprised he didn't bring it up to you, that's all."

Duncan's mouth twitched. "Dare I ask when this conversation happened?"

"Before the Draeic revealed itself and ruined the moment. I would've mentioned it sooner to you, but with everything that has happened since, there hasn't been a chance."

Lie. It seemed, even when I wished to steer clear of them, one always found a way of slipping past my control. Except I was very much in control.

"If you ask me to talk to him, I will. Say the word."

I shook my head, looking back toward Wychwood. "I shouldn't have brought it up. It's nothing, really. Kayne said it would threaten our position if Lucari is ever seen. He is right. Forget I even said anything."

Duncan didn't reply, and I was glad of that. Yet he did not release me from beneath his wing of the cloak. Swaddled in warmth, we both watched the Icethorn Court draw nearer.

Our destination was clearer to see now. The closer we moved toward Wychwood, the easier it was to pick out details. Towering, verdant pines tipped white with snow. Sharp cliff faces of stone that rose from the sea and stretched toward the darkened sky. I scanned for a beach but couldn't see any location that suggested where we would dock. The only variation to the sheer face of the cliff was what looked to be a cove. The shadowed mouth was carved into the face of the rock itself. Jagged rocks extended beyond the water's rough surface like reaching claws. There was no chance of our ships getting close enough without finding one of those stone claws piercing the hull.

Lucari screeched as she flew, dancing among the drifts of snow. Unlike the hawk, the Nephilim didn't fill the skies. Instead, they stayed in their ship, which stalked our fleet like it was its shadow. Since the winged monster had cut across the skies, I hadn't seen Rafaela take to the skies at all. But her presence was always sensed, standing guard onto the deck of her ship, her attention never once straying from our direction. From me.

"Boys," Althea said, interrupting our silence with her presence. "Enjoying the view?"

The wind caught strands of her red hair and tussled it from her shoulders. Dark splotches hung beneath her eyes. I had noticed more, with each day that passed, that Althea's skin had taken on a slight green tinge. Although she did well to hide it, Seraphine had reported having seen Althea bent over the railing as she spilled the entire contents of her stomach into the ocean. When I asked if she was ok, she waved my concern off with a hand and threw herself back into the briefing of her conversations with our captain. Anything to divert the attention from the way the sea made her sick. To Althea, showing such sickness translated to exposing weakness. And, surrounded by Cedarfall fey, she would never have allowed that.

If I was to learn something from Althea, it was her steel resilience.

Althea nudged my shoulder, pale lips cracking when she smiled. "Captain has ensured me that this is the agreed location for our arrival."

"We trust his judgement?" Duncan asked dryly. "The man has had one hand gripped on the wheel and the other on the neck of a bottle."

"Got us this far, and in one piece, Hunter. I suppose you think you would do better? General was it, or did they call you captain in your ranks too?"

"General," Duncan replied coyly.

"Ah yes," Althea brushed her hair across her shoulder. "How could I have forgotten?"

I cleared my throat, demanding their attention. "Althea, not that it is my turn to belittle the captain, but I thought we were meeting our welcome party on the black-sand beaches you spoke of?"

"We were. Plans change, Robin. With everything that has occurred, I took it upon myself to alter our arrival destination rather last minute. I did not like the idea of our plans being known and exposed to the open for so long. Never know who is listening."

"Good decision," Duncan replied.

"Why, thank you," Althea mocked a bow.

A stone dropped in my stomach. It was impossible to ignore the feeling. "Didn't you think to tell me?"

"You trust me, don't you, Robin?" Althea asked.

"Question is, do you trust me?" I retorted.

"Absolutely!" Althea replied, eyes wide in genuine shock. "No one knew but old drunkard over there." She gestured toward the captain, who

was singing a sailor's song as he navigated the lead ship toward Icethorn land.

A loud snapping of metal sounded from deep in the ship's belly. It vibrated through the damp, snow-covered wood we stood on as the anchor finally dropped into the dark waves. The same sound echoed across the ships that followed behind us.

Our ship jolted forward, groaning at the sudden tension as the anchor met the ground far beneath the dark waves. Duncan's hold on me tightened. If it hadn't, my ribs would have slammed into the railing.

"I cannot believe I am saying this aloud, but we made it!" Althea said, glancing between the both of us.

The deck became alive with Cedarfall fey, who began lowering the sails and masts. With each passing moment, the ship slowed gradually. It stopped just shy of the claw-like rock formations surrounding the cove entrance.

"Please tell me someone is aware of your little detour?" I asked from beneath Duncan's cloak.

Althea's face beamed as she looked toward the cove. Her lips were pulled upward, her chin raised proudly with bright, gleeful eyes. "Oh, someone certainly knows."

I recognised the look on her face. A mixture of elated excitement followed the blush of her cheeks and the way her posture straightened. Althea's dirtied fingers gripped the railing. She leaned over to get a better look toward the cove.

"I can see them," she spoke into the roaring winds.

I squinted, trying to see what she could.

"Stay close to me," Duncan whispered into my ear. "You will be welcome, but I haven't earned that right yet."

"Nothing will happen to you," I replied. "I promise."

Althea raised a finger and pointed to the shadow-filled cavern beyond the crashing waves. The shadows seemed to move. I thought it was a trick of the light until they uncoiled like a waking serpent.

Three figures stepped forward. Illuminated by the sudden glow of flame that one held within the palm of their hand.

"There she is," Althea said. "There is my woman."

Gyah stood forward from the light. Even from a distance, I could see her burning smile. Beside her was a vision of Althea, except older. Queen Lyra Cedarfall, dressed for the first time in an outfit more suited to a vagrant than royalty. My heart swelled at the sight of them both, but it was the third person who forced my heart into my throat. I blinked at the prickling sensation that filled my eyes as Elinor Oakstorm extended both arms out for me. If there was not an ocean between us, I would have thrown myself into her embrace.

"We made it," I whispered.

"Yes, we did," Duncan confirmed beneath the gleeful squawks of Lucari, who shot across the sky with anticipation.

I glanced across the ocean, allowing a single tear to roll down my cheek, and replied. "I'm home."

o one else noticed as Seraphine and the surviving Asps melted from the crowd of disembarked fey. They faded into the surrounding night, all without a second glance.

I thought she would have at least said goodbye. To my discomfort, I was proved wrong. I reminded myself that her presence had always been a transaction. It was never personal. She owed me nothing. Our debt was paid, as our contract stated. As soon as we reached Wychwood, I would only ever see her again if I had the money to pay.

I was the only one who knew of the assassin's next destination. It was the price I paid. Being in Lockinge, I found it easy to offer the Asps a new place to nest. It was the only price she would accept since the rest of their dwellings were now husks of scorched timber and stone.

It was not coin I paid, but something far more meaningful.

The offering meant little to me before. Now, standing on Icethorn land with its spiritual presence thrumming through me, I felt otherwise. I had barely seen my offering before. It was a speck in the distance. Before Erix had been the one to point it out, I would never have even known its name. Even now, weeks later, it was Erix's voice chiming through my mind as he spoke the name of my mother's home. Somewhere I could have claimed as my home. Except home was a place that earned that title. Which is what made it so easy to give this away.

Imeria Castle.

I would have to tell them all soon. When one of them noticed Seraphine had disappeared, they would ask. If I even attempted to mislead them with a lie, Althea would have seen right through it.

Perhaps they would react better if I told them first? Before Althea, Duncan, or the rest of them found out by other means. I hardly imagined they'd think well of me for forfeiting Icethorn's castle to the Asps. It was not my home. The human village of Grove still laid claim to that title. I would never wish to return there, either. Not without my father. Even in some warped reality, if he was still alive, I don't imagine the welcome would be merry after what I had done to Jack Campbell.

I forced the thoughts to the back of my mind and focused on what was ahead of me.

"The shifter looks like she wants to claw the skin from my face," Kayne mumbled, daringly glancing toward Gyah, who had her arm wrapped protectively around Althea.

I stood between both men, watching Gyah and Althea reunite. Kayne was right. Every time Gyah laid her golden eyes upon him, I sensed her desire to carve the skin from his body and devour it.

"Don't worry," I muttered. "She has better taste than that."

Kayne grunted. It was the only reply he spared me.

"Mate, the last time she saw you was on the better side of a Hunter's cage," Duncan replied. "Can you blame her for wishing such things?"

"Explain the smile she gave you, then!" Kayne replied.

"Perhaps she's an excellent judge of character," Duncan said, smiling down at me as we walked toward Gyah and Althea.

"Believe me." My heart swelled in my chest as we grew closer. "She is smiling for an entirely different reason than you think."

The fierce shifter was adorned in the deep, autumnal-coloured outfit of a Cedarfall guard. Her belt was decorated with the hilts of weapons. Even beneath the sea of snow-covered pines, the breeze was confident enough to twist her burgundy cloak at her back, mimicking the wings that hid within the concealed Eldrae form. Her dark skin glistened as snowflakes fell upon her. Some covered her hair in silver stars before melting into nothingness.

Althea and Gyah stood beyond a sharp-tipped tent, far larger than the others we passed. A village of them had been erected beneath the cover of Merrow Forest, which Althea had explained was only a short ride to Imeria Castle. Logically, she believed it would be our next destination.

I hadn't found the chance, or confidence, to tell her she was wrong about her assumption. Not when she had fled into the arms of Gyah the moment we had reached land. They had been inseparable since.

Gyah released her passionate hold on Althea and threw her arms around me. "Reckless as always." Her powerful limbs squeezed me around the middle, forcing a laugh out of me.

"It's good to see you too," I replied, resting my chin on her shoulder as I returned her embrace. It was a surprise when tears prickled in my eyes.

Gyah pulled back as quickly as she had hugged me. Gone was her smile. Instead of it, she regarded me with a snarl. There was no time to register as her fist pulled back and delivered a thud into my shoulder.

"Fuck," I groaned. It hurt, but I knew she had held back.

"Never do that again, Robin." Gyah pointed a finger at me. Her tone oozed authority. "We are a team. We decide together. If you ever leave us, I promise my fist will connect with your face the next time, understand!"

I nodded, watching Gyah's body tremble with tension. Her eyes looked heavy, her lips drawn with lines around them that had not been there the last I had seen of her.

"Is this the right time for me to apologise?" I asked, massaging the ache out of my shoulder.

Althea slipped a hand into Gyah's fist. Upon contact, Gyah melted from her sudden fury into something more tepid.

"I hate nothing more than when people need to say sorry. It suggests they have something to be sorry for, which you, Robin, do. Leaving you that night was one of the hardest things I have done. I will never forgive you for making me choose Althea over you."

"From where I am standing, that decision was well made." I glanced down at their entwined fingers. That, and the fact Althea's lips were swollen and pink from kissing, revealed all it needed to about the princess and her personal guard.

"And you..." Gyah snapped her attention to Duncan. He recoiled slightly from the beast lurking in her gilded eyes.

"Perhaps this is the best moment to reintroduce myself?" Duncan spoke, stepping into my side with a hand extended to Gyah. His confidence matched hers. He did not share the same hesitation that Kayne still held as he sulked behind with Lucari chirping quietly on his shoulder.

"No need, Hunter, I remember you perfectly fine."

Althea leaned into Gyah's ear and whispered something. I couldn't make out a word, but whatever she said caused one of Gyah's brows to rise as she looked over Duncan with a scrutinising stare.

"We will see," Gyah said, replying to something Althea had said. Her words were entirely out of context.

Duncan lowered his hand awkwardly.

"Mother is waiting inside with Elinor." Althea gestured toward the tent behind her. "Whilst you put on your big king pants to discuss matters privy to the heads of courts, the rest of us will share a strong cup of ale to celebrate our return to Wychwood. Robin, we will have a cup ready for you when you finish."

I glanced at Duncan, who nodded in silent confirmation. He took my face in his hands and brought his lips down on my forehead. When he pulled back, he spoke through a gravely whisper. "I'll be fine. Don't worry about Kayne, either. I will make sure he has some meat left on his bones once the shifter has finished with him."

Kayne swallowed hard. Gyah snickered into Althea's wild curls, then peeled away from her side. Embarrassing the Tracker, she slid in next to him and slapped a firm hand on his back. Lucari shrieked, flapping her wings until she was airborne.

"Come on," Gyah practically shouted. "Let's see if my enjoyment of humans improves after something strong to drink."

Even with the strange tension between Kayne and me, I still worried on his behalf.

"Careful with him," Duncan winked at me before flashing his bright verdant eyes at Gyah. "Kayne is not accustomed to powerful women."

Kayne swallowed hard, freckled face burning scarlet. "That's not true —."

"Gosh," Althea snorted. "We wouldn't want to break him."

"Speak for yourself, Darling," Gyah said, draping her arm over Kayne's shoulder, which caused him to buckle slightly. "I rather enjoy it."

The four of them sauntered away from the tent, three more willing than the other. I would have given anything to join them. Instead, I looked toward the tent and swallowed the stone of dread that had lodged itself in my throat.

Now was not the time for laughter between friends. I shed that skin as I lifted a hand to the dark grey material of the tent's entrance. Now was the time to adorn my crown and be the King I was trying hard to convince myself I was. If I couldn't trick myself, how in Altar could I deceive the formidable women that waited for me inside?

Jewels of orange flame flickered across the sea of candles that covered the tent's carpeted floor. They cast shadows across the leaning walls propped up by thin poles of wood, which caused the material of the tent to bow between each rod. As we spoke, hands warmed by cups of leafed tea that battled away the inherent chill of the Icethorn Court, the shadows seemed to reflect our words and conjured images of demon gods, winged warriors and death. It was hard not to distract myself from the tales the shadows told. I found my attention drifted between the two Queens until I felt more like a fly on the wall than someone with something to add to the conversation.

The makeshift table was covered in tea-stained maps, candles covered in cream wax, and a single sword with a spiked sun carved into the end of its handle. The weapon was used to hold the curled edges of Wychwood's map down. But as the orange glow licked across its sharpened edge, I knew it had other purposes.

"Robin, you have had the most interaction with the Nephilim," Queen Lyra said, lifting the lip of her mug to her lips. Unlike Elinor and me, Lyra did not blow at the boiling, leaf-infused water. She seemed to enjoy the scolding presence it left as it trailed down her throat. Perhaps the fire within her body enjoyed such a feeling. "What do you have to say about them as a threat to the fey? Now they have reached our land, they have become the minority. It would hardly take much force to deal with them before their interest in us sharpens to something less friendly."

"They are not our enemies," I replied, trying to match the authority that coated Lyra's voice.

"And, now is certainly not the time to create new enemies," Elinor added, offering me a motherly smile. Elinor Oakstorm looked a world better than when I last saw her. Her skin glowed with the kiss of sun; her cheeks flushed with the red of apples. A tiara held back the mane of dark curls. When she blinked, flashing her piercing blue eyes through dark brown eyelashes, I couldn't help but see Tarron. Even her smile warmed me from the inside, as though she conjured rays of sunlight and bathed me in it.

"The Nephilim are responsible for death. They have ensured that some of my own soldiers have not returned home," Lyra replied. "Forgive me if I am not welcoming them upon the shore with open arms." "Not that it would matter. They have not left their ship since arriving," I said. "Lyra, I trust the Nephilim. During a time when such things are hard to earn, I'm certain they will help us with our fight against Aldrick."

"I hate that he has a name now," Lyra added quickly, lowering her cup to the table with a grimace sliced across her freckled face. "Makes him seem mortal when in actuality the man is nothing but a monster."

"Names also have power," I replied, mind wandering to the echo of those very words I had heard. "And we will need an abundance of it to go against him. Having the Nephilim by our side will help when the time comes."

"Then I put forward that we pay Aldrick a visit in Elmdew and evict him with fire," Lyra snapped, leaning forward on the table with both hands.

"Careful friend," Elinor added, looking down at the tendrils of smoke and the sudden scent of charred wood that followed. "Before you do the same to us here."

Lyra reluctantly pulled back her hands and smoked the small flames from her fingers. "Enough time has passed where we have allowed that man to infiltrate a court and hold claim to it. He has killed our friends and forced innocents from their homes whilst keeping the rest as prisoners of war. A war no one asked for nor saw coming. In the name of Peta and Dai, we must deal with this threat once and for all."

I fidgeted with my hands in my lap, sensing the boiling, raw emotion that rolled from Lyra in waves. Elinor laid a hand upon Lyra's, curling her fingers and holding on. Her touch emitted a golden glow that encased Lyra's skin and melted into it. I had seen this healing power before, but it was not a physical wound Elinor wished to treat.

It was the internal wound of loss. And from the way Lyra's eyebrows dropped, her mouth slacked, and her shoulders lowered from the sigh she expelled, I could see that it worked.

"By going to Aldrick, we will give him exactly what he wants," I said, wishing for Elinor to reach out and provide me with the same reprieve. "We hold the key to open the gate entirely. If we do so, the realms will face a far greater threat than Aldrick."

ELINOR SMILED at something I said, her gaze lingering on an unimportant spot on the table. When she spoke, she did so from a place of pure delight.

"I can only imagine Aldrick's reaction when he figured out the truth of the keys he so desperately searched for. He had us both in his grasp, only to lose us. In a strange, twisted way, it brings me great joy to imagine him in his moment of dreadful realisation."

"Question is how," Lyra said. "How did he work it out if no one but the Nephilim seemed to have the insight?"

I inhaled sharply at a sudden pain in my finger. Looking down, I saw the skin around my nail bed swelled with ruby blood. I had picked away at it without realising.

"Robin?"

I offered a forced smile to Elinor, keeping my hands beneath the table. "We can speculate all night how Aldrick has gained such knowledge. It won't help. What might help is waiting on the Nephilim's ship. One of them, Gabrial, can read the past of humans from a script that presents itself on her skin. Aldrick is half-fey, which means he is not above her prying. If anyone can help us gain information on Aldrick and put us, finally, a step ahead, it would be her."

Elinor's brow peaked at something I said. "Every movement of Aldrick is recorded?"

I nodded, noticing the same silent intrigue on Lyra Cedarfall as she gripped her cup again. Her fingers glowed a deep red as though she forged weapons, and her hands were placed within the inferno to warm the metal. It was all to heat the tea, which hissed when she brought it back to her lips.

"Gabrial may shed light on Aldrick's doings. That's the insight we will need to keep us a step ahead of him."

"What do you propose?" Lyra asked over the rim of her cup. I saw pride in her eyes as she regarded me, not as Robin but as a King.

"Aldrick must be stopped before he gets his hands on another key." Before he kills one of us like he has with Peta and takes the key, willingly or by force. "When he left Lockinge, he took some fey he had imprisoned. What is clear is that Aldrick will continue to mutate his followers, providing them with powers until he has an army to match ours. Now he is in the heart of a fey court, he has access to more supplies of fey blood. The murder of Peta and Dai and the lack of the Elmdew power will mean humans can pass into the land freely. He will create his army. I don't require Gabrial's ability to know that for a fact. I suggest we wait for him to come for us. If we stay together, we will be stronger combined than separated.

Then, with the help of our own numbers and the Nephilim, we can deal with him once and for all."

"I never imagined a day when we would sit together, discussing the potential of our realms becoming the playground for demons. Yet our skies have seen the likes of winged monsters, and I fear they are only the beginning," Lyra said, her stare lost to us as it fixated on a place upon the tea-stained map.

"Once this threat is dealt with, there will be another," Elinor added. "I hate to look at this through a pessimistic glass, but it is true."

"Is that supposed to help my concerns or worsen them?" Lyra added, sparing Elinor a side-eyed glance. "As much as I recognise the points you make, Robin, I have a family and a court full of innocents to protect. As the head, I cannot be seen fleeing into hiding from the man who has them all in his direct line of sight."

"I agree," Elinor said. "Our borders are flooded with Elmdew fey seeking refuge and protection. Besides the threat of Aldrick taking occupancy as my neighbour, my court has not entirely accepted me as the Queen. Doran's poison had seeped far inside the council. If I leave now, then they will waste no time jumping in and filling the place I leave behind, regardless of the Oakstorm power I have claimed."

"That leaves us with two options," I said. "Kill, or be killed."

"What if the keys are destroyed?" Lyra asked.

"The Nephilim have sworn to protect them."

"I think it is best we invite the Nephilim from their ship and question them directly about the knowledge. Then we can make an informed decision on how we deal with Aldrick," Lyra said.

"I will speak with Rafaela," I replied.

"Keep us informed," Lyra said, taking her moment to stand. "We shall hold council with the Nephilim before I leave for Cedarfall and return those fey you have freed back to their homes."

"If they let you leave," I added.

"They are welcome to come with me, Robin, regardless, I will be leaving. We cannot stay here. Our power may be what Aldrick desires, but it is the only play we have to keep our courts safe from him."

I swallowed the urge to remind Lyra that Peta was proof that attitude didn't work.

"Will you be returning to Imeria?" Elinor asked. Her question caught me off guard. I looked at her, searching her azure eyes for a reason she might already know the answer.

"I have decided those fey who wish to stay in Icethorn will be taken to Berrow. They can dwell there for the time being." The words came out before I could stop them. "Icethorn has been left empty for a long time. Before I know if Imeria and other places are safe, it is best they stay somewhere I can vouch to be free of dangers."

It was not completely a lie, simply the truth bent. I had decided, as part of the plan those weeks ago, that if we returned to Wychwood, it would be better to keep the fey in one place. There would be few, but I vowed to protect them. I could do so confidently if they were all together. However, I had no intention of ever returning to Berrow. Not with the ghost of memories left behind. Not when Erix's presence was smeared all across it.

"You have a fortress at your disposal," Lyra added. "If you wish to keep your people safe, then open your gates and let them fill Imeria's rooms. Altar knows you have the space."

I couldn't form a reply. It jammed in my throat. Lifting the now cold tea, I took a swig, hoping to help clear it. "I can't do that."

"Do not be ashamed if you hold little care for Imeria, but as King, it is your rightful home. You must claim it. I know Julianne would have dreamed for a day of seeing you, her son, walking the halls."

Elinor's eyes bored through me, searching for the reason why I reacted in such a way. I could not hide from the truth forever.

Swallowing my guilt, I raised my chin and revealed the truth before it consumed me.

"Imeria is not my home. It never was, and now never will. It was the price I had to pay to even have the pleasure of having this conversation with you."

Elinor reached out. I flinched at her touch. "What have you done, Robin?"

"I am not the only one in this room who has had the pleasure of making deals with the Asps. I could not offer them coin, but I could provide them with security. Imeria belongs to them now, not me."

"You threw away your kingdom, and for what?" Lyra blinked as she spoke.

"I gave away a place of stone that meant nothing to me. Not the kingdom but a castle that has been left empty for years. We all have a price to pay, and this was mine."

I waited for them to argue. To tell me I had made a terrible choice and to demand I claim it back. But they didn't. Neither Elinor nor Lyra provided judgement. I waited and waited, but it did not come as words. However, the look they each gave me spoke volumes. Lyra's eyes were overwhelmed with disbelief and fury, whereas Elinor regarded me with understanding.

"Speak with the Nephilim," Lyra said finally. "Let us deal with Aldrick before any more lives are lost. Then we will discuss what it means to be King and how best to make a decision in the future."

"Lyra, that is not a fair assumption," Elinor said.

It was as though someone had stabbed me in the gut and turned the knife.

"I'm sorry, Lyra. Care to remind me what you have done in your attempts to free the fey that belonged to you?" Anger twisted inside me, a cold blizzard of fury. "If I am not mistaken, you were complacent as the fey disappeared over the years."

Elinor stood from the table next, and I followed suit. "Please, enough."

"I do not deny that your actions have been valiant, but wearing the crown means you make a decision that benefits the many and not the few."

"How about you tell that to the Cedarfall fey that fills this camp? Explain the meaning behind that to them and see if they understand why it took years to save them."

I waited for her to reply. I saw in the creases that spread across her forehead that she had something to say. Whatever it was, it never left her paled mouth. Lyra bowed and left swiftly. The flaps of the tent danced with a wisp of elegance.

I was left looking out after her, hating the scoring pain that I had disappointed her.

"I believe the decisions you make are for the best of not only your people but you too, Robin," Elinor said softly. A motherly touch of her hand resting upon my shoulder. "You are the heart of this court regardless of the crown you wear or the throne you sit upon. Remember that."

I leaned into her, resting my head on her shoulder. Her hand dropped around me. I allowed myself a moment of selfish indulgence. Closing my

eyes, I imagined my father and how similar his caring affection was to what Elinor provided me.

"Thank you for having faith in me," I said.

Her hand rubbed slowly at my back. Up and down. Elinor's fingers glowed golden as they dampened the turmoil of emotion, untying it from its knot within me. Clarity overcame me so suddenly, my intake of breath was the freshest and lightest it had been in months.

"I can speak on behalf of your mother when I say that she would be so proud of you," Elinor said. "Take that, keep it close, and remember it with what is coming."

"From the moment this all began, I've been lost. Lyra sees that."

"We all feel lost, Robin," Elinor admitted. "Sometimes recognising that is the first step back toward finding your way out of the maze."

I closed my eyes, allowing her words to settle over me like snow, where they then melted into my bones.

"Don't fear the journey. Feel privileged you are on one. Many have already lost their chance to live. In their honour, ensure you make a difference. Live the life they are no longer fortunate to have." I found my friends by following the outburst of drunken laughter through the camp. The tent they were huddled within rumbled with the sound. The multitude of candles cast their outlines across the cream material. As I pulled open the entrance, I was hit with a wave of warmth meddled with spirits. My eyes practically stung as I entered.

My interruption lasted a moment before I swept in to join them. The commotion did little to conceal Kayne's reaction to my arrival. I had seen his smile which faded when he saw me. Since then, Kayne had stayed silent.

He had sat next to Duncan, so close that my stomach burned slightly with an emotion that left a sour taste on the back of my tongue. My gaze had shifted to the touch of their thighs and the way Kayne leaned into Duncan's side for support. Anyone would have believed Kayne was struck by Duncan's lightning by the way he jolted away from him as I entered the tent.

Duncan did not seem to notice anything was wrong, but Gyah did. The face she pulled suggested so. I smiled weakly to acknowledge her, knowing this conversation would be saved for another time.

I threw myself into debriefing my conversation with Lyra and Elinor. Aided by the cups of ale Duncan continuously poured out for me. Whereas Kayne hardly touched his drink. I tried my best to join the conversation, but I could only focus on Kayne's stare, burning holes into me. By my third, I was relaxed enough to ignore the Tracker.

It was no surprise when Kayne stood from the cup-strewn table and announced he was retiring to bed. Relief cooled through me like a fresh breath of air.

"One more, Kayne, come on. When have you ever turned down a drink?" Duncan drawled, sloshing amber liquid out of the cup that he swayed.

"Lucari will need tending to," Kayne dismissed Duncan. "Strange place and all that."

I couldn't help but feel he was leaving because of me. He had no problem laughing with Althea and Gyah, but the moment I walked in, a storm passed over him.

"She is likely off terrorising the local rodents," Althea said, words slurred.

"Then I better save said rodents and get Lucari to deliver your invitation."

Althea hiccupped as she spluttered. "If they do not arrive by morning, be my hangover-fuelled wrath on your head."

"Nephilim will receive it." Kayne's hand patted the pocket. The back of his freckled hand flattened the small roll of parchment. He offered Lucari to deliver the request for an audience. He'd been adamant to be the one to do it.

I kept my cup lifted to my lips, hoping it would prevent my need to bid him a goodnight. The truth was, I didn't practically care if it was good or not. As long as he and his stalking gaze gave me a reprieve, that is all I cared about.

"Rest well," Duncan called as Kayne took his leave. "Hope the head is ok come morning."

"You know me," Kayne muttered, offering Duncan a wink. "When has a bad head ever stopped me?"

My stomach twisted at Duncan's knowing chuckle. "If you ever want to get to sleep tonight, perhaps we don't make me answer that question."

Gyah leaned into my side. The moment Kayne was out of earshot, she spoke aloud for the rest of us to hear. "Am I missing something?"

I swallowed hard. "It's nothing."

"Besides a refill!" Duncan said, leaning forward with the jug that was far lighter than it had been when I joined them. His arm flexed as he filled Gyah's cup. Some ale spilled across the lip, spreading across the veins of the wooden table.

"With the Tracker," Gyah continued, looking daringly at me. "You've all been stuck together for so long. What has Robin done to piss him off so much?"

I almost choked on the sip of ale I took. Quickly catching the dribble of liquid that burst out of my mouth, I cleared my mouth with the back of my hand and forced out a laugh.

Duncan said nothing but leaned back on the bench. The presence of his arm across my shoulder was so sudden. Even our seat creaked with the movement of such a powerful body.

"Kayne has never been the best at making friends. Unless those friends have feathers and claws."

"Didn't seem to have a problem before princeling over there walked in."

"Gyah," Althea hissed, unable to hide her smile. "I think you mean kingling."

"No." Gyah pulled Althea in close and pressed a sticky-lipped kiss upon her cheek. "That doesn't have a ring to it."

"I'm tired," I whispered into Duncan's ear, doing a job of distracting him with my hand as I ran it up the inside of his leg. He stiffened in his seat. The skin across his arms prickled with a wave of pleasured bumps. "And cold. How about we crawl under some fur and warm ourselves up?"

"Hmmm, how peculiar? Robin Icethorn is cold?" Duncan expelled a rumbling sound buried beneath his breath. "If you are just trying to get me alone, say it. Or if you are looking for some warmth, I certainly have a few suggestions."

"Now, that is something I never wished to hear," Gyah said, grimacing. Althea giggled through a haze of ale.

"Before I am forced to slice my ears off, perhaps I suggest we depart, dearest?" Gyah offered me a smirk as she spoke to Althea, who was leaning on her for support. "The weeks you have been kept from me have left much room to catch up."

Althea stood from the table with such speed that it answered Gyah's question. She swayed violently, stopped only as her hands slapped down on the table. Ale sloshed, and cups toppled over. "Would my guard do me the honour and escort me safely to my tent? What with everything that is going on out in that world, I fear I might not make it there in one piece."

"Oh, I take my job seriously," Gyah replied. With grace, Gyah swept Althea from her feet and threw her over her shoulder. Althea slammed her fists into Gyah's broad back. The Cedarfall princess was lost in a fit of giggles. So much so she could hardly form a coherent word.

"Night, boys." Gyah's lip pulled away, flashing teeth. "I hope you sleep as deeply as we will."

"Sleep is on the agenda," Duncan replied, lifting his cup in a toast. "Just not straight away."

I clapped my hand over his mouth. His tongue writhed across my palm, spreading goosebumps across my arms. "Go before he embarrasses me anymore."

"Exactly why I am beginning to like him," Gyah said, then left swiftly with a squealing princess still flung over her shoulder.

Relieved at the sudden quiet, I folded myself into the crook of Duncan's arm and chest.

"So, we made it," he said, looking longingly down at me in his hold.

"Alone, or..."

"For years, I had tried to get into Wychwood, but to no avail. Who knew it would take me to fall in love with a fey to gain entry?"

"Your motives are different this time, I hope."

"They couldn't be more opposite in contrast." Duncan ran his long fingers down the curve at the back of my head. His focus fell on my obsidian hair, which he brushed away from my forehead before planting a soft kiss upon it.

"Before I take a leaf out of Gyah's book and snatch you into my arms and steal you to bed, I want you to know that I will speak with Kayne come morning. Whatever tension he holds onto must be left here before we head for Berrow."

A chill raced down my spine. "And I thought I had a lucky escape from this conversation."

"You mean more to me than I could even begin to describe."

"I sense a but coming on," I replied.

"Not a but, an and. Kayne has been in my life for as long as I remember. Our friendship is important to me; however, regardless of that, if he makes you feel uncomfortable, it isn't right. Friend or not, I will not see you slighted. You deserve his respect. I want you to know the Kayne I know..."

"Perhaps I should speak to him again? Before you need to get involved."

Duncan shook his head. "The stubborn mule of a man will listen to me. Let me understand what is going on in his head. You have enough to worry about than a sulking man-child."

A powerful throb echoed across my skull. I winced, pressing my fingers to my temple. The dim light of the candles became too bright for a moment. I blinked at the halos that seemed to duplicate as my vision blurred.

"Something I said?" Duncan asked, brushing his fingers beneath my chin.

I exhaled, feeling the sudden presence of pain evaporate as quickly as it came. "I'm just tired. So much to think of at all times. My mind is struggling with the weight of it all."

And I had not had a decent night's sleep since the prison break. Not with the invading dreams that greeted me every time my eyes closed. I hoped tonight would be different with all the alcohol which danced through my veins. I couldn't bear to see Jesibel again.

Duncan offered me my mug of ale, which I gladly took from him. I inhaled the scents of buttery honey mixed with the sharper undertones of clove. Ale never smelt as good as it tasted. I gulped down the remains of mine, languishing in the numbing sensation that filled my throat and spread like wildfire through my insides. All the while, Duncan continued to watch me with the same look of concern he always seemed to relate to me.

"Don't look at me like that," I said, lips glistening with ale.

Duncan took his thumb and swept a dribble which escaped the corner of my mouth. He traced it over my lower lip. The sticky residue only lasted a moment before he dipped in close and pressed his lips to it. He exhaled into the kiss. I pushed in deeper. The empty mug was forgotten as my hands ran down the length of his arms, fingers rising and falling over mounds of muscle.

As my touch caused the dark hairs across his forearm to stand. My fingers traced softly until I reached his wrist. They tangled in metal. As soon as I touched the thin chain wrapped around Duncan's wrist, I felt the drawing pull of my innate power fall away from me.

My stomach jolted up into my throat. I tore my hand away as though lightning had struck it. Which would have been a better feeling than the draining power of iron.

"You are giving me a look that I'd rather you didn't," Duncan said, lips bruised pink from our kiss. His dark eyes glanced down at the cause of my reaction. He winced as he recognised the iron bracelet. "I don't want for you to worry about me, Robin."

"How can you say that when you spend your time reciting the same wishes for my peace?" Ice cracked in my bones, fuelled by my anger. I recognised the emotion for what it was and didn't hide away as the feeling devoured me. "If you wish to lighten my load, Duncan, then do yourself a favour and face the powers you have been given. Hiding behind iron is not the answer."

A deep sadness glazed across Duncan's dark jade eyes. He glanced down at his wrist again. The iron bracelet stood out as something that didn't belong. And it didn't. I wished to tear it from him and allow him to face his truth. His new truth.

"I don't trust the person the iron keeps contained. This power wasn't given to me. That suggests it's a gift. It was forced upon me. What it stands for, what I am... it ties me to Aldrick, and that sickens me."

My hands shook with the desire to touch Duncan again. I shifted across the short distance that had grown between us and eradicated it completely.

"Come here," I commanded, taking his hands and gripping them as though he hung from the edge of a cliff, and I was all he had to hold to keep him from falling away from me. "Listen to me, Duncan. I want you to truly hear what I have to say to you."

The scar down the side of his face flexed as his expression hardened into something of focus. He lifted his eyes to mine. They alone had the power to send a powerful buzz of lightning through my blood.

"You have my full attention, Darling."

"Good. You have no excuse to disregard my words again." I cupped his face in my hands, feeling the sticky warmth of his skin. His cheeks mushed slightly beneath my palms, but I didn't stop.

"Duncan, I understand you have been through a transformation you never wanted. I know what it means to you. This feeling is only something else we have shared. Not all change is full of fear and dread. I had to learn that the hard way. The blood that brought you back from death that gave you another chance... is mine. I'm in your heart, just as you are in mine. Always. In this realm and those that wait beyond the veil of time. The power does not link you to Aldrick, it knots you to me."

Slowly, the mask of steel that Duncan had erected crumbled. His brows softened, his forehead folding with lines. His beautifully carved lips parted.

A strand of his chestnut-brown hair fell over his eye as he shifted in his seat. I reached up and brushed it away, tucking it neatly behind his curved ear.

"With everything I have done in my life, I can say confidently that I do not deserve you. But I am selfish enough to admit I would never let you go."

"Be selfish all you want."

There were many things I loved about Duncan. But namely was how close he made me feel to my own parents. I had not told it to him before, happily keeping this feeling as my own little secret. I coveted the ties of our story to theirs. Hunter and fey; two odds falling for one another. One day I would tell him. He knew about my father and mother, of course, but not the echo of how his physical presence was such a strong reminder. How he made me feel was like ripples across a lake when a stone was thrown onto its calm surface. Duncan was the stone.

"Is this the apt moment to carry you to bed?" Duncan asked.

"Take the bracelet off," I replied. "Then I am all yours."

Duncan spluttered, exuding a deep chuckle that warmed my skin from the chill of the Icethorn Court that invaded our tent greedily. "Is danger one of your kinks, Darling?"

"If I feared you, then yes. I'm not scared of you."

"What if I hurt you?"

I held his gaze as my fingers reached back for his bracelet of iron. The moment the tips touched the metal, I felt the drawing, draining pull. This time, I didn't pull away. "I would forgive you."

"Wouldn't it be better if I was not put in a position that required the need to apologise to you?"

I shook my head. "For a man with such big balls, you fear a little lightning?"

Duncan smirked, exhaling a long breath out of his nose. "Never have I heard little in relation to me before."

"Exactly," I replied, weaving my fingers beneath the bracelet and folding them over until the thin chain bit into my skin. "Facing your truth is the first step in living in it."

"I love you," Duncan breathed.

I ripped the bracelet from Duncan's wrist, snapping it into two pieces which fell from my fingers onto the floor at our feet. "And I love you, all of

you."

Duncan lowered his chin, pinched his eyes closed and gave in to the heavy breaths that took over his body. His face screwed up as he waited for the lightning to come.

I felt his power in the surrounding air, hot and crackling. Small veins of light danced across the layer of his skin. The hairs on his arms stood to attention. I gripped his hands and squeezed, urging him to calm himself.

"Duncan, you control the power. It doesn't control you."

It took a few moments of tension until Duncan gathered enough of himself to look back up at me. The glow of his green eyes intensified as his power coiled within them. He steeled himself, his strong chest rising and falling as he focused on putting a lid on the power.

I waited for him. Giving him the moments to regain authority.

Before long, the light was gone. The air was thin and no longer fizzed.

"Would you look at that?" I said. "He is finally free."

"With you, I will always be free."

"Now, back to the conversation of carrying me to bed—"

A scream pierced the night beyond the tent. The sound ripped claws into my heart and shredded it to pieces. The noise was filled with grief. Powerful, dreadful grief that encouraged my eyes to fill with tears without me understanding what it was I cried for.

Once the howl stopped, it still rang in my ears. The sound drew me to my feet. Duncan too. We both looked toward the tent's exit, expecting someone to burst in at any moment.

When the scream returned, it was not one of grief. It was anger. Burning, overwhelming fury.

It was a cry of war.

Not a warning or a threat. A promise.

looked down upon Gabrial's corpse, my body equally rigid and cold. Her remains were laid out across the table for all to see. And I couldn't look away.

Once golden hair was now stained russet with blood. Her roots were so dark with gore that it looked as though her scalp had turned to obsidian. I was thankful for the two identical pins that had sewn her eyelids closed. They had been wide and all seeing, when Gabrial had first been brought to our camp, draped over Rafaela's arms. The Nephilim warrior was still drenched in Gabrial's blood. I will never forget how little white was left in the young girl's eyes. They were stained black as though her pupils had ruptured, and the colour bled out of their confines.

Hours after Duncan pried the dead body from Rafaela's grasp, Gabrial had been cleaned and cared for. Her skin had been washed, and her body prepared. Little could be done for the ribbons of skin that had been clawed from her body. The bleeding had stopped, but the damage was done. It was impossible to know what was skin and what was torn strips of clothing. Face, chest, arms, neck, legs, hands. There was not an inch of Gabrial's body that had not been racked through, ripping skin into ribbons.

The only discerning factor was the symbols across Gabrial's greying skin. The faint symbols would never move or reveal a human's story again.

Rafaela's fellow Nephilim had done well to fold the wings beneath Gabrial's small, broken body. But there was no hiding the patches of missing feathers or the irritated gashes that sliced across the bone-like frame of the wings. Whoever... whatever had done this to Gabrial, made sure they left their mark.

As if the horror she had been through was not enough, it was believed her tongue had been ripped from her mouth first. The fey healer found only the stump of flesh in her mouth. Not that it made it any better, but it was believed she died from suffocating in her own blood. I only hoped her death was swift and provided her peace from the mutilation she was a victim of.

Rafaela had hardly made a sound since she brought the body to us. I had to convince myself that she had not turned to stone. Every time the Nephilim took a breath in, as though she had forgotten how to do so for too long periods of time, I felt the chill of relief. The only noise she made was a guttural growl when anyone got too close. I saw fear in the healer's eyes as they tugged the white sheet up to cover the horror completely.

What little Rafaela had revealed when she arrived all those hours ago, covered in the blood of her friend, was no one had heard anything of an attack. Gabrial's body was discovered when Rafaela went to tell her of the summons Kayne had sent tied around Lucari's leg.

When Kayne was told of the circumstance, he vomited. Spilled every content of his stomach across the pine needle-covered ground. Even now, his paled skin was a shade of green, contrasted with the dark circles embedded beneath his eyes.

"We are sorry for your loss," Queen Lyra Cedarfall spoke, clear-voiced, across the deathly silent room. Her words were meant for Rafaela. She showed no sign that she had heard. "It saddens me we have met one another under such circumstances."

"Gabrial is not *lost*," Rafaela replied. Her voice was gruff and broken. It sounded as though she spoke through stones embedded in her throat. And she refused to clear them. "She is dead. Returned to the arms of her maker before time. Now, I ask you... why?"

Why? Such a clear question, to the point and precise. Yet why was it the hardest to answer? The single word opened a multitude of further questions. None of them we could answer.

"We will help find what did this," I said, tearing my mind from the haunting memory of Gabrial's flayed, greying skin. "I understand our promise may mean little, but I mean it."

"This is Aldrick's doing, isn't it?" Duncan muttered. If I had looked at him, I would've seen his arm draped across Kayne's shoulder. It displeased me to see, but I swallowed my pathetic misplaced jealousy. Now was not the time.

"For our sakes..." Elinor placed a hand above Kayne's and squeezed, offering him a smile. It softened the crow lines around her eyes. "I hope not. If his influence can reach this far, we have no chance."

"In the Creator's name, I will avenge her." Rafaela was standing now, her chair discarded across the floor from the force she made when she stood. "By nightfall, I demand the culprit to be presented before me for judgement."

Rafaela cast an accusing stare across the room. Her full lips were drawn into a tight line draining the colour from them.

"You think it was one of us," I said. It was not a question but an accusation.

My words echoed Rafaela's blatant mistrust.

"I don't know what to think besides how specific the murder was. It was not to weaken us. If that was the case, it would have been my body, torn to shreds. Killing Gabrial was more important. She is dead because of what she can provide. Could... provide?"

She was right. Gabrial was dead because of the insight she could've provided regarding Aldrick. This was not a coincidence.

"Why did you request our audience?" Rafaela asked, snapping her eyes from Lyra, Elinor, and then to me. "Was it to break bread and discuss unimportant matters, or was it because you recognised what Gabrial could do for our cause?"

I couldn't find the words to reply, knowing what Rafaela was suggesting. It was Lyra who answered, and even her voice shook with knowing.

"Robin informed us Gabrial had access to insight on Aldrick, an ability to read his past and present."

Kayne stifled a sob, catching it in his fist as he, too, worked out why Rafaela believed Gabrial was murdered. Hearing his sharp intake of breath and Duncan's following consoling, I wished to gouge my ears out of my head.

"I trust I do not need to explain any further?" Rafaela's jaw trembled as she gritted her teeth. Muscles feathered in her jaw. My eyes flew to her hands as they were gathered like boulders at her sides.

The room exchanged the same glance to one another over the body of the dead Nephilim. It was one of guilt and fear. "There is no good to come from pointing the blame," I said. "What is important is we ensure this does not happen again. Clearly, we are not safe. Not with the unknown killer among us. It is important everyone is questioned regarding their whereabouts."

"The assassins haven't been seen in a while," Althea said, looking directly at me. "This stinks of the bite of an Asp. Perhaps Seraphine would be the first person we investigate?"

"No," I shook my head. "I can vouch for their whereabouts, and it is not anywhere near here."

I turned away just as Althea pulled a face.

"Whoever is behind this will be long gone," Gyah said, golden eyes coiling with contained power. I sensed a beast lurking within, one wishing to be freed. To hunt. "If they are smart enough to conduct this atrocity, they will have the sense to never return to the scene of the crime."

"I demand to know," Rafaela stamped her foot, the ground practically shaking upon impact. Her red-stained eyes filled with tears. But she bit them back, refusing to let a single one spill.

"Rafaela, we will work together to get you answers. Until then, I invite you to stay with us in my court. Aldrick is the killer. I think we all agree this is his doing. Our focus must remain on him until we determine—"

"What is there to determine?" Rafaela shouted, her voice booming across the tent. "Aldrick must die."

"And he shall," Lyra announced. "But decisions of war cannot be rushed, nor is it decided between such limited company. We must return to our courts and prepare our people whilst bracing ourselves."

"No," Rafaela snapped. "Gabrial has not died for you all to separate like lambs in a field, practically inviting the wolf to take you out one by one. What is important now is keeping you safe, preventing the keys from falling into Aldrick's hands, and," she took a hulking intake of breath, her wings twitching with unspent energy. "He must be stopped before he has any more of a chance to release the Defiler."

"I am sorry, Rafaela," Elinor interjected. "But this is far greater than Lyra, Robin, and me. We have others to protect. We cannot abandon our courts and hide from Aldrick."

I watched Rafaela closely as she pondered Elinor's words. She didn't blink for fear of losing the tears she kept at bay. Rafaela teetered on the

edge of a knife. If she fell, it was into the abyss of sadness or fury. We were a matter of seconds from determining which side claimed her.

Rafaela glowered beneath her breath. "It seems you have made your minds up. My presence is no longer required. If you no longer require the council you have requested of me, I will leave."

"If there is anything you need from us," I said, reaching out with the overwhelming urge to supply her with the comfort of touch. Rafaela snatched her arm away.

The Nephilim stared through me. Her frown had me swallowing what else I had to say. "Queen Cedarfall and Queen Oakstorm, you will be provided with Nephilim to protect you on your return to your courts. Do as you wish and prepare your people. Time is sensitive. There is no knowing when Aldrick acts again."

"We wish to depart within the hour," Elinor replied, bowing her head. "Thank you for your offer. We gratefully accept your protection."

"Do not thank us yet," Rafaela replied through a grimace. "Even we do not have the power to save ourselves from Aldrick, let alone you."

Rafaela knocked past me as she turned on her heel and swept toward the tent's exit. Before anyone could speak, she threw out her wings like a shield on her back.

"What about Gabrial's body?" I called out. "I'm not aware of the Nephilim's customs, but if you wish us to prepare a burial or ceremony, we shall do it. Whatever you ask."

I wondered if she heard the guilt in my offer. Gabrial was dead because of us, after all. Her blood was as much on our hands as it was on Aldrick's.

"There will be no need," Rafaela replied. "In the eyes of the Creator, it matters not what state the body is left behind, but the memories and marks the person left upon the world. Gabrial will be with him now. Allow her body to perish, knowing her soul thrives in paradise."

Then, Rafaela, was gone, tearing out of the tent and leaving a gaping hole. It invited the cold of the dawn to invade within. I could've stopped the icy winds, but I didn't. Its presence was comforting to me. The sting of ice on my cheeks did more to wake me than anything else could have at that moment.

Silence thrummed across the tent as we were left, surrounding the body of the dead.

"Perhaps Rafaela is right. Now is not the time to separate. Not until we know what killed Gabrial, at least," I admitted.

"It is not as simple as you suggest," Lyra said. "I have a court full of life to put before my own. It would be irresponsible to leave them."

"And if the killer was still here, know I would dine well if they were foolish enough to stay close." I could taste the indignation in Gyah's comment. As though the scaled creature hidden beneath her skin spoke for her.

"As much as I share in your sentiment," I replied. "That does not deal with the issue at hand. No one is safe. Aldrick has invaded, and I hardly imagine he will retract his claws, knowing Gabrial is dead. His presence is still among us... I know it."

I looked to Duncan for comfort almost automatically. Comfort was not what I found. He was whispering something into Kayne's ear, still holding him close. I'd rather focus on anything but their embrace, so I returned my stare to Gabrial's covered body.

It was wrong to leave her, but it was not my decision to make.

"Tell them," Duncan spoke up. His tone was riddled with demand. I was all too familiar with it.

Reluctantly, I looked back at him. Kayne had wormed his way out of Duncan's arms. The tracker was panicked. I could see it in his reluctance to do exactly what Duncan demanded of him.

"Tell them what you have told me," Duncan urged again. "Or I will."

"This is not your doing," Elinor consoled, believing Kayne was somewhat responsible for the death.

"Lucari never came back," Kayne revealed, his pale skin flushed with the same scarlet swelling around his eyes. "After I sent the summons to the Nephilim, she didn't return."

My mind raced to the hawk. With everything that had happened, I had not noticed the lack of her presence. But it explained Kayne's reactions. His hawk, which was as much part of him as his own limbs, was missing.

"Why didn't you say anything before..." I said, unable to hide the accusatory tone from my voice. Duncan winced, confirming he definitely noticed it.

"Look at the body in front of you," Kayne replied, hissing through gritted teeth. "It was not the time to share my woes when someone has died... but... Lucari, what if the same thing that killed the Nephilim has—"

Kayne was back in Duncan's arms as his words melted into an array of breathy moans. Perhaps I should have apologised for my lack of caring, but seeing Duncan take Kayne back into his embrace itched at my skin. There was nothing I could say to Kayne, to any of them, to offer them comfort.

I left. The urge to do so overcame me so quickly. Without saying a word, I turned on my heel and walked out into the winter air.

I walked and walked, wishing to scrub the image of Gabrial from my mind. Whilst ignoring another image which had ingrained itself into my conscious. The one of Kayne wrapped up in Duncan's arms.

I tugged on the leather reins, willing my mount to slow to a stop. Ahead of me, parting out of the thick winter mist, was a haunting shard of ice and stone. The last I had seen, Imeria Castle was on the edge of the village of Berrow's outskirts. From a distance, it had looked big, but with it before me, I couldn't fathom its sheer size. It speared skyward, stabbing through grey clouds.

I could hardly believe that a place like this could ever exist.

Streams of frozen wind slashed across the many turrets. It danced cautiously around the castle's edge as though it feared the building. Icicles, far larger than me, hung from beneath balconies like pointed teeth. It was not a place of warmth and life. From the outside, I could feel just how vacant the place was. Even the cobbled stone road, which led us here, was buried in inches of snow and black ice.

Imeria Castle had been crafted upon the face of a mountain. Harsh, raw rock mixed seamlessly with white polished stone that enticed natural light and refracted in a myriad of hues and colours.

My neck strained as I looked up its entire length. I cast a hand over my eyes to block out the light. There was no knowing where the castle stopped as its tip was concealed among the heavy-set clouds.

Dark stone crowned the furthest northern spire I could make out. The obsidian spike's never-ending surface reminded me of the lake between the Icethorn and the Cedarfall Court. The Sleeping Death, as Erix had explained. A body of water that seemed more like a realm of pure darkness. Looking up at the Castle's top, it would seem a mighty god had picked it up

and dipped it upside down into the lake itself, before returning Imeria to its place nestled within the mountain's side.

"No wonder you gave it away," Rafaela commented from her mount, a stained brown stag with two oversized antlers that dripped with icicles that were not there when we had left the encampment earlier. "It is not exactly a welcoming place. Perhaps your acquaintance left the moment she arrived. Anyone with sense would know it is no place to live."

"Oh no, Seraphine is here," I replied, leather gloves squeaking as I gripped tighter on the reins. It was easy to ignore the undercurrent of offence beneath Rafaela's blunt comment. Part of me wished to remind her that Imeria had been a home before. But I felt the need to advocate for the place was counterintuitive. "Compared to the hovels the Asps have been living within, Imeria is the pinnacle of luxury."

There was the soft patter of hooves upon the snow. To my left, Duncan rode forward on his black steed. He chose the horse over the stag, commenting on how his thighs would not feel so offended if he rode on something they were used to.

Duncan glowered at the castle through the shadows of his hood. It was drawn low enough to cover his eyes but did nothing to conceal the purse of his lips. They revealed exactly what he felt as he looked upon the castle. "Forgive me for admitting this, Darling, but I can see why Althea is royally fucked off with you."

"Comforting," I replied.

Even now, miles away from Althea, I could imagine the steam that likely poured from her ears. I couldn't have hidden the truth from her any longer, not when she asked why we were all not going to Imeria together. Her face bloomed a deep scarlet when I explained the reason. Seeing her reaction was exactly why I hadn't told her the price I paid for the Asps help.

Which was equally why I didn't tell her the price I was about to pay, requesting their aid once again.

"So, this is what your ancestors did with the power gifted to you by Altar," Rafaela said, kicking her heels into her stag's side to urge it onward. "You crafted shrines for yourselves and titled yourselves as Kings and Queens. Unsurprising."

"Need I remind you I didn't ask for any of this?" I spat, my attitude as sore as my backside was in the saddle.

"Nor did Gabrial." Rafaela glared forward as she spoke. Her golden hammer had been strapped vertically down her back, laid perfectly between her snow-coated wings. Even with the weight on her back, and the added pressure left on her shoulders since the murder of her companion, Rafaela still kept rigid and straight-backed.

"Let's get inside, shall we? If we are lucky, Seraphine will have something to warm our stomachs," Duncan said from beneath his hood.

"I think we will be lucky if they even let us inside," I grumbled.

"Regardless of your contract with the assassins," Rafaela added, her determination burning around her skin like a halo of heat. "This is your home. Your land. They can open the door willingly, or we will be forced to break it down."

"Or that..." Duncan added.

I looked at him, scanning the glint in his eyes, hoping to read his emotion. "Have I made a mistake coming here?"

Duncan hesitated long enough for my stomach to drop. "I will always support your decisions."

"That doesn't answer my question," I replied. "If someone in our circle killed Gabrial and has done something to Lucari, then the Asps are the ones with the power to wait in the shadows and find them."

"It is not me you need to convince, Robin." Duncan pursed his lips and turned back to the castle. I couldn't help but feel the distance between us. I thought my selfish reaction to him and Kayne had caused it, but a cavernous hole had opened in the ground between us. It threatened to swallow us whole at any moment.

"Then why does it feel like I do?" I knocked my heels into the stag's side and began following Rafaela. She had already trotted toward the half-raised gates at the end of the path. I didn't blame her for wanting to get away. Hearing us squabble was not what she would have wanted to hear, not after what had happened early that morning with Gabrial.

"We are not done talking, Duncan said, grunting as he put his horse in chase.

"Since this visit was one of the only things Kayne has ever agreed with me on, I would've thought that automatically gained your seal of approval, Duncan."

"Lucari is missing. Of course, Kayne is going to want you to do anything to find out what has happened to her."

"And Gabrial?"

I didn't need to look over my shoulder to know that Duncan's lips were left parted but soundless. There was a part of me that wanted to dismount and continue this argument. But then I would have to face the root of this problem. My vulnerability drove this wedge between us. I understood that. Which is what kept me trotting forward, biting down hard on my tongue.

Running from my insecurities was far easier than facing them.

"HAVE you come all this way to claim Imeria back from us?" Seraphine asked from her seat upon a silver-coated throne. "Because I could have saved you a journey if that is the case."

The assassin was laid across it, legs kicking over one arm as she leaned back on the opposite. Her posture screamed disrespect. I glanced at her muddied boot, smudging dirt across the pristine leather of the chair's arm. I wondered if her playful chuckle was offered because she gloated at the scowl her actions painted across my face.

From the moment we had entered Imeria, to the welcome of assassins who melted from the shadows, I was furious. The emotion was misplaced, but I couldn't dampen it.

"My word is bound," I replied, voice echoing across the towering, empty room. "This is not my home, not now, not before."

"Then care to tell me what it is you want? I can see the question haunting those pretty black eyes of yours. Telling like the glare of a magpie. You need something from me." Seraphine swung her legs over and slammed her boots to the ground. The Asp leaned forward, resting elbows on her thighs and placing her head in both hands. "Which is strange because you, of all people, know that we have retired. We have shed the skin of the Asps and now live humbly in our new home."

"A home that will be destroyed the moment the Defiler is freed," Rafaela shouted, wings flinching with the urge to spread and demand the space as her own.

"You know, as well as I, that you would not let us walk away without knowing what plagues me. Once as Asp, always an Asp."

"I've changed, Robin," Seraphine said whilst watching Rafaela with a wary eye. "Out of the kindness we are attempting to adopt, I can offer you

all a full belly and a warm bed for the night. Then you can be on your way, taking your burdens with you."

"We have not come all this way for you not to listen," Duncan added.

"Human, perhaps you need me to repeat myself. As I have already said, you are each welcome to stay in our home, but you will leave come morning."

"Name the price," I spat, nails slicing into my palms.

Seraphine slapped her palms across her thighs and spat. "Do not bring the chaos that follows you to our door."

"You know why we are here, and you are scared..." Duncan said, stepping away from our line. I was certain I heard the rumble of thunder far beyond the thick-stone walls.

"Old habits die hard," Seraphine replied, unable to hide her smirk. "We may have retired from our former duties, but we are not stupid enough to close our eyes and ears to what is happening around us."

"How many of you stayed behind to spy on us?" I asked.

"Enough."

I scolded myself for not noticing. How had I been so blind to trust that Seraphine would have withdrawn all her assassins when she had left for Imeria? Regardless of if she still revoked her former duties, they were ingrained into her blood just like this place was for me. I fought the urge to take my attention off Seraphine and indulge myself in studying the room I stood in. A place my mother would have once walked. I blinked and could see her, in my mind's eye, sitting upon the throne in Seraphines' place.

A BROWN SHEET fluttered on the wall behind the throne. Now and then, I would see behind it, to the smashed glass window that Seraphine had tried to cover. There was no hiding how the material caught on the jagged shards of glass that still clung to the frame, ripping holes that hinted at the grey-covered sky beyond the castle.

Was the destruction caused by the Gryvern when Doran sent them to kill my mother? From the small glances I allowed myself on the walk to the throne room, it was clear the window behind the throne was not the only sign that a struggle had infiltrated this place. It scarred the walls, floors, and pillars. Marks made from claws. A hand slipped into mine, drawing me out of my imagination. I followed the gloved hand up to the person it belonged to. Duncan's concern was palpable across his handsome face. One squeeze from his fingers was enough to refocus me.

"If you know, then let us skip this part and get to what we desire to know," I said, confidence borrowed from Duncan's steel gaze.

"No, that would not be necessary—"

"Who killed her?" Rafaela growled.

Seraphine pondered the question. Even checked her nails as though to confirm just how unbothered she was to help. If it was not for the sudden jolt forward from Rafaela, I believed Seraphine would never have said another word.

"Unfortunately," Seraphine spluttered, visibly shaken by the Nephilim's brute gesture. "I cannot provide the solace you require, Nephilim. The death of your companion is unknown to us. The person who took the girl's life is skilled at even hiding from shadows."

"That is not good enough." The room shook as Rafaela stomped her foot down. Dust rained down from the vaulted ceiling, coating our hair and shoulders like snow.

Seraphine stood, then walked carefully down the cracked, worn steps until she was level with the three of us. It was the first time I had seen her dressed in luxurious clothing. My eyes scanned her nimble limbs, yet I could not see the hint of any weapon upon her. This was not the assassin I had come to know. As Seraphine suggested, it seemed she truly had shed that skin.

"Gabrial was killed because of what she could provide us in this war. Her insight into Aldrick was invaluable, and whoever murdered her knew that. Which means we are once again blind to his movements and decisions. However, Gabrial isn't the only one with the ability to see doings at such great distances..."

"Spit it out, Robin," Seraphine sighed, rolling her eyes as she looked back at me.

"Tell us, have your people retreated from Elmdew, or do you keep them there as a fail-safe?" I asked, smiling as the reaction that passed over her face confirmed what I needed to know.

"Aldrick brainwashed, used, and ultimately led to the death of my sister," Seraphine spat. "She does not have the luxury of retiring alongside

me. To experience a life we dreamed of as children. Living within a castle without a care in the world. Of course, I have my people in Elmdew just as I have them in Oakstorm and Cedarfall. I may have hung my daggers away, but I am still cautious that the fight is not over."

"Then help us," I pleaded. "If not by locating the person behind Gabrial and possibly Lucari's death, but also by stopping Aldrick. Send a command to the Asps you have in the courts and ask them to guard the keys. Guard us, protect us. We started this together. Let us finish it as one."

Duncan's skin crackled with lightning. It hissed in the air around him as he spoke. "Not all of us have the indulgence of hiding behind stone walls."

"Hiding?" Seraphine barked a laugh, twisting the skirts of her emerald silk dress as she turned back to the throne. For a moment, I wondered who that dress had belonged to before. Had Seraphine raided through my mother's belongings, or had they already been pillaged by thieves in the years the court was left unprotected?

"Has anyone ever taught you the importance of grovelling when asking for a favour?" Seraphine asked with a sigh. "Insulting me will not provide you with the answer you have travelled all this way for."

"What will?" Rafaela asked above the rustling of her feathers.

"That is not a price you can afford," she replied.

"Name it, and I will find a way—"

"Robin, enough!" Duncan snapped, blue light flashing in lines across his skin. "You have sacrificed enough. I'll not see you part with anything more."

"Listen to your keeper Robin," Seraphine leered, now sitting back on the throne. My throne. The one my mother had sat upon when this castle was more than empty rooms and scars of destruction across every place I looked.

"You are frightened," Rafaela said. "There is no shame in that."

"Don't speak on my behalf..." A golden hue glowed across Seraphine's face. The light smoothed out the snarl that had set across it. Seraphine's eyes fixated on the cause of the glow, which was held in Rafaela's two firm hands.

The hammer. It was pointed toward the assassin, exuding a warm light that seemed to have some power over her. The creases around Seraphine's eyes melted away, and the black of her pupils grew in size within her eyes. I watched in awe as Seraphine's disregard crumbled, and she wept. Her eyes filled with tears that fell freely down her face. Her lips were moving, repeating a word that I could not hear. The strange, enforced trance lasted only a moment. Rafaela retracted the hammer and slammed the head into the floor at her feet. The glow dissipated, returning the room back to its ominous hue.

Seraphine leaned forward, gaze fixated on the floor. Her chest rose and fell dramatically as though each breath was not enough to sustain her.

"What did you do?" I asked, looking sidelong at Rafaela, who seemed to wait for something further to happen.

"I showed her what my hammer can. The truth. I gave her a glimpse into the future that her lack of aid will help bring forward."

"A vision?" Duncan asked.

Rafaela nodded. "Of destruction."

Seraphine's face had paled. Her wide, unblinking eyes overflowed with horror as her tears continued to spill without sign of stopping. Yet, when she spoke, it was nothing but the voice of the assassin. "I'll help you claim the answers you seek."

"Thank you," Rafaela replied, bowing her head.

I could not stop the gaping of my mouth as I looked between them. Duncan was silent, too, trying to register just how quickly the scene had changed.

"We will find the perpetrator who murdered Gabrial. But understand when the answers you seek are not what you wish to hear, do not return to my home. As Rafaela here understands, the truth is not always what we wish to know."

I felt better knowing Elinor and Lyra would have the added protection of the Asps when returning to their courts. It was a risk coming to Imeria, but it had paid off by the skin of my teeth. Without Rafaela, I feared we would not have been so successful.

Regardless of our success, I could not sleep. The little rest I had fallen into was riddled with Jesibel once again. It was so real. As I stared up at the darkened ceiling, I still sensed her fingers rifling through my head. Picking at visions, one at a time. Gabrial, Seraphine, Imeria Castle. It was as though she wished to haunt me, punishing me for failing her by making me relive everything terrible that had happened.

Sleep had joined my list of enemies. I couldn't face closing my eyes again for fear of what I would find.

Duncan's broad back faced me. Since his head hit the worn, dust-ridden pillow that puffed a cloud upon impact, he had fallen easily into the peace sleep offered. He had not moved since.

I had busied myself with tracing my nails across his skin. Faint pink lines were left in my wake. I watched as they faded within seconds. At least those marks did. The scars that littered Duncan's body would never be scrubbed away. I thought of Gabrial and the words that stained her skin, telling stories of others. Whereas these marks, the ones that crisscrossed in silver, puckered lines, told of Duncan's story. The pain he was subjected to during his time as a Hunter. Each etching was a symbol of his defiance. Some were not as pronounced as others. Across his right shoulder blade was a thicker, angrier scar that bumped beneath my finger as I ran over it. I drew my hand away as though it had burned me like fire.

Unlike the other marks, that was a memory of the pain. Pain I had caused him. What his ultimate defiance, falling in love with a fey, had caused him.

I rolled over, ignoring the exhaled moan of Duncan, who, somewhere in his subconscious, recognised the withdrawal of my touch. Unable to subject myself to my traitorous thoughts a moment longer, I swung my legs over the bed and stood up.

Beyond the narrow, long windows was a sky blanketed in the darkest of black. Thin wisps of cloud passed across the moon that looked hauntingly large this far up in Imeria Castle. It cast its ivory glow into the room. I wondered what this room had been used for before now. It was far too small to be used as a chamber room. I imagined it was well suited for a storage room, but I could not be sure.

I snatched the cream tunic from the bundle I had left on the floor. Pulling it back over my head, I didn't bother to work the ties around the neck. Instead, I left them loose to allow the kiss of chilled winds to devour my skin and wash the sticky sense of exhaustion that laced it.

Once I was dressed, I padded across the cracked slabbed floor to the door. I clung to the aged wood that creaked as it swung open. Looking back to Duncan, who still didn't stir, I gave myself two options.

Crawl back into the warmth he provided to the thin sheets or wander through Imeria in search of the ghosts and memories that would make me feel something for this place.

I pulled the door closed and shut the easier of the two options away. I picked the latter.

Imeria Castle was a maze of empty rooms, narrow corridors with ceilings hidden by shadow and grand, glassless windows. Beyond them gave a view of the Icethorn Court, which stretched like a patchwork of white, grey and silver for as far as the eye could see.

My thighs burned as I paced up endless stairs and down hallways that led to more hallways with closed doors on either side. The light grey carpet runner provided my bare feet with some warmth. Like most of the castle's aged decoration, it was ripped and frayed.

My hand traced the wall to my side. My fingers trailed over marks and scars as I dragged my touch along it. At one point, I saw three equally long scratch marks gouged deep into the stone. I snatched my hand away once I realised what had caused it.

Bannisters had snapped, exposing sharp splitters of wood that gave way to a great fall down to a landing beneath the curved stairway. In some places, I had to take care not to walk over shards of glass hidden beneath flurries of snow let in from the destroyed windows.

Time had not been kind to Imeria, just as the Gryvern had not been when they came and turned this place into what it was now.

A graveyard for a family I never had the chance to know.

I would have thought I'd felt closer to my mother, walking on the same floor she had once walked. Treading in the same places she had. Occupying rooms where she had lived a life. But the truth could not have been more opposite.

I kept going, losing myself from the room I had left Duncan in. I paid no mind to how I would make my way back to him. Somehow, I knew I would find him in this place or another.

Reaching the top landing of yet another staircase guarded by towering walls covered with crooked, empty gilded frames, I was greeted with a rush of wind that pushed the hair from my forehead.

Ahead of me was an arched doorway that led out to the exterior of the castle. Two doors clung to the wall for dear life. It was a wonder the hinges had not given away as they looked moments from falling to the floor completely.

Outside was some sort of balcony. I walked toward it, not because of the view but the outline of a person sitting perched over the low stone wall that circled the balcony. If it was not for the twin wings that fluttered in the winds or the golden hammer leant up against the wall behind her, I may have believed it was one of Seraphine's Asps enjoying the fresh air.

Walking cautiously behind Rafaela, I didn't wish to surprise her for fear she might fall over the stone wall she sat on.

"Can't sleep?" I asked.

Rafaela glanced over her shoulder briefly before returning her gaze to the stretching view. "Your realm is beautiful. I keep looking, thinking I am going to find the end on either side, but it seems to never stop."

"Your homelands must be beautiful, too," I said. "Do you miss it?"

"Irobel is not like this. If you climb the tallest tower erected in my lands, you can see the ocean glittering in the distance on all sides. Wychwood is... grand. I have never felt so small."

It was strange hearing such vulnerability from the Nephilim.

"The world is a big place," I replied. "Your presence has proved that."

"Knowing just how big it is simply adds to the pressure of keeping it and everyone in it safe."

Rafaela's wing shifted slightly, giving me room to stand at her side. I was aware as she fanned her wing back out behind me, shielding the view of the castle's interior. It was like having a great shield at my back. Which, in some sense, was exactly what Rafaela was.

"Gabrial was the most excited of us to finally leave our home and explore what was to offer beyond it. She was hardly given the chance to experience any of it. A world she treasured unconditionally. A place she didn't know, a place she had only dreamt of, and yet she would have given her life to protecting it."

My throat scratched as though full of sand. I gripped the stone wall as the wave of Rafaela's grief had the power to take my legs out from beneath me.

"I wish there was something I could say to ease your pain."

Rafaela lifted her chin and kept her stare fixated on the further points she could see. Her voice did not tremble when she spoke, nor did her eyes fill with tears. There was strength in her sadness, a peace that I marvelled at.

"Gabrial is with the Creator, knowing that gives me a sense of peace. However, when my hammer crushes the skull of the being that killed her, that will also help."

I huffed an awkward laugh, unable to shield myself from the brutal honesty of her threat. "If anyone can find the being behind the attack, it will be Seraphine. Rafaela, I don't wish to tell you what will or will not help, but I have searched for revenge and the bliss I believed it would give me. It was not what I found when I went looking. The promise of revenge is a lie. It does nothing to help."

As I spoke, I remembered Jack Campbell. I thought of his shattered remains smashed across the ale-slick floor of the pub. Then of Doran, whose body slipped beneath the water as Elinor killed him. I hadn't recognised any peace on her face afterwards.

"Death is not always the answer," I added.

"You are right, Robin; it is not always the answer, but sometimes it is. That is my purpose as the Creator's hammer. He made me a warrior of his image and gave me the responsibility to punish those who require it. Just as you did not ask for the power that Altar gave upon your bloodline. I did not ask for this. I accepted it without question. I claimed it. Aldrick will not be the only one to fall beneath my truth."

"When does it end?" I asked. "What waits for you when the world has been cleansed of its threats, and you face freedom?"

Rafaela shrugged, lips twitching as she regarded my question. "That all depends on the Creator's will."

"That hardly sounds like freedom."

"Living in one's truth is freedom, Robin. A lesson you have recently learned. I discovered my truth many years ago when I was born with a different name in a body that did not match the beauty of my soul. I am who I am because of choosing myself. Freedom is a concept I know well, in every sense of the word."

My breath clouded before me, matching the frigid air in defiance. "Then I hope we give the rest of the realms the same chance to experience the beauty of such a thing."

Rafaela offered me a smile. "As do I."

Something moved in my peripheral, just behind the top of Rafaela's head. She noticed my gaze shift and turned to look behind her to see what I had seen. Before I could follow, it was gone.

"I think that's my cue to return to bed and force myself to sleep. I'm so exhausted that I'm seeing things. Rafaela, try to get some rest too."

"Not exactly an exciting concept. Your beds are not designed for bodies like mine." Rafaela threw out her wings. The thick carpet of feathers across them flickered as the breeze whipped at them.

"Good point—" I swallowed my words as a sound echoed across the landscape before us. Rafaela's head snapped around, looking out over the dark. A shiver passed across my arms, sending each individual hair to stand.

The noise was like that of thunder. I expected to see the flash of bluewhite light spear across the skies.

"Get inside," Rafaela said quietly, still searching the landscape for something.

"What is it?"

Rafaela's wings pounded with one fell swoop, and she was up, standing balanced upon the stone wall she had been sitting on. She reached down, plucked the hammer from its resting place, and clenched it in both hands. "Robin... do as I say. Go."

The sound came again. This time it was louder.

Closer.

Then I saw them.

Three black shapes cut across the night sky, blending in with it seamlessly. It took little time for the creatures to cover ground and grow closer. I stood, rooted to the spot as the demonic monster I had last seen flying across our ship days ago, hurtled towards me.

Draeic. Except this time, it was not alone.

"Run."

ear flooded my veins. My nerve endings sparked. I tried to breathe, but a serpent had coiled itself around my chest and squeezed. All I could do was watch the Draeic speed toward me, my limbs frozen like ice and feet rooted to the ground.

The world slowed to the detailed ebb of clarity. Rafaela's command rang continuously through my mind, yet still, I didn't move. My body refused to listen. It betrayed every sense that warned of what was to come.

I glanced back toward the castle, my castle, and imagined talons tearing through the stone. My ears mocked the sound of the destruction. I heard the monstrous tails, thick as the oldest trees, wrapping greedily around spires, snapping them like dried twigs beneath their weight.

Although my soul screamed for me to do as Rafaela commanded, to run back into the safety of Imeria's walls, my heart refused. It kept me rooted to the spot as the violent beat of wings and thunderous roar grew louder as it did closer.

Cold winds ripped around me. I heard their whispers of warnings. Their chants. The wind longed for me to let go of the power that shook within my core as though breaking free from a cage. This was my home. I had not been here to stop the first unwanted assailants when they came, killed and left this court in ruins.

For their memory, I wouldn't run and hide.

The winds forced my back as though a hand urged me to face the incoming attack. My feet barely touched the floor as they lifted me. To its power, I was nothing more than a puppet tangled at the end of their strings.

Power oozed from my skin. The sudden release intoxicated me until I felt as though my very being was no longer my own.

Because it wasn't.

My body was a vessel for a power that was granted to keep the demons at bay. I supposed I would start using it for its true purpose by sending these back to the dark pits they had desperately crawled from.

"I'm not leaving," I growled, allowing the icy wind to envelop me. It tore the dark locks of hair from my forehead as it picked up in a frenzy.

I expected Rafaela to refuse me, but she didn't. Perhaps she saw my refusal burning like boiling determination in my dark eyes. She gritted her teeth, nodded, and then burst upward. Rafaela was airborne, golden hammer raised before her as she charged the three creatures. I admired her strength and prowess, but this would not be her task to face alone.

This was my land, regardless of how, on the surface, I was disconnected from it. Deep down, swirling among the power my bloodline permitted, it was mine.

No longer aloft by the welcoming torrent of my conjured winds, my bare feet pressed to the cold stone as I prepared myself. Even at a distance, I could hear Rafaela's war cry. She met the Draeic head-on with equal confidence. There was no sign of hesitance as Rafaela's stone-grey wings carried her toward them.

The Draeic were equal in size, but each born from different shades of night. Their hulking bodies were covered in an armour of sharpened scales. The closer they grew, the more I could see a form of what seemed to be light exposed beneath their layer of scales. Crackling red fire. As though lava flowed beneath, shown only through the cracks. Much like Duwar had looked when he presented himself in the mirror, standing proudly behind Aldrick. The monsters belonged to him.

My eyes devoured the creatures, searching for a weakness. The one that flew to the left of the formation struggled to keep height. It was subtle but enough for me to notice.

Its leathery wings were covered in tears and jagged holes. Moonlight easily speared through the thin membrane that stretched between their boned frames. The damage was most likely a result of simply brushing against the horns protruding across each of their bodies. Or perhaps the dragging of long talons that lugged through the air beneath them.

I wouldn't allow them any closer.

Doing as Rafaela commanded, I ran. This time to the outer edge of the balcony that we had, not moments before, been sitting together on. The peace of our conversation was a distant memory.

The harsh presence of stone forced into my hip as I leaned as far over the edge as I could until all I could see was the darkened drop below.

I pushed my power into the surrounding air. It welcomed it. Like a leech to flesh, the winter air drank from me. I envisioned every flake of snow and ice entrapped within the winds that whirled around the castle. Honing my focus was as easy as conjuring a thought. Every flake hardened and sharpened in my mind's eye, forming the snow into intricately crafted blades.

I blinked, and the dark glittered with static flakes that hung like stars across the landscape. There were so many of them I could not fathom a number large enough to guess. Then, with clear precision, I guided the winds and pushed the blades of ice straight toward the Draeic.

A boom echoed across the landscape as Rafaela's hammer crashed into the snout of one beast. Beside them, she looked small, but her strength was mighty. It knocked the middle beast off its course and straight into the path of the Draeic with the ripped wings.

My assault met the third of the Draeic. I felt every shard tear through hardened skin. Over and over, I willed the ice to return, ripping, scratching, stabbing. A gust of silver wind engulfed the large beast completely in a vortex of my starved blizzard.

I revelled in the monster's howls as my power tore it to shreds. My body tensed, arms still outstretched, as I forced more of my essence into the winds until it was as much a part of me as my own hands.

There was a sudden, sharp tang of copper that filled my mouth. My teeth bit hard down into the sides of my cheeks as I focused on destroying the creature caught in my web. I brushed my tongue over the mess of flayed skin in my mouth, wondering if that was what Duwar's creature looked like. I knew innately that it had stopped struggling within the vortex I had conjured. There was no noise anymore. Beside the roaring thunder of the two Draeic, Rafaela occupied. I feared to look. Not until I was confident the Draeic I had entrapped would no longer be a threat.

A warm, unwanted rush of tiredness overcame me. Heavy fog shrouded my mind. The world span out of control. I withdrew my power, falling over onto the stone wall of the balcony as my knees gave way. My lungs pinched as I inhaled deeply, forcing as much breath back into them as I could muster.

All of this discomfort was not strong enough to stop me from witnessing the annihilation my power had achieved.

The monster fell from the sky. Its body was now a bloodied, broken mess of limbs and bone. Meat hung from its corpse. The wings were torn. Even if it had survived, the wings couldn't have kept it airborne.

I glimpsed its gouged eyes and shattered jaw. Then it was gone. Falling into the dark. Its death was so terribly silent. Until the shattering boom of its body meeting the ground far below echoed up the sheer face of the castle's walls.

Relief was short-lived as Rafaela's scream cut through the daze of power and tiredness. I looked up to see her body, grey wings folded protectively over her, hurtling through the night. From the arcing swing of one of the monster's spiked tails, I knew it had hit her.

I screamed for her. My voice filled the dark void between us. It was not her name I called or a word I could ever repeat. The sound was pure panic and fury that built from deep within me.

Before Rafaela slammed into the castle walls below the balcony, she threw her wings out and regained some control. Blood smeared her cheek as she looked up at me. I spotted a dark stain spread at the side of her waist that she had not seemed to notice or care about.

Everything that followed happened so quickly.

Rafaela flew upward, wings cascading powerful gusts down upon me. "I need to get you out of here."

"No, I can stop them. This is my domain; I'll not let them take it!"

Rafaela glanced behind her, and we both watched as the remaining two monsters righted themselves and focused back on the castle. Not on me or Rafaela, but on the towering walls behind me. Globs of saliva dripped from their maws; ferocity twisted like red fire in their large, snake-like eyes.

"You," Rafaela shouted above the roars of war the monsters released, "are my priority."

My thoughts drifted to Duncan. Had he woken to the noise and thought it was more sinister than the crash of thunder? I wondered if Seraphine glanced out her window, expecting a storm, instead finding winged monsters claiming the sky of Icethorn as their own.

How much time had passed since we had first attacked? Moments, seconds?

"Robin, look at me! We can't win this."

I longed to shout and tell her I could deal with it, but every inch of my body ached. The power I had exuded had taken it out of me. Looking at the two monsters that flew with frenzied determination, I knew I could not take them. Not like I had with the other.

I watched in frozen awe as the two creatures careened toward me. They showed no signs of stopping, no signs of slowing down.

Rough hands grabbed me, and the ground fell away from my feet. Rafaela's nails pinched into my skin as she tore me from my castle and threw us both into the air. I gripped onto the bloodstained ivory shawl she wore and screamed.

Winds swallowed my cry with their own. The sound ruptured against my eardrums. My eyes streamed with tears from the slapping of cold upon my face.

"Take me back!" I shouted, unsure if Rafaela could hear me above it all. "Don't do this!"

Her hold on me tightened, and I felt as though my ribs would snap. I struggled to breathe as the pressure worsened. It then filled my head. The higher she climbed into the sky, the more I felt the hands of air press into me.

I forced my eyes open, streaming tears, and glanced back toward the monsters.

They did not follow us in chase. There was no relief as I realised it. They never wanted me. I finally discovered what the Draeic desired a split second before they got their wish.

Both remaining monsters split at the last moment before smashing straight into Imeria's walls. Their power and speed gave them the impression of melting through stone as they disappeared into the castle's body. It took a moment for the explosive sound of carnage to reach me.

Rafaela slowed in her flight. I felt the breath leave her lungs as she looked down at what had caused the noise.

The monsters had not been sent here to claim me. This was a suicide mission. And they had succeeded.

Imeria Castle buckled and fell before our eyes. Towers folded in on themselves, walls exploded outwards, unable to hold the weight of stone above them as two gaping holes the creatures left had weakened them to the point of no return. Soon the sky was full of dust and rubble as the castle continued to break and shatter.

Duncan.

He was in there. The castle was falling around him. I imagined him in the bed, asleep and unaware, as bricks fell upon him. It took everything in my power not to blink and see visions of his head caved in, his body squashed to a pulp by the mounds of the castle that had stretched above the room he slept in. The room I had left him alone in.

As the castle continued to fracture, as though made from glass and held in careless hands, my heart shattered in a symphony. Each brick, each slab of stone that crumbled beneath me, matched that of the pieces my heart snapped into.

Pain reverberated through my chest, and my grip on Rafaela fell slack. She was saying something, repeating the same words over and over. But I lacked the care to listen to them. There was nothing I could focus on more than the massacre laid out beneath my dangling feet. Or from the cavernous hole of loss that returned, like a vagrant tenant, to my soul.

THE LIGHT of dawn revealed every horrific detail before me. Shards of golden light cut through the wisps of clouds and graced the mountain of rubble that stretched ahead of me. Dust clung to the air, invading my lungs and making it feel like each inhale was full of grit and dust.

I cared little of that pain compared to the sea of agony that had overtaken me.

Standing on a bolder, I looked out over the remains of Imeria Castle. I cried for Duncan until my throat bled raw. His name was a blade in my throat, scoring deep marks into it each time I shouted for him.

Rafaela didn't stop me. Instead, she continued her search among the ocean of broken brick and dust-covered ruins as she hunted for bodies. One of the Draeic had been completely buried, but another was still visible at a distance, a single ripped wing stretching out of a mound of stone like a sail of a submerged ship.

Now and then, she would find signs of a body. A hand reaching out beneath a blood-covered stone. A face covered by a layer of dust, skin ripped, and skull shattered. Seraphine's body was one of the few I could name. Her torso had been severed, spilling the tangled knot of innards out in a puddle of red and black gore where her legs should have been.

Her legs were never found in the chaos.

I was thankful Rafaela had run her fingers down the Asp's grit-coated face to close her eyes. They had still gleamed with the fear she had when she died.

In another life, I may have grieved her death, the one my presence had brought to her new home. But I had no room for Seraphine or the other broken lives the castle had stolen.

There was only room for Duncan. He occupied every part of me.

Each time Rafaela found another body beneath the rumble, she would look up at me and shake her head.

As frozen tears melted down my cheeks, I wondered if she looked for Duncan to ease her guilt. The emotion was the clearest in her eyes. Unspoken but bitter. I recognised it well the moment she had returned us to the ground as we watched and waited for the fall of my castle to calm.

It took hours to truly stop.

Rafaela had not said it with words, but she carried the weight of death on her shoulders.

At some point, I noticed the thundering of hooves. Weakly, I looked over my shoulder to see a hoard of stags rushing toward us. Althea rode ahead, her poppy-red hair billowing behind her as she cantered toward us. Toward me. Following her was a formation of Cedarfall soldiers fanned out like wings across the landscape.

You're too late.

Rafaela was airborne again, ready to fight, until she realised who had joined us.

Althea threw herself from the stag's side, almost tripping at first, and ran toward us. She navigated over the rubble, eyes not leaving mine as she did so.

"We saw it, all of it!" Althea shouted. "I thought..."

"They are dead," I interrupted her, unable to bear the weight of her sorrow atop my own. "Dead."

"Robin, Duncan is—"

"Dead!" I screamed. Ice burst from beneath my bloodied scratched bare feet. It devoured the stone I stood upon, coating it entirely and cracking beneath my weight. "Duncan is dead, joining the numbers of those who die for simply being near me. Why don't you turn back to Berrow and run before I bring your end? Go on... GO!"

Althea stood firm, although flinching as she studied me. Part of me wished to throw myself into her arms, but then I blinked and saw her body crushed beneath stone or her chest pierced with a blade.

"Robin," Althea said softly, as though my name alone was enough to break me entirely. "Duncan is not dead."

A wave of rage flooded through my body. Overwhelmed by the feeling, I threw my head back and screamed. I shouted to the sky until my throat bled and my fingernails embedded into my palms. I didn't stop until every breath lodged in my lungs had been expelled, and the world trembled from the suffocating lack of air.

I fell forward onto my hands and knees. The ice and stone cut into my hands and tore through my dust-coated trousers.

My Duncan.

"Listen to me, Robin, please."

I took a moment to gather enough strength to lift my head and look back at Althea. My sobs were heavy and all-consuming. It was strange to hear my heartbeat thundering in my ears when I was certain I no longer had one.

"Duncan is alive. I do not know how to explain this, but he is in Berrow... someone... Robin. It is best I take you to him."

Ithea lied to me. It was the only explanation. No matter how many times I forced her to repeat herself during the journey to Berrow, she never seemed to make sense.

Duncan is alive. He is alive.

As she spoke, it was like a puzzle with missing pieces. The final piece couldn't fit together perfectly to form the picture she attempted to paint for me. My mind refused to believe her.

The journey was swift. I was so completely consumed by my thoughts it was like I blinked, and the ruins of Imeria were far behind us. Now, I stood before the ramshackle ruins of a house. Snow drifted across the bowed roof. The wind screamed around the exposed, rotten beams. I kept my gaze pinned on the open door and the darkness that lurked within. And I waited. Waited to be let down or told this had all been one sick game. A way to play with my mind and break it into as many pieces as the heart in my chest.

What made this so terrible was I had been here before. I had stood before this building many weeks ago. It had hardly changed. The house was exhausted, leaning to the side as though it had given up completely. The glassless windows looked like gaping mouths. Did it laugh at me or show surprise at my presence?

If it was the latter, we shared in the emotion. I never wished to see this place again.

Yet here I was, the same broken boy, but under far different circumstances.

Erix had brought me here. Bruised and exhausted in a time when I had not accepted my fate. We had been real, in a place of ghosts, invading the home of someone who had been forced to leave it behind. I feared to blink to find the image of our bodies entwined with one another. How we lost ourselves in a bed, using our skin and touch to fend off the cold night that invaded the forgotten place.

"If you need me, I will be there." Althea reminded me, waiting before the broken gate that hung determinedly to the rotted post at the end of the garden's path. Beside her stood Rafaela, a silent guard. The wound at her side had still not been dealt with besides being wrapped in a makeshift bandage of material she'd torn from her clothing. That was yet another issue she'd refused the offered aid for. Alongside her rebelliousness against healing, she had also refused to allow me to enter without her.

It took a little persuading for her to finally understand I would not allow her to chaperon me into the home before me.

This was my problem to deal with. A problem I had believed would never show itself again to me. If it was not for the promise that Duncan was alive and well, lingering in the cottage's dark, I would have already drawn a blade. I may have asked Althea to torch the remains of the house and finish what time couldn't in destroying this place. More so, what lingered within it.

Each step forward, in slightly oversized shoes that had been provided to me upon arrival, along with the heavy woollen cloak, was as though I was wading through knee-high mud. I persisted, focusing on the chipped wood of the front door and the suggestive flakes of old blue paint that had nearly all but worn away. It was open as if it knew I was coming.

I sensed a gaze scratching across me from someone unseen within the building. I searched the dark, empty windows and found them empty. But that didn't suggest it was not watching. Not waiting.

There was only one reason I didn't consider kicking the door in. To unleash the final dregs of power I had recuperated after the attack with Draeic.

Duncan was inside.

Althea had assured me he was. She told me over and over, never faltering, as I asked her to repeat herself.

I couldn't trust what she told me, not until I saw him myself. My mind raced with questions. I drowned in them. It was not only the promise of Duncan I couldn't trust, but the company Althea said he had inside.

One wrong move, and I could truly lose him. It was a concept I struggled to convince myself of. Not hours before, I had believed Duncan was lost beneath a mountain of rubble and destruction. Except he wasn't. I sensed him as I strode toward the door. His scent of fresh pine and scorched earth. I followed it. However, I couldn't ignore the other presence that coated him like a blanket of darkness. Something cold and evil.

If it was not a game to Althea, it certainly was to the person I prepared to see again. He had chosen this place to hide within for a reason. He knew what effect it would have on me.

Part of me wished to make him pay for taking Duncan. Still, the more rational side of my mind reminded me that Duncan would have been lost beneath Imeria's Castle.

Somewhere, deep within my chest, was a spark of gratitude. It was faint and could be smothered completely at any moment. I couldn't allow myself to ignore it.

I was greeted by darkness. The floorboards creaked agonisingly, exposing my presence. A damp scent hung in the air from years of snow melting into the walls and floor of the house. I didn't remember it being such an unpleasant place before. Daylight sliced in behind me. It exposed walls speckled with stains of dark mould. Before me, the staircase was a death trap. The corridor to its side was covered in drifts of snow that squeaked beneath my footfall.

"Duncan?" I called out in question. His name died in the stale air the moment it slipped past my lips. I almost gagged as the air took its chance to assault my throat with its clawing. I took a deep breath and expelled as much of the hideous smell out of my nose.

Then I heard him. His voice was as real as the memories that haunted this place.

"I'm here, my darling."

I stopped dead in my tracks. My heart burst from my chest, threatening to suffocate me as it lumped in the pits of my throat.

It was him. The deep, rumbling tone caused shivers to pass over my arms. I waited patiently, holding my breath to keep as quiet as possible, as I waited for him to speak again. This could have been a trick of the mind. A way of my memories conjuring a response and luring me to danger.

"Robin..." Duncan's exhale of my name brimmed with relief. The sharp edge of sadness tugged at my gut and urged me forward. "I was so..."

A shuffling of someone else cut him off. Fury twisted in a blizzard within me.

"Come to me, Darling."

I walked faster, following the same steps I had before. To a room that sparked discomfort in my mind. My skin itched at the memory, but I couldn't dwell on it.

My foot kicked at the door. Wood buckled beneath the force, throwing it open with a crack. I hardly flinched as it slammed into the wall. Light followed me. It slipped into the room, exposing every untouched detail.

It was the man who sat on the bed before me that demanded my attention. Duncan. His back was straight, his hands gripped onto each side of the worn mattress as he looked upon me.

Relief deepened the lines on his face. It carved his scar into a tear-like line from the side of his eye to the quirk of his upturned lip. Verdant eyes glowed with tears. A single one broke free of his dark lashes and cast a clear path down his dust-covered cheek.

"Tell me this is real," I begged, gripping onto the door frame to steady myself. My nails bit into the old plaster of the walls until it crumbled away. "Say something again, so I know this is not some illusion cast to punish me."

I wished to run to Duncan and throw myself into his arms. A sob built in my chest. It crawled its way out of me, exposing the weeping child I buried inside. I found something I had believed was lost forever, and I promised I'd never let that go again.

Duncan sighed. A dark lock of hair fell across his eye as he turned his attention to something unseen in the shadows of the room. When he glanced back at me, his stare screamed with pleading. "Promise me you will hear him out? I owe him that much."

The shuffling of heavy feet sang from the shadows. A part of me registered the twisting of ice that crackled around my fingers as I flexed them to my side. It would only take a thought, and the ice would be directed toward the lurking presence.

"Come out," I warned, voice crackling with power. My attention was fixated on the way the darkness rippled as a body peeled away from its concealment. "Slowly."

Like a dog on a leash, he listened.

I braced myself as I closed in on the doorway that led to the room that had haunted my mind. Before my eyes could take in the rumpled mound of sheets atop the bed or the floor completely covered with items of the last occupants that dwelled here, the view was blocked.

The hulking, tall figure put themselves between Duncan and me. Regardless of my forced bravery, I couldn't stop myself from choking on my breath.

"Hello, Little Bird."

Erix stood in front of me. Steel silver eyes bore into me, invading my soul in search of something.

This version of Erix was unfamiliar to me. He was taller than I remembered. There had been a time I had his outline memorised, the way his broad shoulders dropped like the edge of a cliff to the narrowed, hard shape of his torso and waist.

Much like the last time I had seen him in this very place, this very room, Erix was without a shirt. Likely a result of the grey, taut leather wings that protruded from his back.

I believed the grey, almost silver sheen of his skin was because of the lack of natural light within the building. I was wrong. It was the curse his father befell him. His affliction, his truth. Erix hung in the horrific balance of fey and Gryvern, not quite one nor the other.

My jaw dropped, eyes widening to the point of discomfort as I took him in. He held his hands before him in such a mortal stance that it seemed wrong for the way he had changed. Even more so since I had last seen him in the clearing, the night Duncan was captured by Hunters.

Far behind me, winds plagued by ice raced to greet me. It screeched through the house, crawling across walls and floors until it built at my back.

The last I had seen Erix, I promised him death if I was ever disgraced by his presence again.

Regardless of Duncan or anything else that had happened, all I could think about was sticking to my word.

"Don't do it," Duncan said quietly but firmly. He stood beyond Erix's shoulder, seemingly unbothered by the Gryvern's proximity. In a strange turn of fate, Duncan placed himself before Erix, who hadn't taken his eyes off me this entire time.

I fisted my hands, severing the connection to my power and leaving the snow and ice to fall naturally across the aged flooring of the corridor.

"What are you doing?" My words were more like a sob as I looked from Duncan to Erix. "Why are you protecting him?"

There was no ignoring the reluctance that stiffened Erix's body as he urged himself out of Duncan's way. I could almost hear his bone creak with defiance as he stepped aside and allowed Duncan to move for me.

He swept me up in his arms. I was so overwhelmed by his touch that I buried my face in his chest. The powerful wrap of Duncan's arms was more than enough for me to finally give in to the weakness I had fought away since Althea had told me he lived.

"He saved me," Duncan confirmed, his hold constricting around me.

"No," I replied, voice muffled. "He is a killer."

"Look at me." Duncan pulled back, gripped my face in his grit-covered hands and held me so I couldn't do anything but see his desperation glow within his eyes. "I owe him my life. Because of that, I cannot let you harm him. Not until you hear him out."

Duncan is alive because Erix had saved him. Althea's words repeated in my mind. I remember the sickening feeling that coiled within me. I hadn't believed her. Even with both of them before me now, the concept was impossible to grasp.

Althea had explained that a woman who had taken occupancy of a home on the same narrow street as this one had seen what she believed was a monster. They had seen the three monsters that had attacked Imeria before Rafaela, and I had even seen them. It was what put everyone on edge. It was Gyah who found Erix here, but he was not alone. He was with Duncan.

I inhaled Duncan's woodland scents and allowed myself to believe the impossible. He was alive. I wrapped my arms around him again. "I'm not confident I can do this."

"This is going to be hard," Duncan began, pulling away from me but kept a firm hold on my upper arms. "But Robin, I'm going to ask that you listen to what Erix has to say."

The Gryvern lingered in the corner of my eyesight, not once retracting his blade-kissed eyes from us. I wondered how he felt as he watched me in the arms of another man. Erix had enough sense to choose this place to hide within, which suggested the creature still felt something.

Which, after hearing him speak, was not impossible to imagine.

Erix's voice was the same as before. The confident, clear drawl as he called me by the nickname I had grown not to despise as I first had.

"And he killed my father," I hissed, unable to hide the shaking that exposed just how weak I was at the moment.

Erix's breathing hitched as though a knife struck him dead in the chest. Duncan simply nodded in agreement, yet the soft wane of his forest-green eyes glowed with so much sympathy that I couldn't tell who it was for.

"A fighter is taught to blame the hand which holds the sword, and not the sword itself. Erix has done something terrible. He took something from you and doesn't have the power to give it back. However, my darling, listen, Erix was the sword, and the hand who controlled him has since been dealt with. Before you decide how you wish to serve him his justice, give him a chance to speak to you. His mind is his own."

"I... I thought you had died," I muttered.

"If Erix had not acted, I may have been. For that alone, give him a chance."

I cared little if the Gryvern watched on as I desperately reached my hands into Duncan's hair until the strands were tangled with my fingers. He gladly gave himself to me. Dipping his face to mine, I guided Duncan down to my lips.

I closed my eyes and enjoyed the realness of his kiss. The physical presence of his mouth against mine was a breath of fresh air. Our tongues wound together like serpents. Duncan squeezed me, holding me close.

My grip on his hair tightened in response, urging a raucous moan from him.

When I finally pulled away, I revelled in the soreness of my lips and the glistening wetness at the corners of my mouth. I loved it because it was real. Duncan was alive. He was well and standing in a place I never imagined he would be within. But I would take this over what could have been.

I looked to Erix, who never stopped staring at Duncan and me. His face was set in a grimace. A mask of pain and discomfort at the scene he had watched.

I sneered, staring Erix deep into pale eyes. "Speak."

Erix's response surprised me. With a slight bow, he replied. "Thank you."

My entire body trembled at the loss of Duncan's touch. He planted a final, quick kiss on my cheek and whispered something for only me to hear. "I love you."

When I replied, I made sure it was in a loud, clear voice. "I love you too, Duncan."

Duncan didn't see the smile that crept up my face, but Erix did. Not because I felt happy at that moment. My emotions were a storm of something darker in contrast to happiness.

I smiled because of the pain that twisted Erix's mutated expression. He lifted his long, claw-tipped nails and slapped them atop the hard outline of his chest as though something had pierced it.

And it had. My words were far greater than any blade. But it was the truth that they dripped with that buried the words to the hilt and twisted thrice to ensure Erix felt it.

I sat upon the far edge of the bed, discouraged by its presence but needing a place to settle myself as I allowed Erix to explain himself. Considering how the firm mattress beneath me made my skin itch with discomfort, I hadn't realised I fisted the sheets until my knuckles drained of colour. The last time I had been here, on this bed, it was for different reasons. It took great effort to keep at bay the urge to slip into the warm memory. It called me in with its siren song, promising peace and comfort.

Erix hovered by the door. He paced, moving awkwardly with a body he was not yet used to. Longer limbs and the added weight of his leather appendages which hung from mounds protruding from each shoulder blade. It dragged him down.

His physical appearance balanced on the edge of a knife between his fey side and the Gryvern curse that had worked well to devour him entirely. The last I had seen Erix, he'd pleaded with me to kill him. He was frantic, and his behaviour erratic. Whatever had happened between then and now had smoothed out his cracks of sanity and gave him, somewhat, a sense of humanity that he had barely clung to before.

From the moment Duncan had left us alone, we entered a battle of silence. Each of us waited for the other to break it first. The heavy rhythm of his footfall and slight rasp to his breathing soon began grating on my nerves. I lost the battle before it had barely started.

"Speak your piece," I snapped, staring daggers at him. "I haven't got time for this."

Erix slowed to a stop, then lifted his steel gaze to me. All my confidence melted away as he regarded me. The way his strong face

softened spread warmth across my chest.

"This was not how I wished for us to see one another again," Erix admitted.

"Whereas you clearly pondered this moment, I would've preferred if this never happened."

Erix frowned, but only slightly. He fought to keep control of his expression. His face was almost untouched by his curse. Beside his ears that were longer and the grey sheen of his skin, it was mostly him. Erix. I focused on his wings to the drawn-out claws that protruded uncomfortably from his fingers just to remind myself of the monster he was.

"And I would not blame you for feeling such a thing."

I swallowed the dangerous thoughts that mingled in my head. "Perhaps I should thank you for saving Duncan, but I can't help but ask why?"

A lump filled my throat so suddenly that I almost gagged on it. Although my mind knew that Duncan was alive, it still took time for my heart to heal from the trauma that had taken tenancy within its remaining pieces. The physical grief that had attached itself to me was not so easily relieved. Even knowing that Duncan waited beyond this place for when I was done here, the feeling ebbed away from me slowly.

"After everything I have done to you. Taken from you. I did it for you."

I snorted, surprising myself with the reaction. "How does your conscience feel? Balanced, perhaps cleansed of your sins?"

"You are angry, understandably."

There was no need to take a breath as I continued. The words fell out of me without the need for much thought. "I saw you, didn't I? Back in Imeria. You were watching me, weren't you? Stalking me. How long have you been lurking in the shadows, Erix?"

He rocked back, mouth parted. No sound coming out.

"Spit it out!"

I blinked and caught a vision of Gabrial's body ripped to shreds and bloodied ribbons by claws. My eyes fell to Erix's hands, which he held confidently, clasped before him. Had he been following from Lockinge? Had he... killed her?

"The first time I saw you was in Imeria. I suppose it is best I start at the beginning. It will help you make sense of how we got here."

Erix took a step toward me, his body language suggestive that he was going to sit beside me.

"Don't... come any closer to me. You can talk from there."

Hurt speared across his face. Erix stopped and dropped his chin to his bare chest. Muscles rippled like water disturbed by stone. "I do not wish to make you feel uncomfortable."

"It's a bit too late for wishing."

I could have sworn I heard him swallow during the reverberating silence that strung out between us in these moments of tension. Between learning Erix had stalked me, I was finding it hard not to convince myself that he was anything but Gabrial's killer. It made sense. Erix had killed before. What stopped him from doing so again? How much was the Erix that stood before me in control of himself against the Gryvern that stalked his own mind?

"I remembered little at first. But I am aware it started with pain. There was a time that I floated within the current of what I can only explain to be darkness, pulled along by someone else's will and guidance. Then suddenly, that was gone. Severed. I remember my mind becoming mine again, and it was terrible. Memories and thoughts, they all came back. Returned to me. I could not explain it, but I no longer sensed him inside my head." Erix knocked his fist into his skull as though his head were a door. "Doran was gone. There was a period when I ambled through Durmain, unsure where to go. Then I found Berrow. Berrow was like a beacon of light. I followed it. I came here without truly understanding why. Now I remember."

I pushed myself to stand, unable to touch the bed a moment longer. Wrapping my arms around myself gave me no comfort. I wanted to demand that he stop speaking. Listening to Erix speak was like torture. His voice buried claws into memories and dragged them to the surface.

If I closed my eyes, I could've conjured an image of me with my head resting upon his chest. I remembered the vibrations of his deep voice echoing across my skin.

"Do you want me to continue?" He asked softly.

"If you must," I lied. From Erix's brow, it was clear that he was aware of my pain. It caused him the same.

"It was quiet. Then it was not. Suddenly, the streets were filled with people. I saw Althea and Gyah and countless fey I did not recognise. But not you. Although your presence... it was strong among them all. I heard your name, clear as a bell, even as some whispered it. They could have been miles away, and I would still have made it out amongst the rest of what was

said. I knew it was not right for me to stay here, not with the reality of them finding me. I am sure Althea would have enjoyed the chance to take my head and give it to you as a gift. So, I left. I should have flown west in search of somewhere else to dwell, but there was a part of my curiosity that drew me to Imeria. Perhaps I didn't realise it, but I knew, deep down, you would be there."

"And I was."

"And you were," Erix said. "Over and over, I told myself to leave. I saw you with the winged woman and him. The Hunter. I saw you smile. It does not fill me with pride to admit that I saw you both." He didn't need to finish his sentence for me to know he had seen me with Duncan in bed. "You were happy but lost. I recognised it on your face. Just as I was about to leave you, I watched as you got out of bed and left the room. Just as I did to you. The greatest mistake of my life. One that will haunt me for the rest of my days."

I raised a hand sharply, cutting him off. "I've heard enough."

"Please." He reached out to the air as if grasping the opportunity to speak before it slipped away. "I know you owe me nothing but let me finish."

"Why did you save him?" I asked. "Everyone in Imeria, you chose Duncan to save. Why?"

"Because he means something to you."

"Everything," I corrected. "Duncan is everything to me."

"It was an easy choice to make. I was in the wrong place, admittedly, at the right time. No, it has not cleansed my soul of my sins or balanced the scales of justice. I did it because there was no other choice. My will is my own, Robin. I do with it what I wish. That is what you have blessed me with. After everything, you gave me another chance."

"You have another to thank for your freedom," I said. "I didn't kill Doran."

"Then who?" Erix looked genuinely surprised.

"Elinor Oakstorm, his wife, had as great of a reason for seeking revenge as I."

Erix's jaw gaped open, exposing the slight points that each of his teeth had formed. In that moment, for the first time, his face looked monstrous.

"She lives?"

"Very much so. A lot has changed since you gave yourself over to Doran."

"From those creatures that attacked Imeria, I gathered. I never have seen anything like them before. And the woman you fought beside..."

"Nephilim," I said, glad the conversation was shifting this way. "You've not seen one before?"

"Never."

I tilted my head, watching him through narrowed eyes. "Which is strange because one of them was recently brutally murdered. We have since been unable to discover who would have the power to overwhelm a trained warrior whilst ripping her skin to shreds."

Erix caught on quickly. He recoiled, both hands raised in surrender. "You think that has something to do with me?"

"I don't know what to think."

I gasped as Erix dropped to his knees, hands clasped together in some form of prayer. It was the same position I had seen Abbott Nathanial take up all those weeks ago. "I swear to Altar and everything beneath him, I have never seen or done anything against these Nephilim. There is nothing you owe me, Robin, but believe that I have not harmed anyone since my will was given back to me. I wouldn't… I couldn't…"

Although I may have wished he was lying, I knew he spoke the truth. I sensed it deep in my bones as his honesty flooded out of him. That didn't stop me from holding back my reservation. "Rafaela, the woman I fought alongside, has the nifty ability to pass judgement. It is not for me to deem you innocent or not... she can—"

"I will do it. Whatever is needed for me to prove to you I had nothing to do with her murder."

The way he said you made the insides of my cheeks prick as though the words were sour.

"Is that everything?" I asked matter-of-factly.

"If you are satisfied..."

We stood there, staring one another down at opposite ends of the room. How had we got here? The thought was heavy with sadness and regret. If I didn't start walking for the door now, I might never have gathered the courage to do so.

A back of a hand brushed mine.

"Robin?"

I paused, finding it difficult to calm my breathing. "What?"

"You did not need to listen to me. It means a lot that you have."

"I hope you find some solace in this conversation wherever it is you end up next," I replied, trying to keep my focus on the door ahead of me but wishing everything to look up at him one last time. "Rafaela will come to speak with you. Once you have proven yourself as not involved in Gabrial's murder, then you have until sundown to leave Berrow."

"I understand."

I took one shaking step and stopped again. "What has happened to the Gryvern?"

"We've.... They've dispersed. Sometimes I still sense them in my mind, but the connection has been quiet for a while now."

"Shame," I replied. "We could have done with them for the battle to come. Monsters to go up against the creatures that will no doubt find themselves on our doorstep again."

If Erix felt shame or discomfort for me referring to him, he didn't show it. "Robin, the man I see before me is not the same one who told me he was frightened of the dark."

"Much has changed since then. It is not the dark that scares me anymore."

Erix fell into the question I had set up for me. When he asked it, I sagged forward with some feeling of relief.

"What is it now?"

Allowing myself for a final time, I glanced up at Erix, who stared down the arrowed point of his nose. His wings shifted nervously at his back, anticipating the response I had built within me.

"I'm scared to death of losing those I care about," I whispered, turning my back and severing our connection. Only when the bedroom's door was within reach did I continue. "So, keep yourself alive."

As I walked out into the blinding light of day to Duncan, who waited for me at the end of the path, was I certain I heard a reply.

"For you, I shall. Little bird."

uncan didn't question me when I asked for us to be alone. After my impactful yet brief conversation with Erix, I couldn't think of anything worse than sitting before my friends and allies, pretending I could concentrate on the matters of demon gods and death. My mind was shrouded in heavy fog, and I needed a fresh breath to clear it. I longed for a moment of peace. Locked behind a closed door, with no need to force a smile or pretend my mind was not preoccupied with other thoughts.

I was satisfied to know that Rafaela's wound was being seen too. Duncan had assured me that Althea and Gyah would check Rafaela was fine. Not that I cared for what Kayne was doing, but I asked anyway. He was important to Duncan, which meant he was important to me. My inquiry was wasted, as Duncan hadn't seen Kayne since we arrived back. He shrugged as he confirmed it. His response was dismissive and misplaced. Clearly, there was tension between them, and I was not ready to unpack it.

After the attack on Imeria, it surprised me that Kayne was not the first one to check on Duncan. Apparently, the ex-Hunter found it more important that the fey people he had once sworn to hunt were settled in their new homes. There was a part of me which was thankful for him. Kayne provided more of his time to my people than I could have. Bitter jealousy crept up my throat and left a bad taste at the back of it. My time seemed not to be a luxury I could part with. And I felt stabs of remorse because of that.

"I found this," Duncan said from the open doorway, leaning against the frame as he inspected a dust-covered bottle in his hand. He scrutinised the dark glass, lifting it close to his face... so close that his green eyes seemed to cross one another. "There is definitely something inside, and the cork has not spoiled. What do you say? Fancy taking a risk with me?"

My chest warmed at the thought of a proper drink. Not melted ice or water collected from a well in the heart of Berrow that needed boiling before it was safe to ingest.

"Trust you to find wine in a place like this," I replied, cheeks pricking at the thought of wine.

"I'll take that as a yes," he replied, a grin tugging his lips up at each corner. "The rest of the storage has been ransacked. By rats or people, maybe both. But if they left this behind, I can at least wager they lack any taste."

"What would Nathanial think if he could see you now? Duncan Rackley, solving problems with a stiff drink," I said, vividly remembering how Duncan poached bottles from Abbott Nathanial's store cupboards as a youth, but more recently during our short stay in the Abbott's attic room.

"Old habits die as hard as sinful ones," Duncan mocked, forcing the aged voice of the kind-hearted Abbott.

My smile was short-lived as I remembered Nathanial being torn to pieces before our eyes by the Gryvern. And I had just left one. Erix lingered in the dark of my mind, ready to assault me at any given thought or happy memory. It was not a pleasant truth to recognise that all conversations seemed to lead back to Erix in some capacity.

"And if it is something stiff that will solve issues, I have a better idea of what can be offered."

I didn't react to Duncan quick enough. By the time I dragged myself out of my mind somewhat and plastered a fake smile, it was too late.

His dark brows furrowed, painting concern across his handsome face.

"I'm sorry," I said, dropping my chin in defeat to my chest.

"Don't be. Here, you need this more than me." Duncan was before me, towering above me as I slouched in a moth-eaten chair. The fabric had certainly seen better days and smelt like damp mould.

Duncan bit his teeth down on the edge of the cork and tugged. The pop was satisfying. So was the spray of red liquid that escaped onto his lips. One swipe of his tongue and the droplets were gone. He pulled a face, dramatically widening his eyes. I watched as he determined if the taste was good enough.

"It'll do," Duncan confirmed, although the furrow of his thick brow suggested otherwise.

With a lack of confidence, but an overwhelming desire to drown out my thoughts, I snatched the bottle and took the longest gulp.

Duncan's apprehension was not misplaced. It tasted vile at first, as it burned down my throat... something wine should not do. But the aftertaste was when the flavours of fruit revealed themselves beneath the sharper tang that only age could be blamed for.

"Any more of these?" I asked, waving the bottle at him like it was a bone to a dog.

Duncan's dark curtain of hair had fallen before his eye as he shook his head. He combed his fingers back through it, tucking it neatly behind a curved ear. "Just the one, so make it last, Darling."

"How unfortunate," I replied, knocking back another gulp.

"Talk to me. Share the burden I can see in your eyes." Duncan urged my knees apart with his legs until he stood between them. Then he knelt. Groaning slightly as his knees met the cold, hard floor of the room. He was just shy of eye height in this position. It gave me no excuse but to look at him.

I knew this was coming. I was just glad I had some rush of wine to aid me in picking a worry to start with.

"It feels wrong not acknowledging Seraphine and the Asps deaths," I admitted, still hearing Gyah's comment ringing in my head. No one grieves an assassin. A burial is not required if they are already entombed.

"If I had not gone to see them, then they would be alive."

Duncan's fingers dug into my thighs. It was a pleasant grip. One that sent a shiver up my spine. "There is no good taking the blame for another's actions. This is not your doing, Robin. I don't want to hear you take it again."

"But it's true. They died because I was there. It is a fact, and I appreciate you trying to say otherwise, but you can't deny the truth."

"They could have taken you, Robin, but from what you described, those creatures went to Imeria to destroy it. There is no saying your presence at the castle drew them there or if something else did. I want you to stop putting yourself as the reason for all the bad that happens around you. You did not invite them to Imeria, nor did you command the creatures to do what they did. Seraphine, the Asps, their blood is not on your hands."

"It's on my land," I replied.

There was no good admitting that I still didn't believe him. Even now, I fixated on Berrow and how my presence here would only bring more danger to these streets. I promised to free and protect the fey who followed me blindly here. My promises of protection and safety should not have been made.

"I wish to honour them. Without the Asps, without Seraphine, there is no saying how life would look right now."

"Then we shall do just that." The muscles in Duncan's jaw tensed as he regarded me with fierce determination. "But first, you need to rest."

"First, I need to see that Aldrick dies and Duwar's name is forgotten alongside him."

A storm passed over Duncan's face at the mention of the Hand's name. Sparks of purple light danced in the dark points of his pupils. "His time will come."

"Tomorrow, I want a plan. Decisions need to be made. I feel like we are steps behind Aldrick, constantly racing to catch him but finding out we are still miles away. I don't think it is right that we wait. The time to act is now."

Duncan swallowed hard, the lump in his throat bouncing suggestively. "Then that is what we shall do. But tomorrow. It can wait. For you to be at your best, you need to rest. And this time, promise not to leave me in bed alone?"

Do I tell him about my dreams now? Should I burden Duncan with yet another reason to hold concern for me? The choice was easy. I swallowed the urge to tell him that sleep was not as welcoming of a thought as he may have believed. Not when Jesibel waited to claw out memories from my mind.

"I promise," I replied, leaning my forehead to his.

Duncan's grin had the power to draw away my worries, if only for a fleeting moment.

"Lucky for Erix, I guess," I replied, taking yet another swig. This was the largest gulp, so much so that I almost hoped the cruel red liquid choked me. It would have saved me from the path the conversation was about to take.

Duncan rubbed both hands from my knee and up my thigh. His fingers gripped slightly as though letting me know he was here and not going

anywhere. "It was a blessing he was there."

"I know, but it still takes a moment to get used to the fact that my old lover saved my new lover from certain death."

"Lover?" Duncan questioned, still grinning. "Is that all I am to you?"

"No," I replied, shifting forward in my seat to lean into him. The movement made my head spin, revealing that the wine had its desired effect on me. "But that title is only one on a very long list I have."

Duncan exhaled through a smile as he forced himself to stand, using his hands against my thighs as leverage. With one confident swipe, the bottle was no longer in my hands. "I understand there is much that has happened between Erix and you. But I think it is healthy for this, and this, to consider forgiving him." Duncan placed a finger on my forehead before moving it to the space above my heart. His touch left a warmth on me as he pulled away. "There is no good to come from carrying hate-fuelled grudges. Believe me, Robin, look how I turned out."

Empty-handed, I picked at the loose thread on my trousers. "I don't hate Erix. Is that what you wish for me to tell you?"

"Good, you are far too important to allow such an emotion to poison you."

"Why did you leave me with him?" I asked, reluctantly lifting my attention back to Duncan. I feared what I might find, revealed in his woodland eyes, as he answered.

"Am I missing something? Why wouldn't I have given you time to speak with Erix alone?"

I swallowed hard. "He meant a lot to me. Another man would have had some sort of territory over letting the one they loved spend time alone with the one that loved before."

"Trust," Duncan answered simply. "I trust you explicitly. Respect. I harbour enough respect in your own decisions and the ability to take care of yourself. My job is not to suffocate you but to encourage you to act in your best interests. My upbringing was not like that, and I will carry those lessons with me for the rest of my life."

The urge to touch Duncan overwhelmed me. I pushed myself from my seat, knees and body aching from the lack of sleep, and melted into his welcoming embrace. I breathed him in deeply. Sandalwood mixed with the newly added tang of red wine. In the dark that waited when I closed my eyes, I could easily picture the attic room with its mounds of books and

discarded, empty glass bottles of holy wine. That was his scent. Familiar and warming.

"Any monstrous past lovers you need to warn me about?" I asked in jest. "I can't be the only one with such baggage."

"You are and will ever be the only one of importance. The rest, nameless and faceless, were simply means to warm my sheets. There is no one from my past that you need to concern yourself with. Only the one from my present... well, perhaps we leave Aldrick out of our conversation for the evening."

"Oh, come on," I pleaded, neck aching as I looked up at him and he down at me. "Not even one scary lover?"

"As if Kayne would have let them get that close."

Mood ruined. It was amazing how a single name could draw me away from the moment. Maybe Duncan noticed my reaction, or it was the sudden lift of my hands which left his back that exposed it.

"I didn't want to tell you this, but I arranged for some warmed water to be brought here. There was not much, but enough for you to lie in until the cold invades it. You can thank Althea when you next see her. What do you say?"

"Are you suggesting I smell?" I asked, wrinkling my nose as I traced my eyes over him.

"We both do," he replied, voice tempered.

"Then let's hope we can both fit in the tub."

Duncan tensed beneath my gaze. He took a shuddering breath, deeply inhaling through his nose.

"Where there is a will," he said, nostrils flaring. "There is a certainly a way."

THE WATER WAS tepid when we had climbed in, but now it was borderline detrimental to Duncan, at least. Yet he showed no sign that he was cold. Instead, he pulled my naked body atop him and used me as a blanket as we lounged in the brass tub together.

"One memory keeps surfacing of us in Finstock when you could hardly turn your gaze away from me as I bathed."

I laughed, wafting my hands through the cloudy water to create small waves that lapped against Duncan's muscle-carved leg. "Where else was I

to look?"

"Believe me..." Duncan's cock, which was currently pressed into the lower of my back as I was laid between his legs, twitched. "I would have felt pure jealousy if you had given the brick wall of my old room more attention than you did to me."

I rolled onto my front, not caring for the rub of our skin nor the splash of cold water that fell beyond the curved lip of the tub. "Do I even want to know what you thought of me, even then?"

"I thought you were trouble," Duncan replied confidently, one brow raised above his mischievous glare. "And I was not wrong. Not one bit."

One of the many things I loved about Duncan was how my fingers tangled willingly in the coarse hairs across his chest. When they were wet, the hairs stood out more like a thin carpet of masculinity that set a fire deep in the pit of my belly.

"Interesting. We shared the same first impression."

Duncan's lips parted into an exaggerated o-shape. "Are you telling me you did not wish to throw yourself into the tub at that very moment? To have your way with me?"

"Nope," I said, pouting. "Given the chance, I would have frozen the water you submerged beneath and left you for dead. But in hindsight, I would never have discovered the best fuck of my life."

"Robin, I am beginning to believe you only require me for one thing."

"I need you for lots of things," I replied quickly, smirking. "But right now, I want you to pluck me from this tub and take me to bed."

Duncan leaned upward, water sloshing around him. His stomach tensed and hardened into six perfectly compact mounds. He took my face in his hands and added pressure to both cheeks. "Ask me again, properly."

I loved this side of Duncan. How his joking mannerism could shift to something more powerful and sinister. "Please..." I began, widening my eyes to give a sense of false innocence. I batted my eyelashes dramatically, looking through my brow at him. "Remove me from this bath and take me to bed."

"To sleep?" He asked. His heartbeat juddered in the palms of his hands. I shook my head.

Duncan didn't wait for further explanation. He gathered all his strength and composed himself as he moved from beneath me. A wave of water spat into my face. I laughed, feeling the well of excited glee fill my lungs like air. Suddenly, arms wove beneath me, and fingers gripped my skin. The weightless feeling that followed was pure euphoria. In return for Duncan holding me, I wrapped my arms around his neck and held on for dear life.

My damp thighs did well to grip around his waist and squeeze. His hands, perfectly placed beneath my ass, held me up. Duncan didn't say a word as he padded from the bathing room, leaving wet footprints on the aged oak floor as he trailed toward the bed chamber. I kept quiet, too, enjoying the easy rhythm our hearts fell into when our naked skin was pressed together.

Only when Duncan stopped, just before the bed within the simply decorated room, did I say a word.

"What are you going to do with me?" I asked, heart practically leaping in my throat.

"Not what you may expect."

Suddenly, I was in the air, swallowing a scream as my body fell and crashed into the feather-stuffed mattress. It took a moment for the world to still and my mind to catch up with what had happened.

"Did you just... throw me?" I asked, accusation drawing each word out and increasing them in pitch.

"I did."

I was on my front, with hardly a chance to move, when Duncan's guiding force overwhelmed me.

"Tonight, it is about you."

There was no time to ask what Duncan meant when rough hands urged my knees apart, allowing a cold breeze to kiss up against the centre of my ass. All I could do was inhale sharply. I exhaled a guttural moan.

"Take the pillow, Robin, and bite down on it."

I opened my mouth to reply, but only a string of sounds came out. Suddenly, wet fingers were on me. Searching and tracing across my ass cheeks. Duncan urged them apart, trailing a nail around my centre. Around and around, growing closer to the sensitive skin that would turn my body to fire and melt me from the outside in.

"Bite down." His command was final. "Unless you wish for all of Berrow to hear you? I wouldn't mind if the answer was yes."

Fire coursed across my chest as excitement bubbled up within me.

"Good boy," he praised as I did what he asked.

Blindly, I reached up, hardly aware of anything but his touch and cool breath as he lowered himself to my ass. I gripped desperately at a mound of feather-stuffed material. One great tug as I brought it down and placed it, as Duncan commanded, before my lips. I was quick to dig my teeth into the pillow as his tongue finally met me.

My skin was damp from the bath with Duncan. But it was nothing compared to the wet glaze of Duncan's spit which glistened across my ass as his tongue lapped at it, like a cat to milk. Over and over, his devouring touch hypnotised me. I was lost in a sea of pleasure. He drew shapes and symbols with his tongue. Each inch of skin he passed over, felt as though it screamed at my soul. Now and then, Duncan would introduce the soft graze of his teeth or the sharp suck of his lips as it left a bruise behind. A mark to claim me.

I reached back and gripped his hair, holding him in place as he continued devouring me. My nails scratched his scalp, and I was certain Duncan growled.

There was nothing more I wished, in that moment, than to watch him. I wanted to look at Duncan's greedy, spit-slicked face as he ate at me like a piece of the ripest fruits. But I did not wish to ruin the moment with movement. I dared do anything but expel groans into the pillow stuffed between my teeth.

His hand reached beneath me and took my hardened member into his grasp. My pleasure intensified to a new, higher realm as I became a tool in his hold. I was his instrument, and Duncan played me with confidence. His touch conjured a song of sounds that I had no control over keeping in.

Between his furious, passionate kiss that licked and nipped and the voracious rhythm of his arm as he tugged at my cock. I was moments from combustion.

The feeling came on so suddenly that I lost the will to maintain a breath. I buried my head into the pillow, muffling my cry as the rush of pleasure burst out from me. Duncan pulled away slowly, only when he was certain the wave of pleasure had been drawn out to its fulfilment.

I fell onto my stomach. The wet smudge of cum spread across my abdomen and the bedsheet. But I couldn't care for anything but the feeling that Duncan had gifted me.

The heavy weight of a body flopped onto the bed beside me. I lifted my head an inch from the pillow and looked at Duncan through tired, narrowed

eyes. His face was lit with pride. My eyes fell from his pink, bruised lips to the glistening of spit that covered his chin.

"You taste divine," he said, mischief rolling like thunder in his eyes. "If I had to survive off you alone, I would live for an eternity."

"And I would gladly be the one to provide you sustenance if it is like that every time..." I replied as I rolled myself onto my back. The room seemed to spin as though pleasure still had me in its grip. "Now would be the apt moment to gush about your godly touch and equally divine mouth."

"My darling, you look tired," Duncan smirked. "Who knew biting into a pillow could be such... gruelling work?"

"If I had the energy, I would smack you with said pillow just to shut you up." My laugh was natural, not forced.

"Get some rest, and tomorrow you can resume your threats when you have more energy to spend. I have other ideas of what you can do, which include a pillow beneath your knees and not stuffed between your teeth."

"Until tomorrow then," I said, using what little strength I had left to lean up on my elbows so I could press my lips to his.

Duncan welcomed me, his chin and mouth still glistening as though they dripped with honey. "I love you, Robin."

"And I," I said, eyes flickering between his. I wished for his soul to hear what I was about to say. "Love you."

I fell into sleep easily and without fear for the first time in days. How wrong I was. The dream snatched me before my head even hit the pillow that still bore my bite mark on its skin. I expected welcoming darkness and empty thoughts, but as I disappeared from the world of reality, I was greeted by something sinister.

Dark, billowing hair whipped around a face of pale ivory skin. One side of the female's head did not dance with her hair because it was shaved down to the scalp.

This dream was different from the others. It was clearer. Vivid and real.

My voice was my own but did not come out of my lips. But simply existed in this strange place.

Jesibel?

Jesibel stood before me among wisps of dark shadow that coiled around her frame like vipers. Her arms were wrapped around her waist, doing little to cover the torn and stained clothes that hung off her body in tatters. She stared at me with wide eyes, which seemed to be embedded into her skull because of the proud bruises that swelled around them.

Jesi? My voice filled the strange space and encouraged her shadows to dance. I listened as her name echoed as though I shouted it into a barren cave. The sound was strange and haunting, but truly real.

She didn't reply. I watched her mouth intently, ensuring I didn't miss a single movement. Jesibel just stood and watched me.

Even in this dreamscape, I tried to convince myself that this was all this vision was. A nightmare dragged from the darkest corners of my subconsciousness. Jesibel couldn't be real. This was just a haunting image of what I believed she would look like in the clutches of Aldrick.

My arm itched as my eyes fell upon the torn skin on the soft part of her arm. Her wound was angry. Violently spewing blood and other unknown liquids that screamed of infection. Her mark was in the same place Aldrick had drawn blood on me all those weeks ago. I reached a hand to grasp my forearm, only to find that there was nothing to touch. I look down, and there is nothing but darkness. I am merely a part of it.

Listen.

My attention snapped upward, and Jesibel was inches from me. Even without a body, I can feel her presence. The rancid taste of copper invaded my mouth, forcing its way down my throat and choking me. I reached up to grasp my neck, but I had no hands, arms or body to command.

Bruises covered her face, spreading like a necklace across her neck. Heavy dark circles beneath her carved eyes accentuated her emaciated skull. She looked more like a mound of bones with damaged skin stretched over it.

Unlike the other times Jesibel had been in my dreams, this was different. She was not listening and watching as she worked through my mind. Jesi was no longer a bystander. She demanded the dream, as if it was not mine, to begin with.

I tried to save you. I pleaded, forcing all my will into creating a voice in a place where I should not exist.

Forgive me, Robin...

She was speaking, but her lips didn't move. Her face was stoic. Almost... calm. Which was the opposite of how I felt. I drowned in her shadows. Jesibel's eyes were endless and without focus. It seemed she glanced straight through me whilst also seeing me completely.

I came back to free you. I'm doing everything to save you. Please don't haunt me. I promise I'm trying, Jesi. You are the reason behind this all.

Listen to me carefully, Robin. Jesibel's voice was stern and scolding. Her voice surrounded me, just like the shadows that twisted around her. You can't trust me. You can't trust those around you. Forget me.

She was fading. Her skin became translucent, flickering as though she was the sun obscured behind dark clouds. If I had hands, I would have reached out for her and kept her in place. But I was forced to watch as her form bled away from me.

Who? Who can't I trust?

Fear sliced through me as Jesibel screamed. Her mouth parted, the skin at the corner of her lips ripping like paper. I wished to move back, but I was powerless in this place. Jesibel didn't make a sound, but the muscles in her neck bulged, and veins burst across her paled face. She was trying to speak, her lips moving in the same formation over and over. But the word she wishes to say, the name that answers my question, betrayed her.

Jesibel, I cannot forget you.

I couldn't bear to watch anymore. Seeing her throw her head back and forth, her black hair sliced to her scalp with grease, blood, and gore. I wished to shield myself from the horrific view laid out before me. This didn't feel like a dream or a nightmare.

I felt its presence brush against the skin of my neck like a cold breath. Her screams clawed at my ears.

It was real.

I bolted upright in bed, gasping for breath. My hands grabbed greedily for my body, just to make sure it was genuine. My skin was damp to the touch. Even the sheets of the bed had gripped to my skin in places slick with sweat.

Just as my mind caught up with reality, I caught the tail end of a noise beyond the building. I first believed it was just the remains of the dream, but the noise repeated to prove me wrong. It was not Jesi's success at finally screaming but something else. The trill cry of a bird mocked Jesi's cry.

"What's wrong?" Duncan asked, leaning up on his elbow with tired, heavy eyes. I melted into his firm hand, which drew circles across my back.

I fixed my stare on the blanket of night sky beyond the window. How long had I been sleeping? The candles had burned out completely, but the day still seemed leagues away.

"Talk to me." The bed creaked as Duncan forced himself to sit up.

I buried my head in my hands, unable to rid myself of the dream. Even the taste of blood still lingered in my mouth. I ran my tongue across the insides of my cheeks to rid the possibility that I had bitten them during the dream.

"I'm fine," I forced, unable to convince myself with my shaking voice, let alone Duncan. "There isn't even peace for me in my dreams, that is all."

Or peace in waking, for I soon remembered the last time I woke in Berrow from a nightmare. It was different arms that waited to comfort me.

"Give me a moment. I just need the dregs of the dream to pass."

I groaned into my cupped hands. Part of me longed to argue with Duncan and tell him it was not a dream that plagued me. Nothing had felt so real before, despite the shadows and Jesibel and my lack of corporeal form. Besides all of those details, I couldn't pass such an experience off as a dream.

"Why do you persist in refusing my help—"

"Duncan! Can you just give me a moment?" I snapped, unable to hold back my sudden fury. Duncan swallowed hard as I moved from the bed, leaving his hand hovering in the air where my back had only seconds been. "I just need to breathe."

Instantly, guilt overwhelmed me. I shouldn't have spoken to him like that. I was exhausted and shaken, but he didn't deserve that. The silence he responded to me with was more painful than a knife to the chest.

"I'm sorry..." I stood before him, chest heaving with the urge to hold back my sobs.

"Don't, Robin, I understand." Duncan didn't smile as he spoke. He didn't need to tell me he was hurt. I could see it in the wince of his forest-green eyes.

Selfishly, I turned my back on him and paced for the window. I had a sudden suffocating need for fresh air. It is not Duncan that experiences my wrath next, but the window that will not open. Time and weather had merged the wooden frame with the windowsill. No matter how much I forced it to open, it didn't budge.

"For fuck's sake," I cried out, slamming my palms on the glass. The wave of anger coming as suddenly as the first and going just as fast. I press my head to the cold pane and exhale, watching my breath fog beneath my lips and blur the view of Berrow from beyond.

Between the vision of Jesibel, broken and terrified, to the knowledge of the last time I woke to a nightmare in Berrow, I wish nothing more than to run. There is no ability to see sense, just the overwhelming urge to get outside.

"I need some air." I turn from the window to see Duncan standing helplessly beside the bed. The landscape of mountainous muscles across his stomach and chest are taut as he regards me. He gripped the bed sheets enough to shield his modesty.

"I thought we agreed you would not leave me again?"

"Are you planning on stopping me?" I barked, unable to control the torrent of my emotion.

I hate how I sounded, but I couldn't change it. My defeat and exhaustion were in control, and I couldn't do anything but allow it to puppeteer me.

"No, I will not stop you, Robin."

Did I wish for him to say otherwise, or was the disappointment conjured by something else?

I rushed to clothe myself before I changed my mind. It would be easier for me to crawl back into bed with Duncan, but I forced myself to keep moving.

"I won't be long," I said as if he had asked. He didn't say a word.

Part of me wanted Duncan to remind me what happened the last time I walked out on him. Maybe it would have the power to cut through my tantrum and stop me. But Duncan kept silent as he watched me from the edge of the bed.

He only spoke when I gripped the door handle and turned it. His voice was loud above the screeching of the worn, tired metal.

"Robin, tell me you will come back to me."

The pain in his voice almost buckled my knees beneath me.

"I just need fresh air," I repeated my early statement, my voice less sharp as my strength cracked.

"My want is to help you, Robin, but I can only do so when you want it from me. So, when you are ready, I will be here to talk about what has upset you. If you do not wish to share it with me, then I will not ask again. But promise me, you will come back."

"I will."

I forced myself out of the room, down the creaking stairs and out into the cold street of Berrow. My feet carry me away from the house as I embed myself into the silence of the town as its new occupant's sleep. Not that I cared for the cold, but I naturally drew the cloak around my shoulders until the torrents of winter winds were kept at bay.

It was easier to count my steps as I walked aimlessly through Berrow. Counting kept the visions of Jesibel buried. But it was not only her face that haunted me. In waking, it was Erix. I found my mind demanding to know if he had left. Did I want to know that he had, or did I wish to find him lingering in the dark room within the abandoned house I had last seen him in?

Neither thought filled me with any warmth.

I kept walking, kicking mounds of snow and ice that had drifted into piles at the edges of the path. Only the moon guided me through the town, not that I cared about getting lost.

It was when my feet were tired, and my mind finally felt like my own that I heard the noise again. The sound that had been both within my dream and welcomed me when I had woken from it.

The squawk of a bird.

It was close.

I slowed my footsteps and lightened my weight. Something wasn't right about hearing such a noise in the dead of night. This time was for bats and other creatures that dwelled in the dark. This noise was not one I would have ever linked with night.

Rounding the corner of a side street in Berrow, I saw him. Huddled within a cloak, just like I was.

"Kayne?" I said, wading through the shadows into the alleyway.

The Hunter didn't seem surprised to see me. He drew back his hood and exposed the grimace that always seems plastered across his freckled face when presented with me.

"Expecting to find someone else?" He asked, brushing past me with a harsh shoulder as he walked back out onto the main street. I looked down the alley, searching for someone or something else. But Kayne was alone. At least he was now.

"Perhaps you came to find Erix and thank him for saving Duncan in a more... private manner?"

"What did you just say?" I recoiled, slapped by his accusation.

Kayne was already creating distance between us, but it didn't take much for me to catch up. I reached out and grasped his forearm. My fingers gripped his skin hard. In the dark part of my mind, I enjoyed his grunt of surprise.

"Get your filthy hands off me!"

"Your attempt to irk me with your comments is wasted."

I allowed Kayne to shrug himself out of my grip. His face was flushed scarlet, his lips pulled into a firm white line. "What do you want, Robin?"

"A simple walk to clear my mind. Dare I ask what gets you out of bed?"

He flashed me a sickly smile. "What does it matter to you what I do with my time? You are not my keeper."

All my pent-up anger came rushing out at once. This time it didn't shy away. "I asked you a question. I suggest you answer it."

Kayne stepped in close. I didn't so much as flinch. His nose was inches from mine as he looked down the length of it as he regarded me. His shallow breaths came out in silver-lined clouds beyond his pursed lips. "You don't trust me."

"Should I?"

Kayne's laugh sliced directly through me. I watched as his gaze flickered around me as though he searched for something. When his

attention returned to me, his voice was louder and more confident. Each word he spoke felt as though it came directly from the centre of his chest. "What would Duncan say if he knew his beloved and longest friend disliked one another?"

"He knows. But it's nice that you finally found the confidence to admit it aloud. Do you feel better getting that off your chest?"

"You don't deserve him," Kayne hissed suddenly. I flinched as his spit landed upon my cheek but didn't dare to brush the goblets away.

I broadened my shoulders, trying to match his physical prowess. "And you do?"

"Yes!" His eyes bulged. It was the only warning before strong hands pushed at my chest. Pain jarred up my back as I landed on my ass. I felt the skin of my palms rip across the stone.

A growl erupted from me as I pulled on my magic. The cobbled ground beneath my splayed, bleeding hands cracked with ice. Even the winds rejoiced with my desire to hurt Kayne back. But the magic's glee lasted only a moment.

"Hurt me, and you will have to explain yourself to Duncan. Will you lie and come up with a justifiable excuse to victimise me with your magic? What will he think of you for being the one to hurt, or worse, kill, his childhood friend?"

The freezing winds calmed, and the ice melted. My grazed palm stung as the cold infiltrated the cuts that crisscrossed them. "You cannot manipulate me, Kayne."

He knelt down before me, eyes glowing from within. His voice calmed and was now only a whisper. "Here, let me help you up."

I drew my lips back, flashing my teeth up at him. I looked at Kayne's hand as though it was a snake, ready and poised to strike me.

"Robin?"

Kayne's smile faltered as my name rang out over the night. We both turned to look for the owner of the voice. I didn't need to see them to know who it was.

Fire flared suddenly as it bloomed within Althea's hand like a rosebud. It cast light and shadows across her face and over the scene; me splayed out on the ground, and Kayne hovering above me.

I acted fast. I took hold of Kayne's hand. His weak gasp revealed he never expected me to accept his offering. He quickly shifted his weight to

support me as I pulled myself up, using him as my anchor. Disgust laced across Kayne's face as he felt the melted ice and blood smear across his own hand before I pulled away.

"Who knew it was so treacherous out in these streets?" I replied, grinning at the concerned Althea and the fearful Kayne. "Thank Altar for Kayne. If I was alone, I could have really harmed myself."

"Yes," Kayne laughed, shuffling awkwardly from one foot to the other.

"Could you not sleep, Althea?" I asked. "Seems to be the common theme tonight."

"I thought I heard you outside and, funnily enough, I did," she replied, wide, distrusting eyes flickering between me and the Tracker.

She didn't believe me, and nor did I want her to. Her clear, judging disbelief twisted her face into a scowl. It had the effect I wished it to have on Kayne. All his bravado had slipped, and he was quieter than I had heard him before.

"I didn't mean to wake you," I replied.

"Well, you did."

Kayne swallowed hard and took steps away from me. He mumbled something beneath his breath. It was a mixture of an apology and a goodbye. Althea's amber stare followed him until he was out of view, and his footsteps were no longer audible.

"Wish to talk about it?" She asked.

I shook my head. "Not tonight. I should get back to Duncan before he comes looking for me, as well."

"Robin..." Althea pressed.

"Don't worry," I smiled at her. "I have everything well under control."

he pungent smell of boiled potato and meat stew seeped into my skin, lingering like an unwanted guest. My fingers were sticky with the brown sludge-like liquid. It splashed across me each time I dunked the ladle into the cast-iron pot and slopped it into a bowl offered out before me.

Regardless of the stains across my tunic, I was thankful to be helping. Putting myself to work among the people of Berrow. My people. It gave me a sense of worth. It not only focused my mind away from my list of anxieties but also kept my fingers out of my mouth and my teeth away from my nails. They had become my recent victim.

"Nearly all out," I called over my shoulder as I sloshed another spoonful into the wooden bowl of a gruff-looking man with sandy curls and hands the size of plates. He thanked me quietly before shuffling off toward Gyah, who worked at my side, handing out lumps of crusted bread.

"That is the second pot we have gone through," Althea chimed from the burning stove behind me. "At this rate, we will need to request further supplies from mother before the week is out."

I cringed at the thought of asking for help from the autumn court. But it was required, so I welcomed the carts brimming with supplies with a smile. What good of a king was I to the people when I could do little more than dish up stew with a forced smile whilst their lives were still at threat with each passing moment?

"Robin?" Gyah prompted.

I shook my head, forcing a smile suddenly at an older woman with a nest of grey hair and eyes that matched. "Sorry, here you go."

"Something is bothering you," Gyah spoke from the corner of her mouth as she handed out another clump of bread. "I trust I don't need to remind you what harbouring your concerns will do again..."

"How long have you got?" I huffed, offering her a pathetic grin before dishing out the stew to the never-ending line of fey. Many faces I recognised from Lockinge and the journey to Icethorn. There was a noticeable difference they each displayed. Their faces were fuller, their eyes not so tired.

"Still not sleeping?"

The question hung between us, the silence treacherous. It had been three nights since Jesibel had invaded my dream and each night since she had returned.

Don't trust them.

Three words that were on the verge of driving me to the point of insanity. I looked across the bustling room of the old town hall and rested my eyes on Duncan. He was flocked by a group of burly looking fey with stern glares and gritted jaws. He had busied his days conjuring a small band of them, people keen to help protect their newfound home. His mornings were spent convincing new recruits and his afternoons were busy training them in combat.

Although he was always only a short glance away, I still felt like I hadn't truly seen him in days. We were ships passing in the night.

"I'm tired to the point of exhaustion. Even when I dream, I don't feel like I am sleeping. It's been like this since we left Lockinge, and I know I am one more pathetic night's sleep from my sanity cracking."

"It's been going on that long?" Gyah's nails pinched into the hard crust like a hot knife through butter. With one great tug, it split in two. Crumbs fell like rain on her boots.

"My subconscious has a way of punishing me for failing someone. Now I dread closing my eyes for fear of another berating."

"Robin, why haven't you said something about how long this has been going on?"

I pursed my lips as I contemplated my answer. "With everything going on, I didn't think it was important to divulge my nightmares. As if there aren't more pressing matters to worry about. And what could be done about it? Not even a stiff drink has the power to fend the nightmares away."

Gyah's lips pulled into a taut line. I saw her cheeks flutter as she chewed the soft insides of them. This was a habit I noticed a lot more than before. "Did Jesibel ever divulge her powers to you?"

I shook my head, almost pouring an entire ladle of stew onto my boots instead of the bowl before me. I mouthed my apology to the young woman who moved onto Gyah swiftly.

"Believe it or not, there was not much opportunity to discuss such things during my intimate stay in Lockinge's prison."

Gyah nodded, her golden eyes still scrutinising me. Althea swept in with the new cast-iron pot hanging like a pendulum between two strong arms. Her muscles bulged, the freckles across her skin ripping, as she heavily discarded the full pot of stew before me.

"This is the last of it," Althea said, hardly breathless. Flour was smudged across her cheekbone. She attempted to clear it with the back of her sticky hand, only to smear more on the attempt. "It is going to need to stretch to feed the last of the line. Not so heavy-handed this time, Robin."

My face warmed at Althea's reaction to my stew-covered boots.

"I'll try my best," I spluttered through a yawn.

Althea and Gyah shared a look that brimmed with concern.

"Remind me to ask Elinor for a drought to help you get a proper night's rest," Althea said. "Your nightmares are now punishing the rest of us with your snappy mood."

As she said it, I swallowed the urge to do just that. I knew my temper had thinned, or at least my ability to control it. Perhaps that was why Duncan had kept his distance.

"But what if they are not that?" Gyah added quickly. "Dreams, nightmares, terrors. We all know them well but never do they repeat so perfectly. Nor do they make their victim look like an exhausted sack of shit, as our dear Robin does."

I flicked my ladle at her, splattering her dark leathers with droplets of stew. "Watch it."

Gyah raised her hands at her sides and gasped. "No, please..." she mocked. "Not the spoon."

"Would you two stop?" Althea laughed, echoing my chortle. She threaded her arm around Gyah's waist and held her. Seeing them so close warmed me from the inside out. "I'm serious," Gyah said, frowning as she plucked a lump of what I hoped to be overcooked venison from her dark braid.

I waved my hand in a mock bow to Gyah. "Continue."

"This is speculation and highly improbable, but Jesibel could do this to you."

Althea's brows furrowed. "What are you suggesting?"

"Dream walkers," Gyah said. "You mentioned Jesibel was originally from the Icethorn Court. Dream walking was a rare ability but one only privy to those Icethorn natives. It is possible she has those abilities just as Althea has with the flame and Robin's icicle fingers."

Althea shrugged, hiding her smirk at Gyah's description of my powers. "It's certainly possible."

They both seemed pleased with Gyah's suggestion, but I felt nothing but dread. If that was Jesibel, then she was truly warning me. It was not some dream conjured from my worries about her safety and condition. She truly was broken and weak. Her body was no stranger to pain from the marks, blood, and bruises.

Worst of all, she had seen everything. Jesibel had torn through my memories, devouring information about the Nephilim, and our whereabouts. Our plans.

"This has to stop..." I started but quickly lost my words. My mind raced for a reason to prove that Gyah was wrong. What it meant if she was right, was terrifying. "Jesibel shouldn't have access to her powers. The iron cuff around her neck should stop her abilities. Unless..."

"Unless it has been taken off her," Gyah finished for me.

"Bait." My heart fought its way into my throat. "Aldrick is using Jesibel as bait. He knows seeing her like that will make me want to save her. She has even told me not to trust them... I didn't know who she was speaking of, but it must be Aldrick. She is warning me not to fall for it."

"And are you?" Althea said. "I know you, Robin, regardless of the meaning behind Jesibel's dream walking. I don't believe you will give up on her."

A gust of wind screamed through the double doors as they were thrown open. Our heads snapped toward the noise to see Kayne standing between them as he searched the room. I knew who he was searching for.

He raised his hand, sleeves rolled to his elbow, exposing a sea of freckles across his slender arm. Duncan lifted his chin as though he sensed eyes on him. He beckoned Kayne to him with a smile.

"I won't give up on her," I replied, following as Kayne sauntered toward Duncan. I hadn't told Duncan about my interaction with Kayne those nights ago. Althea hadn't brought it up either.

"Which is why we need to do exactly as Aldrick wants us to do."

Althea cocked a hand on her hip and rested on it. "Falling straight into his web does not sound like the smartest of ideas."

"No," I said, forcing my stare from Kayne as his hand lingered far too long on Duncan's shoulder. "No, we make him think we are falling for it when, in fact, we do the complete opposite."

"The last time he had that lost look in his eyes, he was planning a prison break," Althea muttered to Gyah as they both regarded me.

I dropped the ladle into the pot, not caring for the warm liquid that splashed up my arm. "We can't sit around waiting anymore. I can't."

"And you suggest we..."

"I need to find Rafaela." I wiped my hands down my trousers and sidestepped around the pot with the goal of getting outside. "Can you get Duncan and... Kayne? We all need to be ready to discuss the next steps. Together."

"So, the King of the Icethorn Court has learned the importance of teamwork," Gyah jibbed. "Well, I am impressed."

"I live to please." I faked a bow and rushed out of the town hall, leaving Althea and Gyah to finish service. Before I met the cold air of the street outside, I turned back to find Duncan staring at me. His eyes were alight with a question, and I hoped the look I gave him in return, promised that I would give him answers soon. And I would. But first, I needed Rafaela because, without her acceptance, she would never agree to me infiltrating the heart of the spring court and killing Aldrick before he had the chance to even recognise who drove the knife into his heart.

"THE RISKS OUTWEIGH THE REWARDS," Rafaela said, her voice reverberating around the clustered room. "However, I stand with you. If this is our only chance of stopping Aldrick, then it must be taken."

"I don't like it," Duncan glowered. He stared at his clasped hands resting on the table before him. The whites of his knuckles were stretched with tension. "Robin, you are giving yourself to him. Why not tie yourself up in a red bow and burst out of a box? That would be a better surprise."

I gritted my teeth. It caused me great discomfort to hear the pure panic in Duncan's voice. I dared lift my eyes to him for fear of the raw emotion I would find.

"Duncan, it will happen quickly. He will be too focused on the fake version of me that he will not expect when I actually appear. I will kill him before he has a moment to register the deceit. Would you rather we wait for Aldrick to make the first move? Because so far, that has not worked in our favour."

"I would rather you were not the ploy. Anyone else but not you."

"Believe it or not," Gyah grumbled. "I am with Duncan. Robin, your plan is well thought out and clear, but if he invades your mind and discovers the illusion you have weaved, it will be over for you. He will kill you, weaken Duwar's gate, and we will be one more person down in our efforts to stop him once and for all."

"What if this is our once and for all?" I asked, growing frustrated. "I didn't ask you here to vote or deliberate my plan. What I hoped was for your support."

I looked to Althea, silently pleading for her seal of approval. She wiggled forward in her chair and leaned on her elbows as she spoke. "When Robin asked me to break into a human prison, and save hundreds of captured fey, all without being caught or killed by Aldrick and his band of crazed human cultists, I believed he was mad. But I trusted in his judgement, and we are all sitting here together because of it. We all agree this is dangerous, but not impossible. If it works, we save hundreds of lives."

"No, it is bigger than that. We save the world," Rafaela confirmed. "Aldrick is a weak, tired, bitter old man. His power is great but not undefeatable. It wouldn't take much force to end him."

"You haven't faced him," Duncan hissed as snakes of lightning sparked across his narrowed eyes. "He is strong. All it would take is for him to invade Robin's mind for a moment, and he will become the puppet master. He will take what he desires and do it over, given the chance. We have seen what has escaped the gate your Nephilim are so brilliantly protecting. What will emerge next?"

I stood abruptly, slamming my hands down on the table. "Enough."

No one uttered a sound. I looked to the seat Kayne should have occupied if he had not conjured an excuse not to join our meeting. I wondered whose side he would have taken. It was not impossible to imagine that he would have advocated for my plan, enjoying the risk I put myself in by doing so.

For the first time, I longed for his presence. I could have done with another person rooting for me.

"Seraphine and her sister worked for Aldrick and, all the while, kept their minds from his grasp. If they could do it, so can I." I raised my chin, forcing the confidence that I felt inside to radiate outwards.

"Then it will be me," Duncan snapped, gripping my hand. "I can't let you go alone. If you are to become someone else, I will become you."

"No," I felt the urge to laugh as I refused.

"It was not a suggestion either, Robin," Duncan said, pleading dripping from his voice. "I'm telling you, I am coming with you."

"I can't ask that of you," I said, breathless at Duncan's offer.

"You do not need to. I know what it is I am offering, and I don't take it back. We do this together. I will have your back, and you will have mine. And if it comes to it, I will do anything to give you the time to complete the task."

We fixated on one another's eyes. I searched him for regret at his offer, and he searched mine for something else entirely. Althea, Gyah and Rafaela faded into the shadows of the dimly lit room until I believed it was only the two of us, all until one of them cleared their throat.

"Tell us when and I will send word ahead of our arrival in Aurelia. Mother will wish to meet us. I can then prepare a visit from the fey with the abilities we require for this to work." Althea pushed from the table and stood, a determined scowl set on her face.

"We leave for Auriela tomorrow. I don't want to leave it any later than that," I confirmed. What I wished to say was the longer we waited, the more chance Jesibel had to haunt my dreams. There was no telling what information she could gleam out of me next.

Althea tipped her head in agreement. "I will prepare one of my soldiers to ride ahead within the hour. They will have at least a few hour's notice before we arrive in that case."

"Which will give me time to ready the fey I have been training to protect Berrow when the time comes. I hardly imagine they believed it to be so soon, but I trust they are ready to defend their home and themselves." Duncan stood now, still gripping my hand, which I was thankful for.

"My purpose is to prevent Aldrick from collecting another of Altar's keys," Rafaela added firmly, her wings flinching at her back as she spoke. "We agree that if Robin is compromised, I will do what is required."

It was the unspoken detail that I had graced over when explaining my plan. I had hoped it was not brought up, but that was a wasted thought.

I waited for someone to disagree with me or make a comment or refusal, but the room was deathly silent.

"Then it is agreed."

Rafaela stepped aside from the door, calling an end to the meeting. Althea and Gyah left first, murmuring to one another about the soldier they were to send to the Cedarfall Court. Duncan passed next, and as he did, I pulled my hand gently from his grasp.

"I'LL MEET YOU OUTSIDE," I said. "Give me a moment with Rafaela, please."

I could sense his reluctance, but I was safest with Rafaela above anyone else... until the tide shifted, and she was forced to act in a manner to protect the world.

Waiting for the slam of the door, I felt as though I held my breath until I knew they were all out of earshot.

"Talk to me," Rafaela said softly, reading my mind. "Free what burdens your mind."

"Erix." His name fell out of my mouth awkwardly and rushed. "You never confirmed if he was innocent of Gabrial's murder."

I had avoided asking Rafaela how her interaction with Erix had gone for fear that the others would know I cared about it or that I wished to admit to myself that I cared at all.

"You do not need me to tell you the answer," Rafaela replied. "You already know his innocence."

I hung my head, chin to chest.

"I do not need, nor require, an understanding of your relationship with this Erix, but I can tell that the past still haunts you just as it does with him. I saw into his truth. I know the guilt he harbours and the pain he is riddled with. But, without a doubt, Erix is not to blame for what happened to Gabrial."

"Then that person is still out there," I muttered, trying to scrub my mind of everything Rafaela had just said about Erix.

"For now," she replied, causing shivers to spread across my spine. "All things that hide in the shadows reveal themselves. One way or another, it will come to light. And when the one to blame reveals themselves, I will be ready."

I exhaled a sigh riddled with guilt. "Thank you... for standing by me."

"Do not speak too soon," she replied, placing a hand on my shoulder and squeezing enough to tell me she was here. "Succeed in your plan, and then you may thank me."

Because if I didn't see this through and come back victorious, Rafaela had been tasked to ensure I could never fall into Aldrick's grasp, both in life... and death.

he moment we passed over the border of my land into the lighter air of the Cedarfall Court, I felt the discomforting longing hum within my chest. Although the feeling came over me suddenly, I didn't linger. I massaged at the dip at the centre of my chest and willed for the tugging to calm. Leaving my court behind felt as disconcerting as a thorn lodged in my hand. The further we rode from it, the easier the thorn dislodged until I no longer felt as though a hand was gripped around my heart, squeezing at it viciously.

Althea offered me a slight smile. It screamed with understanding, yet I couldn't help but notice how straight she sat up on her ivory mare or how her cheeks were flushed with colour. Being back within her family's lands reinvigorated her. Althea practically glowed, haloed by the orange and red tones of the setting sky we rode into.

Gyah sliced through the sky in her Eldrae form. She sped through the sea of gold. Her nimble, black-scaled body slithering through clouds like a serpent. She disturbed flocks of sparrows, dispersing their cloud-like formations as she cut through them. I was confident I recognised her laugh beneath the rumbling roar she emitted, and the giggles that came from Althea, only confirmed it. Gyah attempted to fill the journey with some more entertainment than our small shots at conversation or, worse, our own thoughts.

It was only Kayne, who rode at the back of our group, who seemed wary of Gyah. Perhaps it was not kind of me to smile every time he flinched or gasped as she glided down above us, but I couldn't help myself.

Duncan hardly relaxed, either. Hours into our journey from Berrow to Aurelia, he seemed to be constantly on watch. The little conversation I had attempted with him had failed quickly. It was obvious that he was solely concerned with the skyline. He watched it, waiting expectantly for us to be greeted by more demonic creatures that crawled themselves through the weakened gate in Irobel.

Since the attack on Imeria Castle, there had been no further sightings of hellish monsters. A fact that should have made me feel more at ease, but I had learnt that silence is not always a positive thing.

"You see those, your border stones. They are the same with which the Defiler's gate was constructed with." Rafaela encouraged her amber-haired stallion to the side of mine. They were similar in size, but the mare I rode on began throwing her head from side to side. My palms burned as I pulled tighter on the reins to control her. "Time has not been kind to the stone, but it explains how the powers of your courts are kept separate."

I craned my neck and looked at the oddly shaped stone marker dusted with snow just off in the distance. Deep in my mind, I recognised them. Not because I had seen them before but because I saw them used for another reason. In Gabrial's vision. When I touched her skin, she had shown me a glimpse at the gate her people protected. The dark stone structures were the same as those I saw before me now.

"That doesn't fill me with great comfort to know," I replied.

"Labradorite is an ancient mineral. Our teachings suggest its properties can be used as protection, which likely explains why they were used in the gate's construction. It is not to protect Duwar but to protect everyone else from it," Rafaela said, one slim brow peaked in intrigue. "Which would suggest, from my theory, that whoever split your courts from one another did so intending to protect you from one another. I would take the presumption that these stones also adorn the ground between Wychwood and Durmain?"

"If there is, I would not have noticed before. Stones are stones. I grew up in a realm where the discussion of the fey was limited. Perhaps Althea knows more about labradorite, whereas I know nothing."

Rafaela looked ahead, but not quick enough for me to miss something that passed across her eyes. "The Nephilim also have other uses for the stone. Although rare of an occasion, it is not unheard of for our elders to bind a Nephilim within them." My stomach jolted, more from the clear discomfort creeping at the corners of Rafaela's eyes.

"What do you mean, bind?" I asked.

"Duwar is strong. Aldrick is not the first being who has been invaded by the Defiler and... influenced. For those Nephilim that turned against their own, they were not killed and given eternal peace with the creator. Instead, they were bound. Bound in stone and kept from truly living or dying. Unless the stone is destroyed, of course. Nothing comes back from that. Being bound is a punishment coveted at the highest level."

"That sounds awful," I muttered, looking back at the stones in a new light. "It amazes me how the world can turn the most beautiful or innocent things into something evil."

"Even the prettiest of flowers can harbour the deadliest of poisons. My advice is to not trust. Caution can save you."

I soured at Rafaela's words, recognising the echo of Jesi's warning that was still clear in my mind even hours since I had last heard them in sleep.

"Without trust, I have nothing," I replied, my throat dry. "I need it if we are going to see that Aldrick is stopped."

"And what makes you think that is possible?" Rafaela asked, still facing forward.

"You said our power is the key. If we can open the gate, then we sure as hell can close it again. The old saying, lock it and throw away the key, springs to mind."

Rafaela winced but hid her discomfort with a huffed chortle. "Your ability to look on the brighter side is an honourable trait. Even with everything you have faced and have yet to experience, I hope it never fades."

"Forgive me if I am wrong, but you speak as though you believe I am going to succeed."

Rafaela kicked her heels into her stallion's side and spurred forward. I first believed she would not reply, but as she trotted off, I heard her words clearly.

"I hope you will because I do not wish to be the one to take you from the ones that love you."

WE STOPPED BRIEFLY on our journey; it was all Althea allowed.

I was thankful she grasped control of our group, for it retired Duncan from his instinctual need to protect. He returned to my side. Even as we continued on our final leg toward Aurelia, I still had visions of his chin drenched in water that spilled as he chugged at the waterskin I had offered him from my pack. His flushed face, wide eyes and glistening wet mouth had me forgetting everything for a moment. When Althea urged us back onto our mounts to continue the final leg of our journey, I was glad for it. The sooner we reached the city, the sooner I could recreate the look upon Duncan in our private rooms. The glow within his narrowed eyes, proved I was not the only one of us who shared the thought.

Kayne noticed too. I felt his stare bore into the back of my head. He hung back and seemed more at ease once Gyah had been sent ahead to scout the path to the city. The taut grin was set into his freckled face like a jewel. It didn't waver and only seemed to brighten the closer we grew to Aurelia, the city of gold.

Evening had fallen across the world, bathing us in a blanket of darkness. We navigated Cedarfall's landscape with only a conjured ball of light held aloft in Althea's hand for guidance. Without its glow, we wouldn't have seen the group of shadowed figures that peeled away from the tree line ahead.

"Halt," Althea called to us, panic-edging the single word. Rafaela and Duncan positioned themselves before me, a shield of wings and lightning encased in flesh.

Althea moved from our group to greet our visitors. It didn't take long for them to be recognised as Cedarfall guards as her ball of fire cascaded light across them. I felt the tension lessen as Althea confirmed what I thought. Soldiers sent to escort us to the city, all garbed in autumnal shades and silver, with their faces obscured by the leaf-like design of their helmets.

There were countless armoured figures. The closer we drew to them, the more that seemed to peel from the shadows of the forest's edge into the halo of Althea's light.

"Mother hasn't skimped on our protection for the final stretch of our journey," Althea said, looking directly at me.

I nodded, not needing further explanation of what Queen Lyra Cedarfall wished to protect us from.

The swarm of faceless Cedarfall guards circled around our group as we entered the dark tunnels beneath the treeline. Althea still kept ahead, but the

line of soldiers didn't allow anyone to leave the perimeter they'd encased us within. It surprised me just how quiet they kept. Conversation had stilled, which had the little snippets of comments shared between Duncan and me kept to a whisper.

Although the soldiers refrained from much more than the sound of clinking armour and the heavy footfall of their mounts, I couldn't ignore the many that looked at me. Whenever I would catch their heads turned in my direction, they promptly turned away. Not being able to see their facial expressions, which were masked by intricately crafted metal, added to my growing unease.

Seeing only the glint of eyes between the gaps in their helmets did little to make them seem less steely.

I was quick to blame my discomfort on the likeness the soldiers had with Erix. They bore the same armour, adorned with the same colours he wore with pride.

Focusing on the back of one soldier, with his broad shoulders and familiar frame, I couldn't help but imagine my old guard. His voice haunted me even now, taking me back to when I first saw him riding into the Hunter's camp, haloed by the golden light of day that danced from the designs of his armour. For a moment, encouraged by the silence, I allowed myself to remember him in that way. And, for the first time, I felt the tickle of a smile pinch at my own cheeks.

Duncan caught me smiling and returned one over his shoulder, directed at me. I didn't shy away or attempt to hide mine. I was not ashamed of my past and the feelings that came with it. Instead, I recognised it, welcomed it and looked toward Duncan, my future, and felt grateful that I had one.

"How're you holding up?" He asked me.

I nodded, fighting the urge to yawn. "Like I wished I took you up on your offer and rode with you."

The thought of being held up by two strong arms, with the hard muscle of a stomach and chest at my back, warmed my soul.

Duncan's eyes narrowed. Within the dark of the forest, they seemed never-ending. "Careful, we have an audience."

I swore I heard Althea mutter. There was even a sound similar to a laugh that escaped Rafaela. The first I had heard from her before.

My cheeks warmed as I focused on my fists, which gripped the leather saddle. I couldn't stop myself from beaming.

The more time passed, the more I longed for nothing more than to climb from my mare's back and stretch my limbs. Each thud across the uneven, leaf-strewn ground encouraged the song of discomfort to intensify across my back. I was certain every joint would crack with relief when we finally reached Aurelia.

We all bared signs of exhaustion, from our slumped postures to the echoes of yawns that plagued our group. All but Kayne. Every time I looked back, I expected to find that he had vanished. Instead, he was still locked in the competition of silence with the surrounding soldiers. He sat straight-backed and wide-eyed as though he could not relax. His gaze drifted across the soldiers with a glint of expectation.

A noise broke the silence. It was loud and shrill, close enough that its sudden presence had me gasping for breath.

Our group slowed to a stop, searching around the dark for what had caused the sound.

Althea lifted her orb of fire until the underbelly of trees glowed with ominous shades of amber and gold. Her light exposed the entanglement of branches but also the cause of the shriek.

A bird sat perched on a branch above us. Iron-tipped claws pierced through the wood's skin, causing it to bleed with amber sap.

"Lucari?" I muttered, pulling numbly upon the reins, causing Rafaela to do the same before her stallion knocked into me. I narrowed my gaze and looked up at the bird as it glared down from its perch like a Queen would from a throne.

Kayne's hawk waited above us as though it was always meant to be there. It glowed in the reflection of Althea's light, which returned its beady eyes to small coins of gold. Lucari squawked once in warning before launching from the thick branch and gliding down toward Kayne's outstretched arm.

An icy chill speared down my spine as I watched Kayne calmly welcome his hawk. It was not the reaction I expected. There was no relief or surprise on the Tracker's face. Only the same grin that seemed to mutilate his face into a mask of terror.

"There you are, my girl," he cooed, running his finger across her yellowed beak. "Why, haven't you been busy?"

"Kayne," Duncan grunted whilst trying to steer his stallion back around to face him.

Something was wrong. I recognised the dread as it encased me. Duncan trotted toward his friend, who still paid no mind to anyone but his hawk.

"Fantastic! The bird has finally returned. But a reunion can wait. We need to keep moving," Althea called out, but her voice was buried beneath the roaring in my ears.

Kayne's lips were moving as he whispered something to Lucari. Then, when his attention lifted from his missing, presumed dead hawk. He looked directly at Duncan. His smile faltered; the creases around his eyes softened. "One chance, Duncan, you have one chance."

Rafaela's feet thudded onto the ground as she threw herself from her mount's back. I felt it vibrate through me.

"What are you talking about?" Duncan asked, continuing toward Kayne, whose eyes were now filled with tears. Except they weren't tears of sadness, but something else. Regret.

"I'm giving you one final chance to do what is right. Stand by me, Duncan." Kayne reached out his spare hand, fingers outstretched as though he beckoned Duncan toward him. I wished to reach out and grasp the back of Duncan's cloak to stop him from moving any closer. My body was frozen.

I felt the soldiers shift around us, likely sensing the same strange atmosphere that had befallen us.

Duncan didn't answer Kayne, whose face pinched suddenly into a furious scowl. When he spoke, he no longer did so calmly. He screamed, spit flying beyond his thin, freckle-lined lips. "Everything we have been through, all the years we have spent together, and you still pick... him."

Kayne snapped his reddening eyes toward me. I felt his hate like a wave, nearly powerful enough to rock me from my mare's back.

"Kayne, you are speaking in riddles! What is going on with you?" The air crackled with lightning as Duncan lost control of his own emotions. I felt his confusion and embarrassment as though the air was laced with it.

"I heard her..." The words flowed out of me. "Lucari, I thought I heard her in Berrow. Kayne, she was never missing, was she?"

The Tracker rolled back his shoulders as he expelled a quivering breath. "Answer him," Duncan growled.

I waited for his reply to confirm what I had already decided, but when Kayne spoke again, it was not to prove me right or wrong.

Smiling once again, with eyes ruby stained eyes and skin paler than it had been moments before, Kayne called out. "Long may Duwar rule."

There was a terrifying silence that lasted only a second whilst Kayne's words fell upon me like flakes of snow. The peace lasted only a moment, and then chaos erupted as the soldiers swarmed.

Not for Kayne.

The soldiers attacked us.

y horse screamed, bucking her front legs to kick out at the soldiers that raced toward me. I became weightless. The force knocked me backwards. I flew from the saddle, wind screeching in my ears. I scrunched my eyes closed as the ground came up suddenly to greet me. My lungs pained upon the harsh impact.

For a moment, I felt nothing but the panicked urge to breathe. Then the pain followed. I wished to reach for my head, but my arms were trapped beneath me. Chaos erupted around the forest, a wave of bodies and blades crashing as one. I clawed at the ground, trying to move, but couldn't shift beneath the force pressing down on me.

I threw my eyes open as reality caught up with me. The mare was splayed across the lower half of my right leg. Its hulking body didn't move, its chest was still and lifeless. I tried to wiggle my toes but felt nothing but agony at the attempt. Something jagged protruded from the eye of the mare. It was dark and thick. The surrounding noise was distracting, but I was certain it looked like a shard of tree.

I cried out as the flare of stark blue light bathed the dark belly of the forest. The air splintered with the sudden heat before dispersing.

"Keep them away from Robin!" Duncan bellowed, his voice stern yet dripping with fear. Another burst of blue light shot across the dark forest, only then did I recognise it as his power. Snakes of boiling light fizzled in and out of existence.

A wave of strength came over me at the sound of his voice. From my position on the ground, I couldn't see anything but the rushing of feet. Unless Duncan conjured more of his lightning, we were bathed in darkness.

I felt the sudden relief as the weight pressing down on my calf was lifted. Looking down, I found Rafaela standing before me with the slumped dead horse now spaces behind her. She was panting heavily. Her dark skin illuminated with dread as she held the golden hammer with one firm fist.

"Can you move?" she asked, words rushed. Her spare hand was outstretched for me.

I brought my leg upward, recognising the sharp pain that encased my ankle like an unseen bracelet. It was a feeling I had had long ago when I had fallen awkwardly from an old oak I had climbed. This time, I hoped it was only twisted rather than broken.

Opening my mouth to reply, I watched as Rafaela was torn from her feet and yanked into the air. A feral scream broke out of me. Thick serpents of root and tree wrapped around her limbs. They twisted around her wrists and legs, wrapping tightly around her waist until her wings were bound and her hands trapped to her side.

She was like a fly, caught in the web of an unseen spider. Except no spider could control trees and foliage like this. It was as though the branches had come alive on their own accord.

The hammer thudded headfirst into the ground beneath her and tumbled uselessly onto its side. Its golden glow died the moment it left Rafaela's touch. If it was not for the root that pressed over her lips, I was certain she would have erupted in shouts of fury. Her eyes screamed with that emotion.

I threw out my power, thrusting arrows of conjured ice toward the living foliage that continued to encase Rafaela. Some embedded into the vines, while others smashed upon impact and rained to the ground in clouds of crystal.

"Duncan," I cried blindly for him. "Help her!"

Blue light flashed once again. This time it didn't disappear without having an effect. I threw my arm up and blocked the debris that exploded toward me. Duncan's lightning had caught a tree. The cracking sound vibrated through my bones. I didn't lower my arm until the slashings of bark and charred wood stopped slicing into my skin.

I braced myself, lowering my bleeding arm to glance back up. It was not Rafaela I saw this time. Others demanded my attention.

A wall of masked soldiers charged toward me. I saw them perfectly. The forest was alight with fire that had sparked in place of Duncan's lightning.

The irate flames danced off the armour, striking fearsome shadows across the ground.

There was no time for questions or wondering. I swallowed the sharp ache in my ankle as I brought myself onto my knees. The soldiers continued to stalk toward me, Rafaela dangling far above them with a cocoon of tree wrapped entirely around her, it was down to me to stop them.

I slammed my palms into the ground. Leaves crunched beneath my force and turned promptly to shards of glass as I forced the inner cold to spread across the ground. Ice grazed across the forest bed in a wave of mist and fury. I forced as much power into the attack that I forgot to breathe properly.

"Restrain the King!" One soldier cried out. Another stepped forward, hands raised. Roots emerged from the surrounding ground, coiling and dancing like vipers. The same roots dangled Rafaela like a puppet on a string above us. And now, they moved towards me. My ice crashed head-on with the twisting earth. I felt the impact deep in my bones. Even my teeth slammed together, sending a sharp vibration through my skull.

I barely had time to lift a hand before the ground burst beneath me, and the thick roots forced themselves upon me.

I lost the grip on my power as I scratched and clawed at the successful root that had claimed my left hand as its own. My nails stung and bent as I gave into panic and fought them.

"Take your fucking weeds off my friend." Althea threw herself before me. Her red hair was wild around her head, a crown of flames in its own right. She wasted no time in sending an arch of ruby fire toward the band of soldiers. It broke their line as they threw themselves out of harm's way. Some moved quick enough, but the soldier with the vines was too focused on keeping Rafaela and I bound that they met Althea's fire willingly.

The heat melted the armour upon impact. Althea released a growl as she held her power until silver darkened and dripped from the soldier's body. The guttural scream pierced me. It was a song of pure, extreme agony as flesh burned and metal liquefied.

No longer trapped by the root, I pushed myself up to standing and gathered my power to hold off the rest of the soldiers who gathered themselves.

Lucari burst into view. Althea screeched as the hawk blurred through the air and flew into her line of sight. The hawk tangled itself within Althea's hair, claws outstretched for her face.

The conjured fire spluttered, like a candle blown by a weak wind, as iron-tipped claws slashed through Althea's skin.

"No," I screamed, the air turning frigid before me. The taut skin around my parted lips hardened and stretched until the corners split.

"Harm her, and you die," Kayne said at my back. His hands were around me, grasping at my throat from behind. He kicked out at my ankle and forced it to give way. I was back on my knees before I did anything else.

His touch disappeared as suddenly as it arrived, although I still felt his presence linger upon my skin. I lashed out with my arm, preparing to thrust my power into his flesh and shatter him. Nothing happened. My power didn't respond, its presence silent and forgotten.

"Did you really think I would not plan for this?" Kayne towered behind me, his face dusted with soot and grime.

Althea's cries still thundered as Lucari continued to claw at her face. She had thrown herself into a ball on the floor. Her head was covered with her arms, skin glistening with dark blood. There was nothing I could do to help her. Not as my shaking fingers lifted to the iron cuff that strangled around my throat. It weighed heavy upon my shoulders whilst it drank my magic from me.

"Duncan?" I cried meekly, waiting for him to strike Kayne down with his power.

He didn't respond.

That is when I saw the blood on Kayne's hand as he drew his thumb up to his face and cleared a bead of sweat that rolled down his temple. "You have doomed him. I tried to make him see sense. I gave him a chance to do the right thing, to remember the cause that once brought us together. His death, all their deaths, will be on your hands."

I lunged forward, not caring for my ankle or the iron at my neck. Kayne hardly flinched as my nail sliced the soft flesh beneath his eye. Then I was dragged backwards, with rough hands holding my arms behind my back.

"Oh, I bet you wished you could have done that to me weeks ago," Kayne glowered. "I even thought you were finally going crack and hurt me the other night. But you never had it in you. Whereas I did. I have waited for this, almost thinking it would never happen. But look at you, on your

knees before me. What a beautiful sight this is... from this angle, I see what Duncan may like about you."

"Fuck. You—" My jaw cracked as Kayne's knuckles met it. My head snapped to the side, but that was all I could move as the many hands still held me up. The inside of my cheeks filled with blood as I yanked my teeth from my tongue, leaving gouged, leaking marks behind. I gathered it and spat it directly at Kayne's feet the moment I could.

"See that the rest of them are dealt with," Kayne instructed a soldier who stepped into his side. "Not a single one is left alive."

I watched with sickening horror as the soldier removed the Cedarfall helmet and revealed something entirely different beneath.

"The Hand will reward you greatly for this," the human said. He slapped his meaty hand upon the metal breastplate and left a bloodied handprint over his heart. Hunter. "As he has with his chosen."

"Go," Kayne snarled, forcing the Hunter to scuttle away in a hurry.

Kayne whistled through his teeth. Lucari flew so close over my shoulder that I felt her blood-slick feathers graze the side of my face. I watched him fuss over the hawk as she perched on his shoulder, offering her praise as though she were a child, impressing a parent.

"What have you done to him?" I spat, tasting the copper of my blood and the ash that fell from the burning forest.

Kayne winced before turning his attention back to me. He stepped to the side, gesturing to a slumped body on the ground behind him. My legs threatened to give way, but I bit down further into my tongue to keep myself upright.

"What you forced me to do, Robin, can't you see that? This would be the moment to say your goodbyes to Duncan. You will not see him again."

"He'll never forgive you," I shouted, spit flying past my lips. "Duncan loved you like a brother, and you have betrayed him!"

"What good is asking forgiveness from a dead man?"

"He loved you!" I screamed again, unwilling to consider the possibility of Duncan's demise.

"Not in the way that mattered," Kayne replied softly. "I never asked for him to see me as his kin. I wished for more. For years, I have longed for him. Then you came and bewitched him. Ensnared me like a wounded dog caught between a trap." I turned my head, daring to admit aloud what I had wondered all this time. "All of this... all this death and deception because you were jealous of me?"

He leaned in close. Lucari screeched in warning, her amber eyes flicking over me with hunger. I expected Kayne to deny me, to conjure another excuse as he had all these weeks. But he proved to me otherwise.

"Yes," he whispered, lips dusting close to my ear. "And if you are wondering if I feel bad, I don't. I never shall. Once you have been handed over to Aldrick, my life will be blessed far greater than anything Duncan could have ever provided me."

"You're pathetic," I said, my voice barely a whisper.

"Says the King, powerless, alone and on his knees before me. Since Lockinge, I have waited to see you beaten down. Aldrick encouraged my patience. He knew this moment would come to me, and now it is here... well, I can honestly admit it was worth everything."

"Since Lockinge?" I asked, unable to ignore the stinging in my heart.

"From the moment we escaped, Aldrick, I have been waiting. How else did Aldrick escape the city before we ambushed the castle? The attack on Imeria Castle. Jesibel? Even that fucking Nephilim, Gabrial, the nosey bitch..." Lucari flexed her wings in pride, chirping happily at the mention of the dead Nephilim. "Everything I have done, everything I will do, was to see this moment. I am a man of faith, Robin, a Tracker. Did you truly believe I could turn my back on what I know just because you swept in with ideas of grandeur? Unlike Duncan, it takes more than a pretty boy to distract me from my path."

His freckled fingers clasped my face and squeezed. The pain was nothing compared to what I felt inside.

There was so much I wished to say. Names and curses I longed to hurl at Kayne. If my hands were not bound or my power drawn away by the iron around my neck, I would have thrown every ounce of my strength into hurting him.

But there was nothing I could do but listen as he divulged his betrayal, his deception.

"Should I offer my congratulations to Lucari?" I asked through gritted teeth. Kayne didn't flinch as spit burst from my cut lips.

"Well, of course, how else would I have kept in contact with Aldrick and my fellow Hunters?"

I scorned myself. All this time, Lucari had never been missing. I should have known.

"So, this is it then? Indulge me for a moment, Kayne. Now you have no one left to stop you. What happens next? Are you going to take me and hand me straight over to Aldrick yourself? Because I can imagine just how praised you will be when you do so."

Kayne dropped his hand from my face and raised it sharply before me. I flinched. I hardly expected it to rest, caringly, upon my shoulder. But it did. This time, his touch was soft. Even the circular dance which his thumb began made me sick. "Oh, you will join me on the journey to Elmdew. But I promise to atone for the sins you believe I have committed. Once Aldrick kills you and takes what he requires, I'll make sure your body is returned to those with enough care to bury you. Perhaps they may even be kind enough to entomb you beside your dear lover."

I searched for a lie in his wide stare but found only honesty. Fear crept up my throat and threatened to strangle the air from me once again. "What makes you hate the world that you would aid the end of it?"

Kayne pondered the question, chewing on his lower lip as he did so. Before he could reply, we were greeted by a rush of roaring winds. It coursed through the forest, dousing the flames and returning the underbrush to darkness. Riding the wind was a grumbling roar that tugged at my soul. The trees bowed beneath the force, screeching and groaning as though they cried out in alarm.

The calm expression on Kayne's face, as the winds pulled back at his ginger hair, suggested he was not shocked at the strange power that radiated around us.

It left as suddenly as it arrived.

And the Hunters exploded in cheers of delight. I felt their excitement buzz through the very ground at my feet as they danced and whooped.

"It would seem the second key has been... collected," Kayne admitted. "Aldrick will be disappointed it was not himself that dealt the final blow. But I am certain he will feel fulfilled to know another has been eradicated."

I blinked and saw Elinor in my mind's eye.

"Is that a tear?" Kayne asked, brows furrowed. "You don't even know who it is you cry for."

From stubbornness and fury, I refused to answer him. I dared speak aloud Elinor's name for fear it would curse it. Selfishly, I was not prepared

to know that Aldrick had pushed at the Oakstorm borders and killed her when she had not long found her freedom.

"You'll pay for this, all of this," I sneered, no longer able to see him through the goblets of tears that filled my eyes. "Elinor..."

"Elinor?" Kayne barked a laugh. "You believe Elinor Oakstorm is the one who has fallen?"

My mouth dried. No. No.

"Robin, if it wasn't for your wish to visit Cedarfall, it may well have been Elinor who was dealt with. But you wanted otherwise. You drew us to the Cedarfall Court, and we simply took the opportunity to ambush it when it was least expected. Queen Lyra's death is because of you. Count yourself lucky Althea won't gain consciousness and discover the truth..." Kayne winked before finishing his sentence. "For my sake."

"You're lying," I shouted, pleading that my accusation was right.

"Queen Lyra is dead," Kayne confirmed with his chest puffed outward with pride. "And you shall be next."

y wrists burned as the rope binding them rubbed viscously and without peace. But the agony was nothing compared to that I felt, knowing I had left behind Duncan, Althea and Rafaela to their promised end at the Hunter's hands.

I tried to focus my mind on counting my footsteps but could not reach the count of ten before my mind trailed back to their bodies. Kayne had ignored my pleading, which left my throat dry and sore. Now, the cloth that had been knotted around my head and stuffed between my teeth stopped me from making much more than a muffled gasp.

Night had fallen upon Cedarfall, blanketing the sky with impenetrable obsidian. Still, I looked to the starless night and prayed to anything or anyone that listened. Gyah would return. I focused, trying to discern her fearsome body among the cloak of night. But time passed, and she never revealed herself. I soon added her name to my list of grief, pondering what kept her from us.

I didn't need to ponder the reasons for long.

Aurelia, the Cedarfall city which lingered beneath the monstrous golden-leaved trees, was not the same as it had been the last I had seen it. As the band of Hunters, led by Kayne, paraded me into the fey city, I knew it had been lost. Aurelia had fallen.

With each footfall, I ground the golden leaves to dust, itching at the sound my destruction made. Everywhere my eyes looked, I witnessed what had become of the city.

The streets were empty of life, whereas the ground was littered with bodies of fey. Beneath the sweet kiss the trees graced the city with, I could smell death lingering. Pungent, the smell smacked into the back of my throat and stung my eyes. Hunters, clearly marked by the stark white handprint of their leader, swelled throughout Aurelia. I watched as some kicked at the bodies of the fey whilst others buried swords through them, over and over. For so much death, I sensed the atmosphere of excitement.

The rope at my wrists relaxed. I tore my gaze from the destruction to Kayne, who spoke with another at the man-made barricade that had been erected at the city's entrance. At first, I thought the barricade was constructed from mounds of silver until I noticed the horrifying truth. Cedarfall soldiers, dressed like the Hunter's who'd tricked us, lay in heaps. Blood oozed from the piles, creating rivers of red that spread far beneath the Hunter's boots. They didn't care.

"Has everyone been dealt with?" Kayne asked a willowy blonde Hunter. Her face was stained with dark smudges of brown that matched the gore she cleaned methodically from the sword outstretched across her lap.

"Those that matter have," she replied. It was clear she believed she had greater authority than him. She paid more attention to her weapon than Kayne. "There are a few fey remaining in the pompous building in the city's north, but it will take only a few hours to deal with them."

"We don't have the time to spare," Kayne spat, snatching the sword from her and throwing it to the ground. She stood quickly, pressing her face close to his as she seethed.

"Do you require a reminder of who you speak with... deserter?"

Lucari screeched upon Kayne's shoulder, distracting the nameless Hunter from his hand, which disappeared into his belt where the handle of a small knife waited. In a blink, Kayne drew the blade free and sliced it across the woman's neck. She was dead before her body hit the ground.

I felt nothing for her death. I didn't care as I watched her blood join the fey blood that she had more than likely spilled.

"Who is in charge here?" Kayne asked.

Another Hunter pointed downward at the body of Kayne's victim. "No one... now."

His posture straightened, his face easing from its mask of anger. Kayne stepped into the position of command like a snake shedding new skin.

"It is imperative we leave for Elmdew and return the keys to Aldrick." I stumbled forward as Kayne pulled on the rope at my wrist. If it wasn't for

his firm hand, I would have tripped over my footing and fell atop the dead Hunter. "What has become of the Cedarfall key?"

"Daveed has already left with it," another Hunter answered. I memorised his face as I did with all those around me. He was young, with his chin and cheeks speckled with white-tipped spots. Dark circles surrounded his blue eyes, making them sink into his skull. Unlike the other Hunters, his clothes hardly fit him. A human boy, likely thrown into a world of promises made by the Hand. And, unlike the rest that circled him, I sensed guilt across his face. He didn't smile, nor did he spare much of a glance at the surrounding dead.

"The teleporter?" Kayne spat, unable to hold back his sudden fury. "I was told he would wait!"

The young boy flinched away as Kayne drove forward. He cowered beneath raised arms, pleading through a snot-filled nose. "Please, please don't hurt me."

Kayne paused, hovering an open palm above the boy as though frozen in place. Then he lowered it. "Pathetic. Is this an example of those who wish to fight for the Hand and the future with his promises? Boys like you would have never passed initiation. It's desperate."

He scampered away from Kayne on an awkward footing. The watching Hunters laughed; even Kayne cracked a smile. "See that the boy is flogged. It may toughen him up. In the meantime, someone tell me when Daveed will return?"

"By morning." The answer didn't please Kayne, but this time I watched as he swallowed his anger. "Daveed is limited to the distance he can travel, but we expected you, although many of us didn't imagine you would succeed..."

"Well," Kayne mocked a bow. "I live to exceed expectations. If I'm forced to wait until morning, then something must be done about him. Already I have been cursed with his presence. See that he is locked away until the teleporter returns."

"Yes, sir."

Kayne stepped to me. I flinched as his pale, freckled fingers drew toward my mouth. He pulled the cloth from between my teeth, ripping the skin at the corners of my mouth deeper.

"I would suggest you act carefully, Robin," he warned. "There is no one left to save you. It is done. Perhaps, depending on the accommodation these

fine Hunters seem fit to provide, get some rest." His voice lowered. "I hear that the extraction of the key is rather... uncomfortable."

I drew my head back and thrust the hard part of my forehead into Kayne's nose. The sound was beautiful. Kayne rocked back, hands slapped across his face as he choked on a curse.

"Are you finished?" I growled, looking wide-eyed at every Hunter around me. If this was truly the end, I would not go quietly, far from it. I would take as many down as I could with me, Kayne included.

A trickle of blood slipped down my forehead, catching in my brow. If my hands were not bound, I would have lifted them to my head and found a cut. Not that I cared. Seeing the smudge of Kayne's own blood spread between his cupped hands was worth it.

"Lock him up, hurt him, do whatever it is you wish," Kayne replied, but not to me. He spoke to the crowd of Hunters that seemed to flood over me. "But make sure, come morning, he still breathes. I want for him to experience every ounce of suffering that waits for him."

With his final words, Kayne swept away, clutching his bloody nose. I was left to the wave of Hunters who suffocated me where I stood.



FAR ABOVE ME, Queen Lyra's body swayed in the nightly breeze. Her neck was bent at an ungodly angle, tied by three thick knots of rope. The noose was the only thing keeping her up.

She was stripped down to the thin garment that would have once been pure white. It, too, danced in the winds, turning her into a vision of a phantom before my very eyes. The dress was torn and stained with blood. Her wild locks of red hair would blow away from her face, exposing the wide, all-seeing eyes and gaping mouth. Only then would I turn away. Unlike her husband, who hung to her left side or the line of red-haired children hanging to her right, Lyra was the only one whose arms showed signs of mutilation. Two anger slashes marked both wrists. Her hands and fingers were almost black with dried blood. Her death had not been caused by the noose around her neck, not like her family's. Lyra had bled dry. Made to expel the Cedarfall power; the key, until she was nothing but a husk. Dead.

The Cedarfall family was dead, every one of them. Faces I had seen during the banquet during my last stay in Aurelia. I thought of Orion, killed by Hunters and now reunited with his siblings and parents. But mostly, my mind drifted to Althea. I saw her in all of them.

I had no tears to shed. Grief was not the emotion that claimed me as I watched them move from side to side above me. It felt like violence.

My wrath devoured me from the inside, searching for a way out. It was all-consuming, but I had to keep it in. There was nothing I could do with the emotion here. Buried in the narrow, deep dungeon carved into the ground. A place to be left and forgotten with only the prison bars crisscrossing, out of reach, above me. There was little room. Enough for me to shuffle on my feet but not to sit or lie down on the sodden ground. All I could do was look skyward and watch the haunting dance as the wind toyed with the bodies of the slain Cedarfall family.

There was nothing I could do but wait until they returned for me. Altar protect the poor soul tasked to pull me out of this dungeon. I may not have had my power, but I had my will and boiling desire for revenge. For Althea, for Lyra and her family. For every soul that had been killed as the Hunters invaded the city and claimed it for their own. I would fight, tooth and nail, in their memory.

I lost track of time within the dungeon. It slipped away from me like sand through parted fingers. The horror of watching the hanging, dead bodies of those I had known lost its power. I grew numb to the view. The pendulum sway within the brisk, nightly winds entranced me. Hypnotising me to the point of exhaustion.

At some point, I must have fallen asleep, for I woke abruptly to my name. I first expected it to have been Jesibel, walking within my dream and warning me as she had before. But it was not her voice, but one I would have recognised in this realm or the next.

I blinked away the sticky sleep that clung to my eyes as I peered toward a face looking back down at me through the dungeon's bars.

"Erix?" His name clawed out of my throat; my voice was painfully hoarse. My nails scratched the narrow stone walls surrounding me. If this was still some terrorising dream, then the pain should have freed me. Even as they bent back and the rough stone tore at my fingers, the vision of Erix didn't fade away.

"What have they done to you?" He growled, reluctantly taking his eyes off me as he scanned the area out of my line of sight.

I dared to welcome the relief that rushed over me. The insides of my cheeks blossomed with blood as I bit down hard on the fleshy skin. I couldn't find the words to answer him.

"I am going to get you out of there, but I need you to be patient. Can you do that for me?"

The pleading desperation in his steel-silver eyes was palpable. Erix radiated his urgency in undulating waves.

I opened my mouth, forcing something out. "It was Kayne. He... they are all dead."

There was no need to specify who, exactly, Kayne had seen killed. Duncan, Althea, Rafaela; I'd not seen them since I was dragged away from the forest where Hunters had been left to finish them. Perhaps I referred to the swaying bodies of Althea's family that danced in the breeze just beyond Erix's protruding leather-clawed wings.

Erix flinched, his lips pulled taut. "He will pay for his deceptions."

"I'm scared." The revelation burst out of me in a sob.

Erix's face pinched into a scowl that gave a view of the berserker that lurked within. His lip pulled back from his teeth, revealing the sharpened canine. "I will let nothing happen to you. Do you hear me?"

I held his gaze, witnessing the mask of sadness that did little to hide Erix's own fury. The berserker lurked within him still, and I cared little if Doran's death meant Erix had full control over himself or not. There was an entire city of Hunters. He could tear through them all, and I would never think of them again.

"Wait for me," Erix said, fingers gripped around the bar far above me. "You will know when the time comes. Be ready."

"No," I half gasped and shouted. Erix didn't pull away as I reached up to him, my fingers barely grazing his own. "Don't... you can't leave me."

"Little bird," Erix breathed, his shoulders sagging from the weight of the world he carried. "I never left you. I never will."

The walls could have closed in on me at that moment, and I would not have cared. "You came back for me..."

"Always." Erix unravelled his grip on the dungeon's bar and stood tall. I watched his every move, holding my breath as he surveyed the surrounding area before speaking a final time. "They live."

Then Erix was gone, the powerful burst of his wings forcing winds down upon me. I squinted against the torrent, feeling the fresh breeze brush the hair from my sodden forehead.

They live. His words played over in my mind. They live.

It wasn't long before the sky answered my pondering. Stark, white-blue lightning forked across the sky, revealing a swell of clouds that rivalled the obsidian of the night. I lifted my head as the sky opened, and droplets of ice-cold droplets fell down upon my face, undistinguishing my tears from the rain.

They live.

he song of fatality filled Aurelia's sky. I didn't need to see it to know the Hunters were under siege. I heard it in their raw, screamed pleas before their bodies sizzled beneath the fire or they were silenced with steel.

The attack persisted until the sky had brightened behind the swell of dark thunderclouds that sparked with the warning of lightning. Still, Erix did not return. Time stretched on uncomfortably. I swallowed the desire to shout for him or dare cry out a name of someone I had thought was dead. Although the flashes of fire and the bursts of lightning suggested Duncan and Althea had survived, until I saw them in the flesh, I would not allow myself to hope.

I couldn't swallow the hope when Gyah sliced through the sky, roaring hell-fury across Aurelia. Even from my distance, I could see her maw stained with blood and the mound of flesh that was trapped between her teeth. There was no stopping me as I screamed her name. The feeling bubbled through the ground and burst out of me without the ability to stop it.

The eldrae released the mound within her jaw, which soon revealed itself to be the body of a Hunter. I felt the ground shudder under the impact as it fell from the great height. Then Gyah was out of sight, roaring once again. I felt as though she cried out for me.

My patience had grown thin. I couldn't stand to listen to the unknown that raged above ground. My heart threatened to burst if I didn't help. Blood swelled beneath my nails as I clawed at the narrow walls pressing on either side of me. I attempted to climb up the slick-damp wall and grasp the bar.

After the umpteenth try, I hung from the rusted bars as the aged metal sliced into my palms. When I dropped, I howled with a mix of frustration and desperation.

For a moment, I confused the sound of pounding feet with my heart, which was clogged up in my throat. Once the sounds had desynchronised, I stilled.

It was a set of feet. One person.

This was it. They were coming.

I prepared myself, jaw aching, as I gritted my teeth. Would it be Erix, or perhaps Duncan would have found me first? Rafaela would tear through the city to find me, tasked with saving me or keeping me from Aldrick's grasp.

It was not Kayne who I expected to see. I fought the urge to cower from him. To force my body into a ball so he could not reach me.

"You are going to do as I fucking tell you!" He panted, face pale against the smudges of ash and blood that covered him. The skin around his nose was bruised and swollen. Dirt, and a burnt smudge of rust, was spread across his neck as though bloodied hands had grasped for it.

I traced every detail of him, devouring it all in. His panting, frantic breathing. The way his eyes left me and flickered across the unseen landscape. Beads of sweat coursed down his grime-covered face, attempting to clean a path through it. I even glimpsed Kayne's constellation of freckles beneath.

"How do you feel watching everything you have worked on burn around you?" I asked, staring daggers through him as Kayne fumbled with a key from his pocket. He almost dropped it in his rush as he thrust it into the old lock that kept the bars in place.

He mumbled something under his breath.

"I've asked you a question," I pushed on, surprising myself with my calm. "How do you feel knowing you've failed?"

"No!" Kayne screamed, slamming his fist into the lock. I heard bone crack and skin rip. "This is not the end. I'll drag you to Elmdew if I have to. So close..."

He swallowed his words, unable to focus on anything but unlocking the gate. Stone chipped beneath the force of the iron gate that Kayne threw open. There was nothing keeping us from one another. Kayne watched me for a moment, glaring down into the dungeon space as he considered his options.

"This ends now," I said, fists balled and ready at my sides. "It's over. I would suggest you get a head start with running before Duncan finds you."

Kayne flashed a bloodied dagger and pointed the tip toward me. "I should have killed you myself. It would have saved me the hassle of weeks of lies and secrets."

"But Aldrick needs me, so you wouldn't—"

"I couldn't give a fuck what that fey scum wants. It is what I want that matters. And that is to see you dead. Once you are gone, that wretched spell you have placed on Duncan will break. He will come back to me... I will free him from you."

Kayne's frantic, demented expression hid nothing of his intentions. I could see from the wide set of his unblinking eyes that he believed everything he spat upon me.

"All of this deception. All of this death because you loved a man that would never love you back."

My sneer hit its mark. Kayne lunged down, one hand free and the other gripping the dagger. There was nowhere for me to move within the narrow space. No place to hide or shield myself from his attack.

That was never my intention.

A feral sound tore out of me as I thrust my open hand toward the blade. The edge sliced into my palm. I felt the echo of pain, but it was kept at bay by the adrenaline that turned my blood to fire.

I wrapped my fingers around the dagger and squeezed. The momentum caught Kayne off-guard. I reached up with my spare hand and smashed my closed knuckles into Kayne's shattered nose. It popped again beneath the impact. The weak bone breaking easier than before. Kayne reeled back. I didn't make the mistake my last attack had on him. This time, I left more than a bruise.

The dagger slipped out of his grasp. I released the blade, my fingers numb and coated in my own slick gore. It clattered to the ground at my feet, out of reach from both of us.

"Duncan was never yours," Kayne screamed down at me. He was like a child, gripped in the thralls of a tantrum. "He was mine, and I waited patiently for years that one day Duncan would see me in the light I wished. Then you came and trapped him in your web. It is my duty to free him. To protect him from your kind, just as we vowed in our oaths to the Hand."

I squared my jaw, teeth grinding across one another until the bones in my face ached.

"Free him then," I begged, preparing myself for my next move. Kayne needed to act fast because the feeling in my hand was fading. The pain was demanding to let itself known. "Get it over with, Kayne. Do what you have to, just break this fucking spell. I'm waiting."

Something caught Kayne's attention out of my view. He smiled. Lips curled upward as blood oozed down his face, smudging across his skin until it looked like he wore a mask obscuring his nose, mouth and chin.

My breathing hitched as he moved out of view toward what had caught his attention. I hardly had a moment to steady myself before he slunk back into view, a torch of burning fire gripped in his hand.

The glow of furious flames reflected off his insidious expression. I saw his intention gilded in his eyes. He lifted the torch away from him and held it horizontally over the entrance to my narrow dungeon.

"Aldrick may punish me, but at least I will be known for being the one who killed the Icethorn King. Tell me, Robin, will you burn, or will you melt?"

I winced as the fire dripped from the oil-sodden tip of the torch. Burning ash fell upon my shoulders like snow, hissing upon impact.

"He needs me," I shouted, panicking. My scored, sliced palm slapped against the brick wall as I tried to scramble up toward the exit. My feet slipped across the smoothed stone, my weak fingers unable to grasp anything. "I'm the key."

"You are not the key," Kayne snapped, disgust twitching at his bent nose. "Robin, your body is merely the casing that protects the key within. If I kill you, that power will be released. Aldrick is a powerful man. He has the tools to capture the power, no matter how you are eliminated. Aldrick may slap my wrist, but it will be worth it."

I sensed my pleading gloss across my mouth. Biting down on my lips, I refused to snivel for Kayne to spare me. Steeling myself, I stopped my clambering and tried to control my breathing.

"Indulge me for a moment, Robin." Kayne cocked his head to the side. "If you survive this, will Duncan love you when that face is a ruined mess? When your skin is a map of scars that rivals the constellation of marks across your lover's skin? Would Duncan wish to bed you, or will he finally have space for another?"

I wouldn't entertain him with a reply. Instead, I spoke with calm clarity, which mirrored the rush of serenity that cooled my body and numbed my panic and pain. "It may not have been enough for you, but Duncan loved you, Kayne. As a brother. Do not punish him because it was not what you demanded of him. That was never his fault. It was yours."

"No..." Kayne's lip curled upward, exposing his blood-stained teeth. "This is all because of you—"

The fire winked out as though it was a candle blown out by an unseen wind. Kayne looked down to the smoke curling tip.

"He is all yours." The unseen, deep voice said. The baritone voice warmed my skin, tickling across my consciousness until it conjured an image of a man, half Gryvern and half fey.

Erix.

Kayne thrust the splinter of wood outward as though it was a sword made from deadly metal. He gripped it in both hands, pointing it before him.

"What have you done to my love?" Another voice joined the fray. Duncan.

"Duncan, please hear me out," Kayne pleaded, eyes filling immediately with tears. "This isn't you! Aldrick has told me... he has said this will break the fey's sway on you. I can help you..."

"I've heard enough," Duncan replied. I could almost taste the dismissal as he spoke. "Erix, get Robin out of there. I don't wish for him to see this."

My chest thundered alongside the sudden clang of power that filled the skies. The thick, grey clouds burst with blue light as Duncan fuelled and called upon his power. I couldn't see Duncan or Erix, but in my mind's eye, I had a clear image of them both standing side by side. The chaotic thought was almost hard to believe. But it was real, no matter if I could only see the horror pinch across Kayne's face... both men, my past and present, faced down the threat to my life as one.

I heard the heavy footsteps on the ground above me. They froze Kayne to the spot. He shook like a leaf captured in the wind of a storm. Then Duncan was there, standing beside the mouth of my dungeon. He glanced down at me. His eyes glowed with power; his mouth set into a firm line.

The sudden urge to scramble out of the dungeon toward him was overwhelming. I longed to reach for him and encase myself in his protective embrace.

"I am sorry I didn't listen to you," Duncan said softly, regret twisting his face into a scowl. "You're in pain because friendship blinded me. Robin, you are safe from Kayne now. We will ensure nothing happens to you again."

His voice, although loud and demanding, was for me and me alone. Each word crackled with his power, burying Kayne's pleading as nothing more than background noise.

"This ends now," Duncan said, drawing his gaze from me. He looked ahead of him to Kayne, who swung the fireless torch like a sword before him.

Duncan offered a single word, humming with his dark desires. "Run."

Kayne didn't waste a moment before he threw the cold torch at Duncan and sprinted away from view. The splinter of wood clattered across his powerful chest and fell to the ground. Duncan allowed Kayne a head start before he followed in pursuit.

The view of the swaying, dead Cedarfall royals was once again in perfect view. No longer obscured, it reminded me of the severity of Kayne's deception. I scrunched my eyes closed and refused to open them again.

"Do not be afraid, little bird." I peered through one eye to see Erix, leaning on his front on the floor above me and offering me a hand. His nails were pointed into claws, his skin as grey as stone. "No further harm will come to you."

I didn't waste another moment. My slick fingers gripped around Erix's firm hand. I cried out, almost surprised at the pain my mutilated hand gifted me. Part of me required the pain his grip on my sliced palm provided. It made this moment feel real.

The joints in my arm screamed as Erix pulled me out. His leatherstretched wings flapped, providing him with the extra strength he needed. Once I was half out of the narrow dungeon, he took another hand and gripped the material of my shirt. My belly grazed the harsh stone edging as he yanked me to my freedom.

We lay upon the ground above, on our backs and panting. Rain was falling harder now, splashing its fresh kiss upon the skin of my face. Erix was at my side, looking at the ominous storm clouds, but I sensed he knew I was looking at his profile. I wondered if he wished to look back at me or if he didn't out of respect for Duncan.

"Tell me when you are ready," Erix said finally, whispering beneath the crash of Duncan's thunder. "Unless you wish to lay here forever. I will allow it."

I watched as the droplets of rain splashed across the sharp structure of Erix's face. They fell on his skin and ran down his hollowed cheeks as though he cried.

"Thank you," I breathed out slowly, feeling the tension in my chest unravel.

"What for?" He whispered.

"For not listening to me."

Erix rolled his head and faced me. I didn't need to explain what I meant. In the glow of his silver eyes, I recognised Erix knew what I spoke of.

He forced a smile, but it was brief. I waited for him to say something, but his silence continued. Then his eyes fell upon the iron cuff around my neck, and he released a taut breath.

"There is a small band of Hunters left alive. They have hauled themselves within the capital building. Do you have the energy to help eradicate them and reclaim the city?"

My body was mine once again. I sat up, weak but willing to fight. "More will return by morning. We must be ready."

The Hunters had spoken about a teleporter who would return to Aurelia to take me to Aldrick. By the time they returned, we had to be prepared.

This was our one chance. My plan still had life left in it.

"First, I need to get that cuff from your neck," Erix said, eyes fixated on the bolt that hung above my collarbone.

I stood, uncaring for the pain and the tiredness embedded in my bones. Glancing down at Erix, it was my time to offer him a hand. He looked at it as though it were the strangest of things. Then he took my offering, held my gaze, and smiled mischievously.

"Just like the old days," I said as he towered above me. Inches apart, I allowed myself a moment to inhale him. A scent my body recognised and my soul had missed. If I stared into his eyes, I easily forgot the rest of his changed appearance. It was like looking into the man I had once known before he left me in bed alone on that fateful day.

"Quick," Erix muttered, his gaze flickering across every inch of my face. I felt my skin warm where his eyes graced. "Before there isn't a single one left."

My mouth watered at the thought of a fight. I glanced again at the dead Cedarfall family. I felt their fire course through my body. This was for them.

"I'm ready."

A lthea severed the rope from her mother's neck. Queen Lyra's limp body fell into her daughter's arms before being carried down to the ground and laid out beside the rest of the Cedarfall family. Not once did Althea cry. There was not a tear that escaped her defiant eyes. It was not sadness that billowed from her in powerful waves. It was fury. Hot, melting vehemence trapped within the casing of flesh.

Gyah waited, never once taking her eyes off Althea. She held the pile of folded white sheets to her chest almost protectively. That pile lessened with each Cedarfall Althea freed from the noose at their necks. One by one, the bodies were covered. Harsh burns marked their skin, left by the rope. The blue tint of their skin and the wide, bulging eyes. The sheet that fluttered down over them hid all of it. They may have hidden the horrific image of their bodies, but the truth had scorched itself in my mind. I still saw their death clearly.

Dawn had arrived, bringing an air of peace with it. The sky, still bruised with ominous clouds, no longer flashed with lightning. Everything seemed so still. The giant, golden trees of Aurelia shed their leaves. I sensed their grief at what had happened beneath them. The air was still thick with the scent of charred wood and flesh. Piles of Hunter's bodies collected swarms of flies, whereas the dead fey gathered like twigs and used to build pyres throughout the city. Each one burned with Althea's crimson fire.

Lady Kelsey, Althea's aunt, sobbed among the crowd of survivors. She had been among the small group of fey that had barricaded themselves within the manor. After Erix freed me from the iron cuff and the dungeon, we cut through the Hunters, who had also fled into the manor. The hallways

toward the great hall in which Kelsey and the rest of the fey were hiding were littered with shards of shattered, flesh-hardened ice of the Hunters we had fought. It was over for them before it could begin.

My heart stung as I witnessed the grief and listened to it. I pressed my bandaged hand over it, hoping to keep it from bursting free of my ribcage.

Throughout the crowd of survivors, there was a symphony of wailing and screaming. We watched the last of the Cedarfall royals lowered to the ground.

Queen Lyra was dead, which meant the Cedarfall key was successfully in Aldrick's hands.

Rightfully, it belonged to Althea. The Cedarfall Court and its crown were hers. And the snivelling, powered human, who took tenancy in the dungeon I had not long left, would help us get it back.

"I can't bear to watch," I whispered, tightening my hold on Duncan's steady hand.

He tugged on my arm in gentle suggestion, pulling me into his side. I turned to face him and buried my face, eyes closed, into his chest as he coiled his arm around me.

"I've got you," he said. "I'll always have you."

I hated how emotionless he sounded. How hollow he seemed.

Duncan had been like this since he had returned from his own hunt. He had said little about what became of Kayne as he chased the Tracker through Aurelia. Kayne had been dragged through the city by his ankle and dumped within the manor. The Tracker's blood stained a path from the place Duncan had killed him.

I swallowed my pondering thoughts and focused on this moment.

Duncan had not been the same since he returned with his prey. Quiet, distant, although never straying far from my side. Although he held me up as Gyah lowered the final white sheet across Lyra's body, I sensed that, somehow, I helped hold him up.

"This would be the moment I have to say something, but I admit I am without words."

I turned back to look at Althea, who stood, shoulders back, as she spoke with Gyah standing a step behind her. A shield at her back. I could see the grief Gyah carried in her golden eyes. It was enough for them both.

"You may expect me to encourage you. Perhaps spark strength back into your hearts with promises of vengeance for what has happened here. But I cannot lie. I cannot make promises I am not confident I can keep." Althea washed her gaze over the mounds of her dead family before her. We all watched as her face softened. When she regarded the crowd again, her eyes glistened.

"Cedarfall has been violated by evil. Our enemy saw a moment of unsuspecting weakness and pounced. So many lives lost. Aurelia will never be the same. A city scarred, mirroring the marks left upon our own hearts. I know that there is nothing I can say, nothing I can do to help heal you. Nothing that will fix..." Althea choked on her words.

I stepped forward instinctively, but Gyah was there in a blink, taking Althea and pressing a kiss upon the wild red curls stuck to her forehead. Her affection had the desired effect, allowing Althea to gather herself to finish her sentence. "Me."

Gyah whispered something to Althea, whose forehead creased with lines as she nodded in silent agreement.

"This is not over," Althea continued. "Not yet. As long as Aldrick continues his campaign against the realms, more lives will be lost. Our enemy tried to take Cedarfall just as they had with our brother court. Just like Elmdew, innocent people will continue dying as long as our enemies breathe. But, just like the smoke that coils and dances in the wake of the Cedarfall's mighty flame, I will stop at nothing until they suffocate. I will burn them out of their hiding places. Not even the winds will dare collect their ashes. The ground will regret them. The water will refuse to wash their memory away. I cannot promise, but I will pledge. Pledge to see this dark time come to its end."

If Althea's speech had been given at a different time, under a different circumstance, I could only imagine the explosion of applause that would have followed. Instead, the crowd was silent. No one cried in the quiet that followed. No one uttered a word.

I LOOKED through the crowd and found Erix without meaning to. He hung to the back like a shadow. His arms folded over his chest; wings gathered at his back as though he carried a flag. It seemed he sensed that I watched him, for his eyes tore away from Althea and found me. Rafaela stood beside him. Her face set into a grimace as she leaned on her golden hammer for

support. She, like the rest of us, showed physical signs of exhaustion after our fight.

"If it was not for Erix," Duncan whispered, lips brushing close to my ear. "We would not be here. Cedarfall would have fallen to Aldrick's attempts, and more would have died. Erix saved us. He saved you."

"I know," I replied. Erix looked away first, and I reluctantly followed.

"Robin, I want you to know I will never forgive myself. I should have listened to your concerns. Kayne got this far because I allowed him to. I'm sorry."

Discomfort clawed up my spine at Duncan's revelation.

"Even I would not have foreseen his betrayal," I replied softly, longing for Duncan to believe every word I said in reply. "Kayne tricked us all."

Duncan winced, brows furrowed. The scar on his face deepened, as did the lines across his dirt-covered forehead. I wished to reach out and touch his face. To draw him down to my mouth where he could forget his regrets. "Kayne got his comeuppance. Do not allow him to haunt you, Duncan. It will not benefit you."

Duncan had not yet revealed what he had done to Kayne when he caught up to him. Duncan's lightning did not mar the Tracker's body. The signs of struggle were more mundane.

"Do you wish to free yourself from your burden?" I asked. "If you keep it all in, you'll find that your guilt eats you from the inside."

"Kayne hurt you. Guilt is not what I feel for his death. The only thing I am guilty of is wishing so desperately that I killed him before he had the chance to..."

Althea's voice had raised in volume. It seemed she wished for everyone in Cedarfall, living and dead, to hear what she had to say next. Duncan swallowed his words and pinched his mouth closed. The last I saw of his profile was the feathering twitch within his jaw as he fought hard to keep his next words in.

"Just as a Cedarfall is born from the flames," Althea called out, each word striking into the heart of the crowd. "May they return to them."

Althea waved her hand before the line of bodies at her feet as though gesturing farewell. Fire bloomed within her open palm, then fell in arching, golden waves upon her family until her blaze consumed each one.

No one left until the wind claimed their ashes, and the ground was left eternally scorched.

"Are you confident that is what you saw?" My question rang out across the throne room. It was not empty, but for the grand size of it, the room should have hosted far more than the few of us.

Lady Kelsey turned her red-rimmed eyes upon me. "I watched my sister's murder. Every detail will haunt me until I am returned to the fire. Of course, I am sure."

"I didn't mean to offend you, Kelsey." I hoped she registered the apology set in my expression.

"It would make sense," Rafaela added. I was thankful for her taking the weight of Kelsey's eyes off of me. It had not been long since her sister was cut down from her hanging place, and already I had offended someone with my careless comment.

"Aldrick has access to an abundance of the stone in Elmdew. If he is fashioning boxes to collect the keys within them, it makes sense why the power has not manifested physically within Elmdew and here."

It didn't feel right to describe it as a box. Kelsey had recounted what had happened, watching the Hunters cut through Queen Lyra's wrists where they collected her blood within a box of labradorite. Not a drop spared, she had said. Lyra had not screamed. She made no sound as she expelled her blood and with it, the Cedarfall key that thrived within it.

"It took hours," Kelsey sobbed, her words barely audible as her hands muffled them. "I begged them to stop. Althea, I never wished to leave her in her final moments... but I failed her."

Althea raised a hand and silenced her aunt. "I do not wish to hear any more of this."

Kelsey bowed her head, eyes smudged with coal that ran down from her lathered eyelashes and left rivers of black down her grief-stricken face. She didn't utter another word, but her muffled cries carried as background noise among the room.

"Labradorite is not indestructible," Rafaela continued to explain, aware that the entire room required her knowledge of the stone. In Wychwood, I only ever saw them as blessed markers that distinguished the four courts. Just like our knowledge of the keys, it seemed Altar wished to remove the true purpose of the stones from our history. Perhaps the gods wished to keep us in the dark to protect us when all it did was make us more

vulnerable. "It is malleable. The Nephilim had used it as prisons, weapons and even the heart of our concerns, the gate which keeps Duwar locked away."

"For now," Althea said quickly, her gaze fixated on a spot on the floor before her. "We understand Aldrick's intentions and know what he wishes to achieve. He may even claim the third key if we continue sitting around talking about it. Or, we act now."

Three powerful raps sounded on the closed doors. No one needed to accept the request for entry, for the door burst open. I turned and watched as Duncan and Erix entered, side by side. In the middle was a man I had hoped to see. Eroan, the kind-hearted tailor that greeted me with such warmth the first time I had visited Aurelia. I had hoped that I would see him again, but not under such circumstances, and certainly not as he pushed the wooden, wheeled cot before him. On it was the outline of a body covered in a sheet.

"Just on time," Althea said plainly, resting each elbow on the edges of the gilded throne as she surveyed the new arrivals.

My heart invaded my throat and lodged there as I raced across the room toward them. There was no time for niceties as I greeted Eroan with a weak smile, trying everything in my power not to focus on the dead body he carted before him.

"It is good to see you." Eroan bowed, his dark hair brushing across his sad, tired eyes. Although he lived within the Cedarfall Court, Eroan belonged to Icethorn. Like Jesibel, I recognised my court in the blue shine within his black hair to his stare. It was as cold as ice.

"I appreciate that this is a hard task, but I thank you for trying." I placed a hand on the man's shoulder.

There was a reluctance in his expression as his eyes trailed across me, searching. "Please, tell me there is another way."

I shook my head. "This is the only chance we have."

Eroan sighed, gathered his emotion and boxed it away, leaving only a stern mask of determination lathered across his face. "So be it."

I mouthed my thanks before turning back to the room. "We will have a short window to infiltrate Elmdew and deal with Aldrick. Gyah, have we had word back from Elinor? Is she aware and ready?"

Gyah prowled forward from the shadows of Althea's throne. Her hand lingered on the new queen's shoulder, offering her the reminder that she was there, which had the desired effect from the way Althea's face brightened. "There is no time to wait for a reply. If we wish to use the human teleporter, we must do so before Aldrick has enough time to understand that there is a problem. We can only hope that Elinor receives our request and acts immediately."

"And the Asps?" I asked. "Have any been located?"

"Aunt, this would be when you should speak up. The Asps are your expertise," Althea said, a hint of warning in her voice.

Kelsey showed no sign of indifference as she confirmed her success. "Without the assassins, I would not be standing here..." There was more Kelsey wished to say, but one look from Althea kept her on track. "This is the first time the Asps have not requested payment for our aid. Something about Robin coming well recommended by a respected peer within their fold. The tonic you require to keep that leech out of your minds should arrive shortly."

"Good." My body trembled.

Everything was falling into place. I dared ask the next question, but the answer was important to our chances.

"How many of Aurelia's survivors have agreed to come?"

Duncan cleared his throat. "Enough. More than half."

"My people have lost enough," Althea added sternly. "I do not wish for them to put themselves in harm's way."

"With all due respect, Althea." Duncan was careful with every word and the tone in which he used. "Your people would refuse anything but to help. They, much like you, feel as though they have nothing left to lose."

"And there is nothing more terrifying than that."

My blood cooled as Erix spoke. He walked toward Althea, sparing me only a quick glance. He stopped when he reached the throne. Erix bent his knee and bowed his head.

"My duty started in this court," Erix said to Althea alone, although he spoke with undeniable conviction. "It was my honour to serve your family, and it would be an honour if you allow me to do the same for you, my Queen."

"Stand," Althea commanded. "Please, Erix."

Erix stood tall, his wings flexing naturally at his sides. Physically, he was not the same man who last served the Cedarfall Court. But his soul had not changed.

"If you wish to continue your preceding service to the Cedarfall crown, you will do so as I ask of you. No questions."

"Anything," Erix replied, almost choking on his sudden emotion. "Name what you need of me, and I will do it."

Althea looked over Erix's shoulder, directly at me. "You protect Robin. Stay by his side. Keep him alive. He is your responsibility as his guard."

"Robin does not require me," Erix replied. I was thankful he didn't glance back at me. If he had, my knees might have failed me completely. "He has Duncan. He has his power."

"And he will have you," Althea persisted. "If Robin is still persistent in his want to be the lamb sent to the slaughter, it will be with as much protection at his back."

Should I have said something? Perhaps, but the words hid from me in the mess of thoughts that stormed through my mind.

"Althea is right," Duncan added. His sudden presence was beside me. I was so focused on Althea and Erix that I had not noticed. "You have Robin's best interests at heart. If you refused Althea's request, I may just never forgive you."

I was thankful for the hand that Duncan squeezed around mine. His grip was soft yet firm. As his thumb began tracing small circles on the back of my hand, my thoughts calmed enough for me to say something.

"They are right," I added. "I need you, Erix."

Even the weakest of spring breezes could have toppled Erix over. We all watched as a wave of relief cascaded over him. He straightened, pushed back his shoulders and lifted his chin until he looked down the sharp arrow of his nose at me. "I will prove myself to you again."

I smiled honestly. "There is no need. You have already done that."

Althea stood from her throne abruptly. A black-tie band had gathered her mess of red curls into a bun and swept it off her sharp face. Still covered in muck, blood and other soils of war, she provided her final decree to the room. "Erix, Rafaela. Gather those who want to fight and get them dressed in the Hunter's clothes. Aunt, you have an hour to get as much Mariflora tonic as the Asps can supply. We must fortify our minds, or this will be over before it truly begins."

Before Althea had even finished speaking, the room was already emptying.

"I will work as fast as I can," Eroan said, glancing toward the covered body laid out before him. "But understand that a glamour is a sensitive and delicate thing. It can be as weak as powder upon one's face or as strong as a mask. I will need time to ensure this works."

"Eroan," Althea replied softly. "Do your best. You may just save the realm."

I sensed the pride and determination swell within the slender frame of Eroan.

"Last chance," Althea said to me. I could hear my breathing as the room emptied. All but Althea, Gyah, Duncan and Eroan, who fussed around the sheet-covered body as he rolled his sleeves up to his elbows in preparation. "If you tell me you have changed your mind, we will find another way. It hardly sits well with me knowing that you are going to put yourself in this position."

"I must do this," I said firmly, trying to mirror the outward resolve that Althea exuded. "We all have a part to play. This is my plan; I understand the dangers. I cannot allow anyone else to do this."

"I will be by your side, friend, every step of the way."

"Which is why I have the strength to even take the first step," I replied.

Althea pursed her lips and exhaled a long, taut breath out of her nose. She wrapped her arms around me and pulled me in close. As I inhaled, all I could smell was fire. It was both pleasant and unpleasant.

I didn't pull away.

"I'll miss this face." Althea's eyes trailed across every detail of my face. I sensed her drink me in with her gaze. "How long will it last?"

Her question was not for me but for Eroan.

"It is reversible only by the one that crafts the glamour," Eroan replied.

"Then you better stay alive," Duncan added, casting a hateful look at the bundle of flesh hidden beneath the sheet.

I had not allowed myself to dwell on the new addition to my original plan. It had always involved a glamour and infiltration. But the face I was to take had only become a recent addition to my ever-changing plot. In my mind, there was no other option. It was practically handed to me on a silver platter.

"Let us leave them to concentrate," Gyah announced, urging Althea toward the exit of the room with a firm hand. "It is frowned upon to interrupt the artist who works on their finest piece."

Eroan waited for the great doors to clang shut behind them before addressing me again. "I am ready."

"Me too," I replied, focusing entirely on the covered body.

"Are you?" Eroan persisted.

"Not at all," I replied, forcing a wavering smile.

"I am here," Duncan said. "And not going anywhere."

I wondered if he would feel the same when this was done.

"You are going to need to sit for this," Eroan said, edging his songful voice with command. "It is best you are as still as you can be."

I did as he asked, taking a seat in a chair provided.

He rubbed his hands together. Then Eroan provided the great reveal. He tugged at the white sheet covering the body and pulled it away. The material rippled onto the floor like water. Everything was silent as I took in the body laid out before him.

Until now, this idea had been a grand one. But looking at Kayne's lifeless body filled me with nothing but dreaded regret.

y guttural howls of pain silenced the encouragement Duncan provided to me. I heard him beneath my breathy moans and tight-lipped gasps. It didn't deter him.

It felt as though my bones shattered and my skin split. I dared open my eyes for fear I would find my flesh melting over Eroan's hands as he brushed them over my face like the paintbrush of an artist.

"Can you give him a moment?" Duncan snapped. I squeezed his hand, barely registering the click of his fingers beneath my force. If it was not for the precautionary band of iron clasped around my wrist, there would have been nothing stopping my power from trying to protect me.

I heard the focus embedded in Eroan's reply. He was breathless, as though he climbed the face of a mountain. "If I stop, there is no saying how disjointed the glamour will be. Please, allow me to... focus."

"It's fine," I hissed through gritted teeth. "I'm fine."

Duncan leaned his forehead into my shoulder. I risked a peak and saw no blood, melted flesh, or destruction. There was nothing to suggest I should have been in so much agony. Eroan's fingers were feather-light, but where he touched, it was as though he left poison in his wake.

Gritting my teeth, I leaned into the pain and focused on the body before me. Kayne's head was turned slightly to face me. His wide eyes were all seeing. His skin was an ashen grey. I expected him to blink or move. He didn't. Eroan would turn back to look at him, pausing his work and studying the lines of Kayne's face and the details that one only would see up close. Those moments of painless peace were short-lived. Eroan soon

reached for me again, fingers prepared to mould my face into one that no longer looked like me.

The glamour was about to make me look like Kayne. To steal his face and use it as my own.

Eroan must have noticed my fixation with Kayne. The fey shifted himself in the way, blocking my view of the dead body.

"It may have been many years since, but I remember when your father was sitting before me at your mother's request." Eroan's words distracted me as his thumb smoothed across each of my brows. I felt the hairs bristle and settle. If I had seen my reflection, I would likely have watched as they changed from black to auburn. "It was never my place to question my queen. But for years, I pondered why she had wished for me to glamour a human Hunter. Of course, now I understand."

"He told me," I winced, not at the pain this time, but from the way, the mention of my father and mother dredged up a mental discomfort.

"Having a glamour worked upon you is not a forgettable experience, as I am sure you understand."

I lifted my chin, guided by Eroan's vice-like grip. He studied me down the length of his nose, shifting my face from side to side before continuing again.

"Can you tell me about them?" I asked, feeling silly to do so. "It might help distract me from..." I swallowed my words as a gasp burst out of me. Eroan forced his fingers into my temple, working my skin like the soft bread dough. I felt as though my skull would split.

"I remember his face, the one Julianne commanded me to conceal. Your father was a handsome man. It was not impossible to imagine what had captured your mother's fascination. There is so much about you that looks like him. Your lips full and pale, just as your fathers had been. I see your mother too, which hurts me to conceal."

I blinked and saw the emotion crack across Eroan's long, focused face. A bead of sweat rolled down his temple, mirroring his finger that fell from my own.

"Your cheekbones," Eroan continued, resting a gentle finger upon them. "They are sharp as the mountainous range north of our homeland. I remember when your mother was young, her cheekbones inspired poems from besotted men and women. In fact, if I dare spill her secrets, I remember one girl who particularly enjoyed cursing the apples of Julianne's

cheeks red with kisses. She was a lady in wait from Elmdew, and your mother was merely still a princess."

My chest warmed as a smile bloomed over Eroan's face.

"By the sounds of it, you knew Robin's mother well?" Duncan asked from his perch beside me.

"Of course. Knowing her was one of the greatest honours of my life."

"What else?" I pleaded, grimacing at the unseen fire that devoured my skin.

"The Icethorn's always had the darkest of eyes. Black as night. It was said that the Icethorn's eyes made even the rawest of obsidian jealous," Eroan replied. "Close them for me now. I am nearly finished."

I did as he asked. His hands covered my eyes and pressed. It was no surprise as I cried out. Duncan closed his lips to my ear and whispered. "Breathe, my darling. It is almost over."

By the time Eroan retreated, I was exhausted. I fell forward, leaning on my knees as I tried to catch my breath.

"Do you wish to see?" Eroan asked finally. He wiped his hands down his silken shirt, leaving damp stains upon the material. Once his palms were dry, he produced a small, clasped mirror from his pocket. It was no bigger than his hand and was golden, speckled with azure jewels.

I took it from him. My fingers shook slightly as though the weight was too much to bear. No matter how I convinced myself otherwise, I wasn't prepared to meet my reflection.

"I shall begin working on the Tracker's body,' Eroan announced, sharing a glance at Duncan. "I know the face I will create well. This glamour will not take me as long. Dare I admit I wish he could feel the discomfort I am about to give him?"

"If it makes you feel any better," Duncan replied. "Kayne certainly felt a world of pain for what he has done."

Eroan exhaled heavily, his pink-stained lips quivering. He steeled his expression, flexed his fingers together and moved for the dead body without another word.

I didn't wish to look at Duncan for fear of what I would see as he took my unfamiliar face in. I had yet to see it myself and already wished to lift my nails to my skin and scratch every detail off. Remove every detail that did not belong to me.

"Don't look at me," I said, words fumbling out of my mouth.

"I am," Duncan whispered. "It does not matter what you look like to me. I know the truth behind the lie. I know you."

Duncan encouraged me to lift the mirror. His two fingers held the weight of it, lifting the glass surface into view.

"I don't want to see!"

"Look at me," Duncan urged. "Robin, look at me."

My head didn't turn.

Duncan knew he would not encourage me with words. Instead, he got on his knees before me and took both hands into his own. I studied his face as he fought to hide his reaction. Instinctually, he grimaced, and that made me feel repulsed.

I couldn't blame Duncan for his reaction. He currently looked into the face of a man he believed to be his brother. A man who had betrayed us. A man he had killed. The bruise marks around the real Kayne's neck revealed how he had perished. Yet that was alleged, for Duncan had not spoken a word about it.

"I'm sorry it ended the way it did," I said. "With him."

Duncan's eyes narrowed, and he rolled back his shoulders. "I am not. I am only sorry I didn't figure it out before. It would have saved a lot of pain. Friend or not, he hurt you. You are far more important than anything else."

"And now you are forced to stare into his face until this is over," I replied, smiling before realising who exactly smiled back at Duncan. Which was why his lips hardly so much as twitched.

"You are no longer the only important person in my life," Duncan replied. "So is Eroan here. His survival is as important as yours. The moment we win, and we will, you are coming back here, and Eroan is going to pull every one of his threads apart until he returns you back to me."

"I shall," Eroan answered, turning away from the table. "Stay safe, okay? I can't bear the thought of losing you when I have so many more stories just waiting to share about your mother."

"Then I will have to come back," I replied, standing from the chair with the aid of Duncan's offered hand.

"Indeed, if you haven't got enough motivation to see this through, then you can add that to your list. And, must I say, I am very much ready to return to Icethorn." Eroan bowed. I've missed my home."

"I am finished with the Tracker," Eroan announced, shaking his head as though he was surprised by the tears that snuck up on him. "Is there anything you will need of me before I leave?"

"Only that you will need to pack a bag," I said, offering my thanks with a smile. I felt my adoration for him swell in my chest. "Icethorn, your home, awaits."

"Thank you..." Eroan bowed deeply again, his voice muffled in thanks as his sobs finally overtook him. The quick pattering of his feet reminded me of the lashing of rain upon a window as he left. It was rhythmic and fast.

I stepped forward, pulling free from Duncan's hand, as my eyes fell back on Kayne's dead body. My knees wobbled, but I gripped the edge of the table to steady myself.

It was my face that rested among the white sheets. Not Kayne's. Dark, obsidian eyes. Locks of midnight hair fanned out around my head. Skin was pale as winter's first snow. The subtle point of ears that belonged to a fey, not a human.

"Uncanny," I breathed, reaching for the point of cheekbone that stretched the surrounding skin. It was cold to the touch but real. The image of my face did not fade away or ripple like disturbed water to reveal the image beneath.

It stayed unwavering and there.

"This is my greatest fear, brought to life," Duncan said, his hand perched across his brow as though he blocked out bright light. He turned his back on the table, unable to look anymore.

Whereas I couldn't do anything but look. I marvelled at the face that I knew so well. I replayed Eroan's comments about my features and how similar they were to my deceased parents. Hearing his words in my mind was enough to dilute the horror of looking at my face upon the dead body before me.

"You know, this might just work," I said, speaking my thoughts aloud. "I dare admit it, but it might."

"All we need is a moment of distraction. A way of getting close enough to Aldrick to kill him."

"Presenting him with what he believes to be your dead body is only going to anger him," Duncan said. "You are going to need to be ready."

My cheeks pricked at the thought. I tore my attention from my face and looked back at Duncan, whose eyes beheld a clashing storm of concern.

"That is exactly what I hope," I muttered. "There is nothing more distracting than anger. I want Aldrick to feel it. To lose himself in it. I will

be ready when he does."

Duncan narrowed his dark-forest eyes at me, and the corners of his lips turned upward slowly. "Careful, Robin, that promise of danger will excite me."

I practically witnessed as Duncan caught himself. As though he saw Kayne's face where mine should have been and swallowed his flirtatious urge.

"Tell me it will work," I said, needing to hear someone else believe it was a possibility.

"For our sakes, I hope so. It is our only chance," Duncan replied, keeping his focus on his boots this time.

This was not our only chance; it was our last chance.

And I had to make every moment count.

he sun burned through the final smudges of ominous cloud. I looked up, and all I saw was endless blue.

There was no relief from the heat that warmed the Hunter's leathers I wore. I felt my skin prickle beneath, itching for the promise of fresh air. My entire body seemed to exude sweat. It took great effort not to run a hand through the ginger curls plastered to my sticky forehead.

My foot thumped the ground as we waited for Rafaela to return with the human teleporter. Our one ticket into Elmdew rested on the shoulders of the boy we had kept prisoner for hours. The longer we waited, the thinner my patience grew. I couldn't help but dwell on the time that we had wasted. It was mid-afternoon, hours after the teleporter had returned to Aurelia, and still, we had not left for the spring court and the death that awaited there.

Perhaps I was frustrated because, with each passing moment, my confidence in my plan dwindled. If I waited long enough, I feared I'd give into the inkling thought to give up.

I chewed on the insides of my cheeks, trying not to dwell on what was to come. Lucari chirped on my shoulder, iron claws digging into the padded leather. What I would have given to knock her away from me just to feel my power return.

I flinched every time she moved, expecting that she would discover that I was not her loyal Tracker, but a sheep dressed in wolf fur. Lucari's lack of distrust gave me some hope. If I could trick the hawk, then Aldrick should never be the wiser. And with the Mariflora's sharp nectar currently threading itself through my body and another vial of it hidden within the

inner pocket of my jacket, Aldrick wouldn't have the chance to invade my mind and discover the truth behind this illusion.

"I can feel your heartbeat in your hand," Duncan said, voice muffled by the helmet he adorned. Across the front of it, a white-chalked handprint had been dried across the metal. The symbol of Aldrick, the Hand.

My breath lodged in my throat as I looked at him. Even with his face mostly obscured by the Hunters helmet, seeing him dressed in the dark-brown leathers with a multitude of blades threaded among the straps that enhanced his broad structure reminded me of when I first met him.

"Just don't let go of me," I replied. It must have been strange for Duncan to hear my voice falling from Kayne's lips. He did well to hide his discomfort, but there was still a wariness to his glance. Since Eroan had altered my face into this image, Duncan had not got close enough to kiss me. With what we were about to face, I longed to feel his reassuring mouth on mine. But in the same breath, I couldn't face the thought of him laying his lips on this face.

My lower stomach flipped as Duncan winked at me. If it was not for the helmet, I would have seen the scar upon his face tighten. "Never," he said, lowering his face slightly toward mine.

I glanced back over at the group, searching. As if the person I looked for would've suddenly appeared.

Duncan read my mind, exposing my unspoken worry aloud. "Erix will come."

Excuses flooded to mind. They all were conjured to throw Duncan off my trail of thought. I didn't like to imagine how Duncan might leave, knowing Erix occupied my mind. And it was pointless to lie. To tell him I was not looking for Erix would have been an unfaithful act.

"Will he, though?" I asked.

"I spoke with him, Robin. He has assured me he will come. Erix desires nothing more than to help. To do so, there is something he must do first."

"And that would be?"

Duncan's thumb continued its circular dance across the back of my hand. It may not have been the affection I desired from him, but I willingly accepted the calming effect he offered.

"We need numbers. Erix believes he can add to them but needs time to ____."

"Places!" Althea silenced Duncan as she called across our small band of fey. Like me, each one of them was dressed as Hunters. It was our turn to dress as our enemies and trick the unexpecting. "Rafaela has the boy."

I looked out toward the pathway that led back to Aurelia. Sure enough, Rafaela was there, walking side by side with the powered human.

The sun glowed across her dark skin. Rafaela's wings were not folded away but wide and proud at her back. The larger, grey-toned feathers trailed across the ground behind her. At her side, limped the human. He was young and thin, no more a child than a man. His pock-marked skin and hairless face revealed his naivety. That and the way his posture screamed with his lack of confidence.

The human's eyes trained on the ground as he strolled in line with Rafaela toward us. He gripped his arm as though it were broken, rubbing it up and down to self-soothe himself.

"Why does he walk freely?" Gyah called, authority booming out toward Rafaela.

Panic surged through me as I took the boy in again. Gyah was right. He had no chains binding his wrists or tethering him to Rafaela. There was no evidence he wore iron to prevent him from using the powers that had been given to him. For a moment, I wondered if the boy had a scar above his heart that matched Duncan.

"He is not our prisoner," Rafaela replied calmly, one hand on the hilt of the great hammer that balanced feather-light upon her hip. "I trust Daveed will not flee. Believe it or not, but he wants to help."

I had known that Rafaela had spent time with the Hunter. He was human, and she represented the physical form of the Creator. Never did I imagine she could sink her faith through his shield of disbelief. But, with the boy looking up at her with fiery awe, it was clear she had succeeded.

Tenison hummed throughout our group as they joined us. I realised quickly that Rafaela's open wings were more of a warning to us that she protected the boy. Her knuckles tightened on the handle of her weapon, the squeak of flesh against leather piercing the silence.

Daveed glanced timidly up at Rafaela, who was focused on Lucari perched on my shoulder. Her lips peeled back from the gleaming white of her teeth as she watched the murderous hawk with hungry intent. Rafaela had made it clear what she desired to do with the bird that tore Gabrial to shreds. She just had not been given the opportunity.

Yet.

"Tell them for yourself," Rafaela said sharply, speaking to Daveed all without taking her narrowed eyes from Lucari.

"I... I am sorry. For all of it," Daveed croaked, his high voice cracking like stone.

"Be more precise. Help them understand why we can trust you."

"The Hand, he is not giving us a choice. I never wanted this. I don't want it. He makes us do as he wishes. I can hear him in my head when he is close. Whispering for me to do things I... I..."

"Take your time," Rafaela urged, placing a hand on his shoulder. I watched the calming effect it had on him. He took a deep breath in and blinked to clear the haze of panic haunting his sky-blue eyes.

A chill spread up my spine as I waited for the boy to continue. His bruised face was scrunched in turmoil as he faced unseen battles within his mind.

"How did it come to be that you became caught in his web?" I asked, drawing his attention to me. "The promise of power, or the promise of a world in which you would thrive."

Daveed grimaced as though my suggestive comment had physically struck him. "Neither. They took us from our homes. In the room of mirrors, he killed us with a blade of blood, but we did not die. He made me this... he turned me and uses me. I just... I just want to go home."

"You will go home," Duncan said, oozing fatherly calm. He strode forward with the confidence that made others stand back. "I understand what has been done to you, for the same has happened to me. You are pulled on both sides. But if you help us as we ask, I vow to get you home."

"He has a family," Rafaela added, wide-eyed. Those four words had as much power as the ice that crackled in my blood. We all knew the importance of a family. Some more than others.

Duncan nodded, lips pulled into a tight line as he regarded the Nephilim. "I will ensure that you return to your family, Daveed."

"No," Daveed barked. "The Hand promised... he, he said he would kill them if I ever went back."

"That will not happen," I added, feeling his panic slam into my chest. Rafaela wrapped her arm around the boy's quaking shoulders and held him close. "We," Duncan took my hand once again. "Will make sure the Hand... Aldrick is never a threat to you or anyone else again."

The boy hardened his expression. He held Duncan's stare, searching for any reason he could not believe him. Then he nodded, satisfied there was nothing sinister to uncover. We all witnessed as Duncan's words fuelled Daveed with a confidence that was previously lacking.

Daveed squared his shoulders and puffed out his chest. "Make it hurt," he said. "I want him to know how it feels to die."

"Aldrick will know pain unlike anything he could imagine," Althea added, sympathy hidden beneath her mask of fury. I only saw it through a crack of emotion that lasted only a moment.

"How many of us can you take at one time?" Althea walked through the parted crowd. The helmet was carried in the crook of her arm. A long blade tickled the ground at her side. Garbed in the leathers that fitted her slender, hard body, she looked all the warrior with a whip of red hair twisted into a braid across her shoulder.

"Three," Daveed replied. "Four, at a push."

"Three will be sufficient. If that is what you can do without pushing yourself, then there is no good to come from depleting your energy." One wave of Althea's hand and the group of Cedarfall fey split into groups of that number. I recognised Lady Kelsey among them. There was no stopping her from joining our small army. She thirsted for the same revenge as those she stood amongst.

"Understand that if you betray us, it will not only be you that burns but the home Aldrick stole you from."

Daveed flinched at Althea's warning. Rafaela's wings folded slightly around him.

"I know you have no reason to trust me," Daveed said firmly. "But I promise... I promise you safe passage into Elmdew."

Althea watched him for a moment, then stood back. "As soon as you deliver us safely into Elmdew's borders, I want you to get out of there. Aldrick will kill you first if he knows you are the one dropping enemies behind his lines."

"You must take me directly to Aldrick," I said.

Daveed swallowed hard.

"No harm will come to you," Duncan reassured him. He reached into his pocket and withdrew the spare vial of Mariflora tonic. "Aldrick's attention may be diverted when we deliver the false body to him. However, that is not to say he will not have the chance to invade your mind. Take this, it will keep him out."

"Duncan, no." I longed to reach out and snatch the vial from his hand. "There isn't any more to replace this."

"I cannot and will not allow Daveed to risk himself on our behalf. The tonic is for him."

"But... but," I felt my panic muddle my words. "There is no knowing how long the tonic you've taken will last. What if it fades, and you need another dose?"

"Aldrick will be dead long before the tonic fades," Duncan replied. "Because you are going to finish this. Swift, just like we agreed. In and out."

"In and out," I repeated, trying to convince myself that it would be just that easy.

Daveed's hand shook as he plucked the vial from Duncan's thick fingers. He popped the cork. The sound vibrated through my bones. I watched the vial empty as Daveed knocked it back. The small, protruding lump within his throat bobbed as he downed it in one.

The glass smashed on the cobbled path at his feet.

"Let us not waste any more time," Althea clapped, commanding us all into action. "Daveed, the next part is up to you. Get us into the nest, so we can burn it from the inside out."

IT WAS hard to breathe as we waited for Daveed to return. Each length of time between his teleportation grew longer. When he finally returned each time, he looked more exhausted than when he left. His face had paled to a deathly white, whereas his eyes were ringed with a dark crimson.

There was no warning before the air crackled, split and popped into a bundle of unfurling light as the human boy revealed himself. Each time, although I burned holes into the ground he would materialise back to, the shock of his return didn't dilute. Perhaps it was more relief that he returned rather than surprise at his sudden appearance.

Althea and Gyah had been among the first group Daveed took. Lingering across the lips I nibbled nervously on, was my final plea to Althea and Gyah before she left. Don't come for me until you find them. Save Jesibel and the other fey he has imprisoned. Leave Aldrick to me.

I hoped they listened.

Unlike my pending destination, Daveed delivered the small, disguised army to another place within Elmdew. From what Daveed had revealed, the capital city, Rinholm, had become the heart of Aldrick's efforts. The dead King's castle was being used as his base of attack. That was where we would go.

There was no knowing if Daveed had not delivered the rest of them to Aldrick. With the deception that I had grown accustomed to, it was easier to distrust the boy. My conscience reacted naturally to that emotion. Each time the air split, and he stepped through the spindle of light, my concerns only grew.

Rafaela was the last to be taken. A heavy, black-woollen cloak was draped over her shoulders, barely concealing her wings. Her presence demanded attention whether they were hidden or not. No garment would conceal her for long. One look from the wrong person, and they would see the tips of grey feathers or the awkward bulge of a golden hammer protruding from the cloak like a bone out of skin. Which was why Daveed would drop her off far from Rinholm Castle. She would wait for our agreed sign before revealing herself.

"It is my job to worry about you," Rafaela had said before she departed. Part of me wondered if she spoke so slowly to give Daveed time to recover from his last jump. It was a term he had used when describing how his newfound power worked. He could only travel to a place he had physically visited before. "Do not concern yourself with me, Robin. I shall be fine."

"Until we are all reunited, I am afraid the worrying will persist," I replied, taking her hand in mine. Our grip on one another was strong. We stepped in close, connected as one.

"This is only the beginning. The first hurdle of many more to come. Stopping Aldrick will not undo the damage he has inflicted on the realms. He is merely a wall through which we must travel to get to the next. Remember, he is only one weak old man. We only give evil strength if we hold on to fear of it... so be strong."

Rafaela's words occupied me whilst Daveed split the air and beckoned her through. It left Duncan and me alone. Except, we didn't utter a word to one another. There was comfort in just having him by my side. Even if he said something, I don't think I would have heard it over the roaring in my ears.

Not long after, Daveed returned. Duncan had to catch him as he stumbled out of his spindle of light.

"You've done well, Daveed, careful now. One last trip to go." Duncan grunted his praise as he righted the human boy before turning his attention to the sheet-bound body at his feet. Until now, it had laid across the ground, hardly more than an afterthought.

Kayne's limp body collapsed over Duncan's shoulder. If this was another time, under different circumstances, I might have admired his unearthly strength. But I couldn't spare much attention to the dead body nor the visible pain that sliced across Duncan's dark gaze.

"Once you take us to Rinholm, I want you to jump as far away as you can," I said, focusing on the panting human who could hardly stand up without burdening his weight on his thighs.

Daveed blinked slowly, eyes heavy and mouth drawn thin with tiredness. "If I can manage it."

"For your sake, I hope you can," Duncan grunted as he balanced himself with the added weight of the dead he carried. "Let's go."

"Erix isn't coming, is he?" I asked, wishing I had the strength to not let his abandonment hurt me.

Duncan's silence spoke volumes. If it was not for the helmet covering his expression, I was confident I would have seen him wince. "No. Erix is not coming, Robin. I'm sorry."

I stared at his dark-green eyes through the slits of metal. "You knew?" There was a pause. "I did."

My nails bit into my palms. I hardly registered the injury.

"Coward," I spat. "I should have known. You heard what Althea commanded of him. He should be here; he is meant to protect me. It's his duty, and once again, Erix has turned his back on me when I needed him most."

I couldn't stop the words from falling out of me. Duncan didn't stop me, either.

"Erix has not turned his back on you."

A part of me wanted to scream at Duncan, but something stopped me. "It doesn't matter. Daveed, take us."

"Erix will come—."

"I don't wish to discuss him anymore. Enough of my energy has been wasted on trusting people who never deserved it in the first place. Erix, Kayne. They do not differ from one another."

Duncan reached out for me. I sensed his want to say something, but I pulled out of his reach.

"Daveed, do it," I snapped this time, hardly caring for my tone.

I saw the human boy hesitate out of the corner of my eye. I caught how he looked at Duncan as though searching for a command.

"Now!" I felt my power rise to the emotion I felt. Lucari chirped, digging her iron claws into me. The power dispersed before it even had the chance to show itself. "Please."

I gathered the storm of dark emotions and took it in my hands. There would be a time, soon when I would release it. Like a rabid beast chained and baited with bloodied meat, I dangled the promise of vengeance before me. It was Aldrick who hung on the hook.

As Daveed thrust his hand downward, peeling the air in two and drawing them apart like curtains with the arrival of dawn, I walked past Duncan. He watched me like the hawk perched on my shoulder.

"Enough men have lied to me, Duncan. Please think again before you consider joining the list of their names," I warned.

"Please, Robin. I don't want to go like this. Let me explain."

I grimaced at the sad edge to his deep voice. It would have been easy to turn back to him and give in. Instead, I forced my feet forward, closing into the spindle of shimmering light. "I don't wish to know. I need to focus."

"Robin!" Duncan tried a final time.

"My name is Kayne," I barked, recoiling at my hateful tone.

Duncan didn't respond.

I felt all the parts of the man I had to play. There was no time for remorse. No time to dwell as Duncan's heavy steps sounded behind me. There was only Daveed and his power and the man I was prepared to kill on the other side of it.

he air was bright with the sweet floral scent of flowers. From the moment we slipped out of Daveed's spindle, it was as though a wall of fragrance slammed into me.

I inhaled deeply, unable to stop the pleasant smell from invading my nose and spreading its presence down the back of my throat. I swallowed hard, trying not to cough.

Daveed fell to his knees upon a bed of daffodils the colour of freshly churned butter. Their green stems snapped beneath his weight; his fingers smeared with pollen as he dug his fingers into the ground to catch his breath.

Panic gripped me as I surveyed our destination. Aldrick was not in sight. No one was.

"Get up," I hissed, scanning the surrounding area for threats besides the tangling of tall, stemmed flowers around my ankles. "I told you to take us to Aldrick!"

"I... I. Can't." Daveed's back arched as he spluttered his excuse to the ground.

"Robin, give the boy a moment." I cringed at the ice in Duncan's tone.

"We don't have a moment. He was supposed to take us to Aldrick, and instead, we are left stranded in a..."

"Gardens." The young boy muttered. "These are the gardens set at the back of Rinholm Castle."

I threw my gaze across the expansive view around me. Much like the sea of daffodils that Daveed currently lay among, there were other patches of colour spread across the flat landscape. Towering crimson tulips bowed in the slight breeze. Lilac hyacinths swelled among one another like bunches of ripe grapes ready for the picking. Ahead, I could see stone walls that had been built into a partition of arches. Vines draping with colour pulled at the ancient bricks, leaving little of the natural stone behind the vivid green and dew-wet flowers.

"What good is a garden? I need Aldrick."

Daveed lifted his face and stared directly through me. His skin was almost grey, his wide eyes rimmed with red, irritated veins. "I'm sorry, but I can't do it anymore."

A scream clawed up my throat. I almost gagged as I swallowed it back down.

Before I could open my mouth to demand anything further, Duncan spoke with a voice laced with understanding. "Rest. When you get your strength back, I want you to return to Aurelia. The fey waiting there will keep you safe. Can you do that?"

Relief smoothed all the turmoil from Daveed's face. He gritted his teeth as his arms shook to keep him from falling face-first into the bed of flowers. "If you want to reach the Hand, you'll need to walk north." Daveed's worn gaze travelled in the direction he spoke of. "You will hear Rinholm before you see it. Aldrick is in the old King's throne room. His room of mirrors. He never leaves it."

Duncan shrugged Kayne's body over his shoulder into a better position before looking in the direction Daveed had spoken of. "You've done well, Daveed. Be safe."

The human boy looked at me, and the softness dissolved into something harder. Perhaps he waited for me to add my thanks. I couldn't conjure a word, not as my eyes itched with fire. My nose tickled as pollen invaded it. With each swallow, I felt the sticky residue cling to the back of my throat with defiance. Spring was beautiful for many, but not for me.

Lucari chirped, perhaps sensing my discomfort. I tugged on the leather band tied around her claw, which I had gripped around my fist like a leash. I walked ahead, carelessly stamping over unnamed flowers, which bled across the dark leather of my boots. Duncan kept up the pace behind me.

His silence propelled me forward.

DAVEED WAS RIGHT; I heard Rinholm before I saw it. As I traversed the sprawling glades of flowers, each neatly arranged and separated into patchwork sections throughout the garden, I caught the rumble of thunder. At least, that was the only thing to explain it. Except, there was not a single cloud in the bright sky, nor was the sound Duncan's doing.

I slowed to a stop. Duncan joined me at my side, his arm brushing mine only slightly.

"Is that?" He asked, voice buried beneath another explosion of sound.

We both looked up to the pale skies around Rinholm's crown. My mouth dried as horror washed over me. "It is."

"At least there is no doubt Aldrick is inside."

The three monstrous Draeic circled Rinholm like birds enclosing prey. Tension snapped at the leather cord as Lucari attempted to take flight. Her small wings were powerful enough to cause me to wrestle against her.

My power rose as I watched the creatures twist through the sky in a never-ending loop. Something drew them to Rinholm, and deep down, I sensed it too. A drawing influence that I didn't wish to pay attention to. Reminiscent of when I left Icethorn and recognised its siren call. This feeling was similar but much quieter. Less like the pounding of a drum in my chest, but the soft, lulling whisper-like waves lapping against my soul.

"We should've excepted nothing less," I said, biting down the fear I felt for the creature's presence. "Let's continue. We don't know how long the Mariflora will last, and since you gave up your final dose, it is better we end this before you put our efforts at risk."

Duncan flinched, recoiling from my words as a sour expression pinched his face. I sensed he wished to say something back. Part of me wanted him to. Whatever retaliation that was promised by his parted lips soon dispersed, and he took up walking ahead of me the final distance to Rinholm's boundary.

The castle was smaller than I expected. A modest manor set in the heart of acres of fields. The castle was not surrounded by a city like Aurelia or embedded into the mountain face like Imeria. It was nestled from civilians and would have once been a place that encouraged peace among its visitors.

As we stepped beneath the hulking shadows cast down from the Draeic that flew high above us, I couldn't help but recognise that peace was far behind us.

I straightened my back as the hive of Hunters revealed themselves beyond Rinholm's main entrance. The metal gate towered skyward, its design reminiscent of vines and flowers in full bloom. At its top, the vines developed sharp-pointed thorns. I imagined it kept anyone from climbing over because the design continued as far as I could see on either side.

Like the plump, coin-sized bees that danced among the hedge of drooping snowdrops, the Hunters spread themselves out as we took our final steps toward the castle's gate.

"Lost?" A grizzly voice asked. I felt the weight of his dark eyes as he looked from me to Duncan and then to the pointed-ear body flung across his shoulder.

"The Hand expects our presence," I spoke out, forcing as much of Kayne's confidence by deepening my voice and keeping the trembling at bay. I wasn't scared of the Hunters. No, I was fearful of what I would do to each of them if I lost control. Thank Altar for Lucari's iron claws, as they kept my power at bay.

I looked at each one of them, memorising their faces. As their eyes fell on the illusion of the fey body that Duncan carried, I recognised the boiling tempest of hate inside of them. Oh, how I wished to give them something to justify such an emotion. But I had to wait. Their time would come after Aldrick was dealt with.

I ground my teeth together as the man released a barking laugh. It was soon silenced as Duncan discarded Kayne's body to the ground with a careless thump. Even with the gate between us, the Hunter jolted back. My face looked blindly toward the skies with glass eyes and lips stained blue with death.

"Tell the Hand we have delivered the Icethorn key to him. I am sure he will then allow us entry."

I was certain I saw fear in the Hunter's face as he looked down at the body. "Is he... dead?"

The skyward creature roared above the final word.

"Stone cold," Duncan growled, asserting each word with the attitude he once imbued as Aldrick's general.

"Has he bled?"

The question would have been strange, but what we knew of Aldrick bleeding his victims made little hesitation as I replied.

"Not a scratch." I blinked and saw Queen Lyra strung up by thick rope around her neck with gashes across her wrists like jewellery crafted from rubies.

I wondered if Duncan recognised the relief across the Hunter's face.

Without another word, the gates opened. Duncan stepped over Kayne's body without sparing it another glance. I followed, keeping my chin raised.

Kayne's body was left for Hunters to scoop from the ground. It took three of them to carry it inside Rinholm.

"Where is the teleporter?" The Hunter asked as we entered the cool shadows of Rinholm's main atrium. I didn't need to press him further to know he spoke of Daveed. "The lad left hours ago—"

I kept my gaze forward, focused on the back of Duncan's head. "That pathetic excuse of a Hunter? Was it you who sent such a tired, weak boy to collect us from Cedarfall? He could hardly stand when he returned to us. All this time wasted because someone misinformed picked a child to get us."

"If you've got a problem, bring it up with the Hand. I'm sure he would love to hear you moan," the Hunter replied, smiling in jest as he looked at Duncan.

"We shall do just that," Duncan replied. The heat in his voice had the Hunter swallowing back his laugh. Even he sensed Duncan's authority as though it oozed from his very skin.

I felt the urge to smile. Not because I cared if the Hunter believed us. It was the tickling presence that spread throughout my skull. The further we paced into Rinholm, turning down its long corridors and passing through the barren, silent rooms, the more the feeling intensified.

Aldrick. He reached out for my mind, looking to unveil our secrets before we reached him. But, unlike before, his presence was only a brush of a feather. It was almost pleasant. The mariflora worked. It kept my mind as my own, allowing Aldrick to only grace it as a visitor, rather than invade it completely.

Duncan turned his head slightly. Through the slit in his helmet, I saw his eyes grace me. He felt Aldrick too.

"I would have expected Rinholm to be a fortress," Duncan said. "Where are our numbers?"

"Is that bitterness I sense? Are you pissed that you've not been trusted as one of his chosen?" the Hunter retorted with a snort. "Maybe the delivery

of the Icethorn boy will put you in his good graces."

"That would be an honour," Duncan replied.

"What if Rinholm is attacked?" I asked. "Shouldn't the Hand be more protected in case of a fey invasion?"

"Have you not seen the fucking monsters the Hand has collected?" Although his tone dripped with sarcasm, the Hunter looked at us like we were stupid. "The draeic protect him. The only fey that grace these halls are dead ones."

My blood chilled.

"I thought he would have kept the fey close?" I asked, mind whirling quickly to come up with something to say without prying too obviously. "He promised me power if I brought Robin... the Icethorn key to him. Doesn't he need the blood of the fey to give it to me?"

"The Hand gives us all the opportunity to be changed," the Hunter replied as the group ahead slowed before two closed doors. They were made from carved wood, depicting all different types and shapes of wood-toned flowers. Much like the main gate, we had entered through, it was clear the decoration continued inside the Castle. Even the muddied-worn carpet we trod across had peonies woven in shades of blue, pink, and purple. "Don't worry, the Hand keeps his prisoners elsewhere but close."

If the fey were not in Rinholm, then Althea and the rest of them had been brought here for no reason. I had put them in more danger.

I couldn't dwell on the thought as the doors creaked open.

Light blinded me from within the room ahead. I lifted a hand to my brow just to shade my eyes from the sudden burst of it.

"Enter." A meek voice croaked through the glare. Enter. The command filled my mind. It was strong and forceful, but it did little to move my legs. My will was my own. If it was not for Duncan, who stepped forward, I would have likely stayed rooted to the spot.

Those carrying Kayne's body entered the room first. Their rushed footsteps echoed across the smooth-stone floor like the pattering of rain. I forced my chin up as I followed them. Duncan hung back until I was at his side. It took great restraint not to reach out and clasp his hand.

Lucari screeched with glee and launched herself into the air. I let go of the leash and allowed her to be free.

She glided toward Aldrick at the far end of the grand room. From the folds of heavy-woollen blankets rested across his lap, he lifted an aged, thin

arm which shook violently as he welcomed the hawk.

I heard his broken, gravelly voice greet Kayne's hawk, but it mattered little of their reunion as I cast my attention around the room.

Every part of the wall and ceiling had been covered with mirrors. All different shapes, designs and sizes fit together like a puzzle until little of the original stone was left visible. I tried not to stare at my reflection as I paced toward Aldrick. There were hundreds of me, from all sides, revealing every inch of my stoic expression.

He returns to me, my most trusted warrior. How I have looked forward to seeing you. My son found his way back to me and comes bearing the greatest gift of all.

I stopped just shy of the throne and bowed until I faced the floor.

"It should be I..." Aldrick took a rasping breath in. His throat clicked as though it was filled with sharp stones. "That should bow to you. But alas, my body is not as forgiving as yours."

By the time I straightened up, Aldrick was frowning at the dead body carried in the Hunter's arms.

"I would have liked to have been there to watch the life drain from that boy's body." Aldrick stopped talking aloud. Instead, he forced his piercing will into my head. As before, when he spoke with his mind, the voice brimmed with clarity and boomed with youthful strength. The far opposite of how his physical form portrayed itself.

At least I will be present as his blood drains until he is left nothing more than a husk, with not a drop to spare.

Aldrick was swaddled within a cocoon of blankets. They pooled around the throne he sat upon, shirking him into a weak image of the man I had last seen. Wrinkled skin hung from his bone-sharp face like sun-dried scraps of leather. His eyes were glassy and distant as he looked at me. Across the little skin that he didn't hide beneath his coverings, I recognised the faint lines of scars. Marks that had not been there before. Likely gifts left from when Seraphine pushed the gilded mirror atop him during our escape from Lockinge all those weeks ago.

"Have you nothing to say?" Aldrick said through a scowl that deepened the many wrinkles marring his face.

I dug my teeth into the inside of my lip until I could taste blood. Duncan shuffled nervously behind me, likely sensing as Aldrick forced his presence

back through our minds. I wondered what the mariflora would have shown him? Whatever it was, he withdrew briskly and showed no signs of distrust.

"I'm sorry," I said, forcing my voice to sound like anything but my own. Eroan's glamour didn't run that deep. "I mean you no disrespect. I suppose locating the right words proves difficult when faced by you. After all this time, I never thought I would have made it back."

"I never doubted you," Aldrick replied. "Without your efforts, I would never have made it out of Lockinge." You have been there every step of the way to ensure we are not stopped. I understand the weight of a lie, and you have been buried by them. "With the return of Duwar, you will be a general of the highest orders. It is your reward for your persisting loyalty."

Lucari eyed me from her perch on Aldrick's arm. Her talons pierced his flesh but didn't draw blood. Aldrick didn't care or seem to notice.

There was nothing stopping me from killing him.

The few Hunters who had come into the room couldn't stop me or my power. I sensed Duncan's energy as though it buzzed around my ears. Part of me wondered if it was my imagination or if his own electrifying power leaked into the room's atmosphere.

"I wish to show you something," Aldrick announced. "Would you entertain an old man?"

I stepped closer to him. "I couldn't refuse you."

No, *you could not*. His inner voice had force to it, as though he willed to bend me to his command. I had to pretend it had that effect, otherwise, he would catch me out before I had the chance to strike.

"Bring the Icethorn's body," Aldrick spoke to the Hunter's carrying Kayne. "Let us show our guests what their efforts have aided in."

Lucari shot away from Aldrick but didn't return to me. In fact, she flew in circles around the room just to stay away. I waited for Aldrick to notice, but he was focused on the sudden appearance of more Hunters who moved, emotionless, to the back of the throne and pushed it. To my surprise, it moved. Wooden wheels screeched across the slabs as Aldrick was wheeled toward me. I hardly moved out of the way before one wheel ran straight over my foot.

"I don't like surprises," I said, the words tumbling out of me.

Duncan inhaled sharply.

Aldrick raised a shaking hand, flecked with liver spots. Those pushing his wheeled throne stopped. He was now at my side, between Duncan and me. From his perch among the mounds of blankets, he glared directly through my eyes.

I refused to look away. He was so close that I couldn't breathe without inhaling the stale stench. If I reached out my hand and touched his thin skin, I would have allowed my ice to devour him.

I lifted my hand slowly. Duncan moved, but I couldn't care why. Not as I focused on Aldrick, who watched me expectantly.

"The gate should be no surprise to you," Aldrick said, so suddenly I almost stumbled back. "Come, see what I have forged."

My legs betrayed me. I couldn't dare so much as lift my eyes from the spot on the floor where Aldrick had only just been.

Perhaps I will allow you to pierce the Icethorn's flesh. We will watch as the third key is bound, and the gate weakens with its addition.

"And it works?" I asked as dread sliced its fingers down my spine. I couldn't control the bite of panic that coated each word like thick honey.

"The draeic are drawn to it for a reason. It calls to them like a beacon," Aldrick replied, wheels screeching in chorus with his tired voice. "Their presence here alone confirms our victory."

I locked eyes with Duncan. He had pulled the helmet from his face, revealing moon-wide eyes that reflected the same horror that turned my limbs to stone.

"End this," Duncan mouthed, but Aldrick was back in my mind, forcing his will. Like the puppet I was to play, I moved toward him before he had the chance to see that I hadn't followed.

Before I could act, I saw something in my peripheral. Movement in the mirrors behind Duncan. My knees almost gave out as the figure of brimstone, fire, and shadow stepped forward.

Duwar. It was here. Duncan noticed my change in expression. I saw it in the rise of his dark brows and the softening of his eyes. Panic surged through me as I felt the demon God bore through my soul with its fiery stare. Before my knees gave way, I snapped my attention back to Aldrick.

He had his head turned slightly, regarding me through a side-eye. I sucked in a breath, hissing through gritted teeth.

Kayne, the gate is a success. Because of you, Duwar shall be freed.

*e have been deceived.*Rinholm was not empty of Hunters as we had been made to believe. As we followed Aldrick through the castle, the hallways and rooms became thick with bodies. The stench of stale, sticky skin infected the air, successfully burying the sweet kiss of spring.

They were like statues. Unmoving and frozen, guarding the inner castle like a forest of waiting soldiers.

Duncan kept close to me. If I wished to reach out, I would have brushed my fingers across his waiting body behind me. His solid presence was a shield at my back, and I was thankful for it. With the countless eyes following our every move, I couldn't do anything but keep my gaze set on the back of Aldrick's thin-silver-haired head as his presence parted the walls of Hunters like a rock did to a river.

"Pardon the audience," Aldrick said, turning his face slightly until I glimpsed his hooked nose and drooping chin. "Our creation requires the best of our numbers to protect it. Each man and woman has been picked and would sacrifice themselves willingly to ensure the gate is safe from those who would wish to see it destroyed."

"And you trust them all?" I asked.

A shiver coursed up my arm as a smile twisted Aldrick's face. "I have peered through every thought and every memory that occupies their minds. There is not a shadow that I have not infiltrated. Each of these brave humans has laid themselves bare for me. I trust them all, not because they have earned it, but because I have judged them and found them worthy."

Does that answer your inquiry?

"Yes," I replied aloud. If Aldrick heard the frozen sharpness of my voice, he didn't react to it. "It does."

We finished our short journey in silence. I took the time to map out our surroundings or the little I could see through the haze of Hunters standing around us. All I could do was memorise the turns. Keeping a trail clear in my mind for a way back... if that was ever an option. The second I killed Aldrick, we would have a wave of Hunters ready to fight for him. I was suddenly thankful for the proximity of our friends, even if I didn't know where they were. When the time came, I would need them here.

The castle walls receded, giving way to an open garden brimming with light. If there had been doors to exit through, they had been removed. From the jagged walls, it seemed something had torn it free with force.

The garden revealed itself slowly the further I followed into it. I couldn't see much through the multitude of bodies, but I could hear everything. As I stepped out into the cooler air, I ducked with a gasp as the draeic made their presence known. It was above this place that they flew in their endless circle, chasing one another's tails in a circle of dark, scaled flesh.

Only Duwar's enemies should dread their hounds. Aldrick pierced through my mind. You are his champion, Kayne. You have nothing to fear.

The faint pulling that I had felt when we first arrived had returned. Perhaps it never disappeared, but I simply grew used to its call. Now, stepping free into the open garden within the heart of Rinholm castle, it spiked with intensity.

Like the draeic, the gate called to me. I am its key.

Four mounds of dark stone speared through the earth and reached up to the heavens. Labradorite. Altar's bones. Even from a distance, I could understand their sheer height and size. Decay spread beneath them. Like blood pooling from the body of a victim, the stones drew the life from the grass bed, turning it brown and wilting flora until they were unrecognisable.

I blinked and saw Gabrial's vision. It was as if this scene had been plucked directly from it and recreated before me. She had shown me the gate the Nephilim had protected in Irobel, but here one waited before me. Different in location, but the details were all the same.

Aldrick was wheeled directly through the circle the stones created. Whispers of silver-grey mist twisted around his chair, disturbed by his

presence. I hadn't noticed the sea of it hanging inches from the floor as though repulsed by it.

Duncan kept me walking, his firm hand pressing into my back. I didn't care if anyone noticed. It was the least of our concerns. Instead, I took the quiet to filter through every conversation that Kayne had stolen information from. He had always been there, stealing knowledge and sending it to Aldrick.

Kayne knew of our plans to infiltrate Lockinge. It was he who tipped Aldrick off. Jesi had been taken solely to punish me for Duncan's affections. What else had he gleamed from me and shared with Aldrick?

The Nephilim had taught us of labradorite properties and uses, and Kayne took everything we learned and handed it to Aldrick. Or had he? What I saw before me was the physical manifestation of his deception.

"Would you care to do the honours?" Aldrick asked, arms open as he beckoned me toward him. At the side, his Hunters fussed over Kayne's body. He was placed delicately at the base of one stone pillar and left slumped against it.

I remember all the things you wished to do to him. Now is your chance. Even if his soul has departed, you can still leave your mark on the King's skin. You have been patient for this moment. Come. Bleed the boy dry. For Duwar.

"For Duwar," I muttered, stepping away from Duncan, whose fingers dropped hesitantly away.

Like the interior of Rinholm, its exterior was decorated with Hunters. All around the outer edges of the garden, a line of them waited. Watching. I felt every eye burning a hole through me. I risked a quick glance around. There were too many for me to take. There was no telling if the Hunters were powered with fey blood or mundane, but regardless, I couldn't comprehend the number of them.

I wondered if they recognised the internal battle I suffered. Was it plastered across my face as each step toward the gate was like wrestling against the tide of an ocean? The curls of mist were corporeal, like fingers gripping onto my boots, trying to get a hold of them. My footsteps grew heavier the further I walked, and I was certain I felt a heavy vibration from the ground, as though it growled in threat or hummed softly in greeting.

"Isn't it useless without the final key?" I asked, wishing to stall Aldrick with my questions. "Elinor still roams free. What good is the gate without

"All is in hand, dear boy. Thanks to your insight, we were ahead of the Oakstorm's attack on our eastern borders. The summer court is fractured. It would not surprise me if their Queen were returned to me by her late husband's supporters. From what I have learned, Doran would have been an interesting man to break bread with."

I was not surprised to learn of Aldrick's knowledge of our plans. Part of me wondered if Kayne had revealed Elinor's reasons for the attack on Elmdew. Did he already know that it was meant as a distraction for this very reason?

"Tell me what you need me to do with... him," I said, biting my nails into my palms to still my panic.

"Bleed him dry," Aldrick rasped. "The stones, much like their namesake as Aldrick's bones, will contain the Icethorn power. Just as ribs house the heart or the skull shields the brain, the stones will devour the key. Stain the ground red. Feed the gate."

One look at Duncan and I caught the shake of his head. His dark forest eyes were wide, pleading. They screamed for me not to do it.

"Surely you would prefer to be the one to do it?" I asked, sauntering toward the slumped body. The second I took a blade and cut into Kayne's skin, this would all be over. "I brought him for you."

"I flayed the Elmdew King and his consort." Aldrick frowned as he spoke. It was the first time I noticed his impatience. "Once you skin your first fish, you have skinned them all. I admit I allow you to do this because Robin is past the point of putting up resistance. It is not as enticing when their minds are... quiet."

I swallowed hard. "I don't have a knife."

Aldrick clapped his crooked hands. "Supply him with a blade."

Before the command was completed, the Hunter closest to me shot forward. I tried not to allow my hand to tremble as I reached out and grasped the hand of the plain dagger held out for me. As my fingers curled around the leather-wrapped blade, I felt a shock of warmth. It was warm, the leather slick and sticky as it fitted into my palm.

Warm hazel eyes glared back at me. The helmet did little to hide the bridge of freckles and a strand of fire-ruby hair. Her heat alone revealed who hid behind the Hunter's outfit.

Althea.

One minute she was there, the next, she melted back into the wall of Hunters she had come from. Before I turned my back on them, I looked across the line. I searched for others that seemed out of place. Gyah, or Lady Kelsey. But among the line-up, I couldn't identify Althea again. I just had to hope they were all there, like Althea, waiting to attack if the time required.

"You must have been disappointed to have missed the murder of the Cedarfall Queen," I said, voicing the confidence with rolled-back shoulders and a raised chin. It was easy to see Aldrick as the weak man he was. Curled up in a chair, with the inability to even raise a hand long enough from its armrest. I glared down at him, hearing the leather of the warm blade squeak in my grasp. "Perhaps you would like me to describe it to you?"

Aldrick's lips pinched into a thin, tight line. I felt his power press into my mind again, searching as the beginnings of distrust were planted. The mariflora kept his will at bay but did little to dilute his vile presence.

"I do hope that is not regret I am sensing?" Aldrick asked.

"Regret," I echoed, feeling my power swell in my chest. "No, not regret. I just thought you might like to know what you have achieved?"

Aldrick's eyes traced me. He pressed a bent finger to his lips. "No. I do not care how she perished. What matters is the Cedarfall key was collected and brought to me. That is where her power now resides." Aldrick pointed to the large stone at the north of the forged circle. "As you will soon watch, it is like watering a flower on the brink of death. The stone will devour the key and hold it. If you were cursed with fey heritage, you would sense the gate. It grows stronger with the presence of each key."

Oh, I felt it. The humming beneath my feet and the way I longed to reach out and dust my fingers across the stone at my back. It called to me.

"Death seems like a steep price to pay." It was hard not to smile at Aldrick's reaction. He leaned forward, grasping the arms of his chair as he attempted to make his frail body look larger.

"They could have opened the gate for Duwar freely. Instead, they choose to stand against us. Their death is merely a means to an end," Aldrick seethed, spit dampening the neckline of his stained tunic. "Enough of this. Kayne, finish the task, or I will take your hesitation for weakness and act accordingly."

Without taking my eyes off Aldrick, I lowered myself to my knees. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Duncan hesitate. If only I could infiltrate his mind and tell him what I knew. That our allies were around us. We were not alone.

My fingers wound through the dark hair of the dead body. I tugged it hard, pulling the head back and exposing the white of the neck. My neck. Aldrick's eyes seemed to light with excitement. It was like he was a child, looking at the most delicious of treats. He followed the slow lift of the knife as I brought it to the skin.

"That's it," Aldrick breathed, relaxing back into his chair as his tongue traced his lower lip. There was a hunger in his expression as his eyes focused on the dead body I drew into my lap. "Allow the blood to fall upon the stone, and it shall do the rest. Let us all watch as it leeches the Icethorn of everything that made him who he was."

Kayne's body had stiffened in the hours since Duncan killed him. Eroan's glamour did little to conceal the necklace of bruises that encircled his neck. I brushed the sharp edge of the blade against the soft skin of Kayne's neck.

I longed to watch as the excitement drained from Aldrick's face. If only I could memorise the moment the realisation struck that he had been deceived. Witnessing that would make this all worth it.

Duncan tore the helmet from his head. No one cared to notice him or see the fear that graced his scarred face. I wanted to tell him it was ok. But all I could offer was a flicker of a smile.

Angling Kayne's neck toward the stone, I felt my skin prickle with its proximity. I could not react, not yet.

I drew the knife across Kayne's neck. His skin split with ease, like a sack of grain did when cursed by a blunt knife.

Blood poured over me, staining my hands crimson. It was cold, powerless. From the gash across Kayne's neck, it spluttered and splashed across the waiting stone.

It was as though the entire audience of Hunters inhaled at the same time. Anticipation was as ripe in the air as the rot that scented it.

I focused on Aldrick and the sickly grin that twisted his face into one of horror. Then, ever so slowly, that mask slipped.

More, give the stone more.

His command was clear, but I ignored it.

Sharp as an arrow, his eyes snapped to me. I had disobeyed his order.

"Were you expecting something to happen?" I asked, releasing my hold of the hair and letting Kayne's body fall limp to the ground at the stone's base.

Aldrick lashed his power into my mind, over and over. It had no effect. I heard his commands but brushed them away as though they were the weak wings of moths. He longed to find out what was happening. He focused all his power and might into controlling my mind, that he howled in frustration.

"So close," I tutted. "Yet so far."

Thunder rumbled as dark clouds spread across the blue expanse, devouring it entirely. The booming rumble made the draeic whimper like scorned puppies. The world grew dark. A sudden fork of blue-white lightning cut across the sky.

"General Rackley," Aldrick growled, turning his attention to Duncan, whose body was sheathed in sparks of white light. "Have you returned to avenge your parents with the power I gave you?"

Duncan shrugged, eyes bleached with power. "Something like that."

"No," I added, dropping the knife and encouraging icy winds to billow around me. "Aldrick, this ends now. You've failed."

A storm of emotion brushed over Aldrick's ancient face. His wrinkled lips pulled back, revealing stained teeth. A bead of sweat traced down his face as he continued stabbing daggers of his power into my mind. Each one snapped and broke. His efforts wasted.

My glamour meant nothing. Aldrick knew what I was. *Who* I was. I heard my name screech through my mind as he pleaded to take control of it.

The force retreated as though scorned by fire.

He looked between Duncan and me. Tension hummed thickly in the distance between us.

"I admit, I am both surprised and impressed," Aldrick said, his voice almost buried beneath Duncan's thunder. When his voice invaded our minds again, it was not to take control. In fact, it was not meant for us at all.

Stop them.

His army of Hunters exploded into action. A wave of leather bodies thrashed toward us. Lightning whipped across the sky, and winds screamed throughout the gardens.

We welcomed the attack. As the bodies swelled toward us, I kept my eyes focused on Aldrick, who disappeared behind the wall of leather and flesh. But he still lurked in my mind, trying to get through.

You shall die. I let my promise fill my thoughts until it was the only thing Aldrick could hear. The failure you are.

y back pressed into labradorite stone as the Hunters continued their attack. I felt the rough edge through my jacket. It scratched at my skin the discomfort reminded me I was very much alive, and this was actually happening.

The ground trembled with the stampede, the air alive with the cry of battle. I steadied my footing, calling forth the power that lurked within, and brought it to the surface. The force split through my skin and exploded in a wave of furious mist that shot forward across the garden. Whatever it touched turned to ice. I felt every rotten blade of grass and flower shatter beneath the force. The first wall of Hunters didn't care for the cloud of mist that greeted them until it was too late. My starved power clung to flesh and spread like a plague. The first humans it graced didn't have a chance to cry out. My ice claimed them. Their bodies froze to the spot so suddenly that the Hunters behind them could not slow down. Humans barrelled through my wall of frozen statues of flesh. The bodies of my victims exploded in smatterings of blood and skin. Many fell, legs left stuck in position like skeletons of trees which exposed bone that my power had turned as brittle as wheat.

I inhaled the cold sharply, drawing it back to myself.

Snakes of pure light crackled at my side. A Hunter, who scrambled carelessly over the pile of dead comrades, gathered themselves and ran toward me. He made it a few steps from the barrier of frozen corpses before he joined them in death. A burst of light struck him. It tore him from his feet. One moment he was racing toward me, the next, his body cracked into another oncoming group of enemies. Melted flesh smeared across those he

hit. Even from a distance, the smell of charred hair, meat and skin suffocated me.

"Are you alright?" Duncan panted, placing his body before mine. It was shrouded with bursts of hot-blue light that charged the air around him.

"They will keep attacking until they are freed from Aldrick's control," I replied. "We either kill every single one of them or the strings that tethers them to him."

I couldn't locate Aldrick amidst the bedlam, but his cry still rang out through my mind.

Take the Icethorn heir. Duwar will bless the brave warrior that sees his blood is spilled upon the stone!

"I need to get you out of here," Duncan said as he sent a chain of his lightning into the Hunters closest. The spark of light shot between four bodies before fizzing back into the static air.

He didn't see the threat of a blade coming in from his side. But I did. I conjured one of my own, spilling my power into a spear of ice that grew into a sword. The cold bite burned into my palm, and I welcomed it. I thrust the cold edge into the belly of the Hunter, who lunged for Duncan. The force ripped the ice from my hand.

As the Hunter fell to the ground, she landed upon the spear and forced it deeper into her belly. She didn't move again.

"Not until Aldrick is killed," I replied, grunting as I gathered a pressure of frozen wind between my palms before sending it into the chest of another Hunter that drew close. "Duncan, I'm not leaving you. We started this together, we end it together."

I expected him to refuse me, but he didn't.

An arch of fire exploded in the distance. It moved with grace and control. It drew the attention of the Hunters and drew them toward it like moths to open flame. It eased the wave of those who tried to reach me.

"Althea?" Duncan breathed, now pressing his back to mine. I felt his deep voice rumble through him. We moved as one unit, throwing power out to anyone that drew close enough to cause risk.

Another burst of unnatural flame answered Duncan's question.

Time was a strange concept when all one could think about when worrying about my life and the life of the man I loved. Knowing we were together made us fight harder and smarter. I growled through my exhaustion, grappling with the adrenaline that would soon wane. Every step

we fought our way from the labradorite stone was slow. It felt as though we were kept in place. Stuck in a web with dwindling hope of getting out.

Aldrick's fuelled commands would quieten, and I grew hopeful that Althea or Gyah would have reached him. But the Hunters did not stop, and Aldrick soon returned with more demanding pleas.

Kill the Icethorn. Duwar will reward you. Do. Not. Stop.

I wished to form words of encouragement to share with Duncan, but I couldn't hold a breath. Even the desire to shout for help, as the wave suffocated us, I couldn't so much as gasp as I threw arrows of ice outward and conjured ripping winds of winter to devour those that got close. And they did. Each attempt was getting closer. Fingers grasped at my skin, and swords were thrust out toward me in the hope it would cut flesh and spill blood.

The draeic beasts didn't discriminate on who they attacked. Their powerful wings forced gusts of scorching, stale air upon us as they dove and picked people from the ground and took them skyward. I heard the terrified screams as bodies were sliced in two by serrated teeth and plucked between the draeic as they fought each to devour the limbs. Blood fell from the sky like rain, splattering across my hair and face as I continued my fight.

Exhaustion crept up on me, a silent assassin. I longed to throw out my power, as I had at Imeria, but I couldn't. Not as the crowd around us was filled with my allies. So, I kept my magic gathered and intimate. Which allowed the Hunters to press closer with each passing second.

A swell of enemies coursed forward as one. Duncan cried out, trying to carve a path through them. It was no good, with every Hunter we killed, another two took their place.

It seemed the tide was changing and not in our favour.

Until something slammed into the ground before us, sending bodies flying in all directions from the force. The comet of gold and grey blurred with speed and barrelled into the unexpecting Hunters that pushed toward us.

I first believed it was a rogue limb dropped from the draeic's jaw until dove-grey wings unfurled, and a golden hammer swung in one wild move that popped skulls like grapes between teeth. By the time Rafaela righted herself, the smooth edge of her weapon was coated in chunks of bone and gore. Her dark skin glistened with the blood of those her fall had killed. The

cream robes she wore had stained to a dark crimson that would never truly be cleaned from it.

"You did not give me a signal!" Rafaela shouted as the flat head of her hammer split the skull of a hunter with ease.

Her presence alone rejuvenated the adrenaline within me.

"I haven't exactly had the chance!" I grunted, ducking as a blade passed over my head, but I thrust pelts of ice forward, tearing the skin from the face of my attacker.

"Focus," Rafaela cried, twisting her wings and knocking multiple humans down with little effort. "Don't let the gate taste your blood. It will not stop drinking until you are empty."

I swallowed hard, aware of the labradorite behind me. Its presence seemed to be the only thing to offer a sense of calm patience. It was waiting for me, stalking my every move.

Rafaela worked her way through the crowd as more Hunters attempted to overwhelm her. And it was working.

Our eyes caught; Rafaela then fell upon the stone at my back. There was no denying the horror that flashed across her eyes. Blood splashed across her forehead, dripping over the sudden furrow of her brows.

Buried in the storm's eye of Hunters, there was no knowing whose side weighed heavy with victory.

Feral, skin-flaying screams split the air. Thunderous roars responded. I could not look up at first, not as a Hunter grappled onto my jacket and pulled with all their might. Stumbling over my footing, I almost fell if it was not for Duncan, who reached out and grabbed my shoulder. His grip pulled hard backward, giving me a moment to thrust another spear of ice straight up from the ground beneath the Hunter. It pierced, at an angle, through his chest and neck. He hung there with wide, all-seeing eyes. It took a moment for death to claim him.

We are close to victory. Aldrick screamed, forcing his voice into every mind. I wondered if it was my deep-rooted exhaustion, or the mariflora that was weakening because, for the first time, I felt his innate demand. For a moment, my soul wished to bend to it.

Duncan fought with a sword he had pulled from the waistband of a Hunter at his feet. He swung it, two hands holding firm. Lightning twisted down the metal of the blade until it glowed a furious red.

"Robin!" Rafaela's muffled cry reached me. Her voice laced with fear for the first time.

I turned back to find her but could no longer see her among the sea of Hunters. As I scanned the crowd, Duncan roaring with each swing of his blade, I noticed that Althea had not announced her location with fire for a while. Nor had I seen Gyah in her Eldrae form. All around me were the angry faces of our enemies whose bodies no longer belonged to them but to Aldrick, who pulled the strings from his unknown location of safety.

I forced three words into my mind. *This must end*.

Give yourself up freely. Aldrick replied quickly, as though he had waited for me to reach out. Hasn't enough blood been spilled? If you stop, I will call back my warriors. No one else needs to die today.

Duncan snapped his head to me. His wide eyes revealed he had heard Aldrick. "This is not..." His teeth parted as he emitted a growl, hacking through the arm of a Hunter before pulling his blade back and diving it through their soft belly. "The time to be the hero. Give him what he wants, and we all die. Aldrick does not know mercy."

Deep down, I knew Duncan was right. I could not trust a word Aldrick spoke.

Give the gate your power. One sacrifice to save them all.

Another scream lit the air. Then another. And another.

I risked a glance and saw the sky filled with winged creatures. Like flies to rotten meat, they swarmed the three draeic. The cloud of grey limbs slashed and picked at the demons whose roars no longer sang with terror but bled with their own fear.

Gryvern. A cloud of claws and gangs attacked the draeic. I felt a drop of blood land upon my upturned face. I lifted a finger to my cheek, and they came back black.

My lips curved upward, and my chest swelled with hope. It took moments for my mind to piece together the strange, unexpected puzzle that was the Gryvern's presence.

Erix sliced through the sky, hands curved into monstrous claws. His growl was low and trembling, matching that of Duncan's thunder. Steel-cold eyes locked on with mine. There was no hesitation as he found me within the crowd from his height.

I'm afraid. I coated my mind with ice and forced the reply back to Aldrick. *You are in no position to compromise with me.*

I thrust out my power, pulling on the dregs that lingered in the deep pit inside me, and pushed outward. The cold blast of winter wind coiled around me and forced the Hunters close enough to fall back.

It let up space ahead of me for a moment, and then Erix was there. Standing inches before me, with his blanket of thin-leather wings blocking out the enemies at our back.

"So, you disappeared and found me an army," I muttered, wishing to reach out and grasp him, just to check he was real.

"Forgive me, I had a feeling we would need help, and I had some *siblings* I thought I should call upon."

The Gryvern cried out in unison. I sensed their glee within the highpitched nature of their noise.

"You can control them?" I asked.

"Not now," Erix replied, flashing two sharp canines that overlapped his lower lip. "When this is over, I will tell you everything."

Duncan cried out; his voice pitched with pain. I glanced over Erix's shoulder and watched as Duncan disappeared into the wall of Hunters. Even as he drowned within the bodies, he fought for his life. The crack of a jaw as his fist connected. The snap of a bone at his elbow jolted into someone's face. Then he was gone, just like that. Gone.

I offer this to you one more time, give your power, or Duncan Rackley dies.

"No!" I screamed as my power became a blizzard, drowning out all other noise. My heartbeat filled my ears, my throat and even shuddered painfully through my bones.

Erix sensed my action but was too late to stop me.

Then I ran, thrashing out deadly cold before me.

Erix followed at my back, wings propelling him forward.

I threw myself into the same wall of hands that took Duncan from me. I clawed through them, caring little as my nails tore with flesh. My skin burned with the frozen kiss of ice. Anyone who touched me would feel pain until it was my last chance.

Erix was never far behind. He forged a path at my side. The tipped talons on his wings swung and stabbed, his claws turned skin to ribbons and his teeth buried into anything he could reach until his face was masked in blood.

Give him back to me!

I couldn't help but plead.

Give up the key.

Don't hurt him. Please don't hurt him.

The soft chuckle vibrated through my mind. Goosebumps puckered across my arms as it rang like a bell through my skull.

"Fight them, Duncan," I shouted, my voice rough as shattered stone.

I could no longer see Erix. I looked around at the glaring faces of Hunters with their greedy hands and fingers that pinched my skin and pulled my hair. My chest pressed inward. I tried to breath, but my ribs constricted and squeezed tight onto my lungs.

"Okay!" I screeched, wishing for my voice to tear across the crowd and pierce Aldrick. "I won't fight you anymore!"

Stop.

The word was final. It was meant both for me and for the army of Hunters.

My knees hit the bloodied mess of the ground. There was no warning to put out my arms, so my face took the brunt of the fall. Everything went dark and quiet. I dared open my eyes for what I might find. I waited, curling my body into the foetal position, waiting for more pain, more hands and fists and nails and blades.

Nothing.

"Here lies a King, cowering in a pit of dirt and death. What a sight."

The mass of Hunters had moved. Now, they waited in a circle around me.

And Aldrick was there, mud splattered up the wheels of his chair and sticky among the woollen blankets across his lap. Besides that, he was untouched. Unscathed, whereas I felt like my soul had been flayed from my body.

"Tell me, Robin Icethorn, have you had enough?"

I pushed myself up enough that my chest peeled away from the wet ground. Gathering a lump of bile, I spat before him. "Fuck you."

"Now, there is the human lurking inside. Rough around the edges and flawed. It must have been so terribly exhausting playing pretend for all this time. I would not be surprised if you have had enough. Here." Aldrick offered out a hand, palm raised to the sky, still filled with the gryvern's screams. "Allow me to help you rid yourself of the responsibility the *key* gives you."

I scanned the crowds, looking for a sign of Duncan. Erix. Althea. Gyah. Rafaela. Anyone that might help. Whereas the sky was still a battleground for the Gryvern and Draeic, everything on the ground seemed so still.

"What have you done to *them*?"

"Does it matter?" Aldrick replied.

"It does if you wish for me to cooperate." I stood slowly, longing that Aldrick did not see my legs tremble. It was only the two of us within the circle. No guards protecting him. Only his daring, but that would do little to save him.

"You die, and I take the key, or you give it freely. Cooperation is not something I am concerned about."

I lunged toward him, feet slipping across the slick ground. My power had depleted, but that didn't matter. I would tear his throat out with my bare hands. I was so close, my nails a hairbreadth from his wrinkled skin, when a voice spoke.

"Little bird." The wall of Hunters peeled away, allowing Erix to pass through. He moved awkwardly as though his legs were not his own. His face was painted with apology and fright; both emotions were in clear conflict with one another. "It is not me. I am not doing this."

No, this is my doing.

Duncan was on his knees, hands gathered behind his back. Erix stood above him, claws grasping at his chin and neck. I saw his hand tremble with hesitation, but they didn't move away.

"*Mariflora*. I should have known. Highly effective when ingested by a mortal but rather useless to monsters. And look what you brought to the fight, one cut from both cloths."

My lips parted, expelling a feeble gasp.

Duncan looked at me with verdant eyes brimming with defiance. His chin was raised, his shoulders back as much as the bindings allowed. Muck coated his face, deepening the hollow of his cheeks and the etching of the scar down the side of his face. Now, more than ever, it looked like a permeant tear engraved into his hardened expression.

"One thought, and your beloved dies," Aldrick grinned wildly at the revelation. "There is no more fight. No more bloodshed. One thought, that is all it will take, and it is over for him."

"Robin, don't you dare listen to him. Do you hear me!" I recoiled as Duncan shouted at me. Spit burst out of his mouth as he snarled his own demand. "My death is not what matters. I do not matter!"

"You do," I breathed. "To me."

I dared to look away as tears filled Duncan's stare. He refused to blink and provide them with escape.

Erix fought against Aldrick's control. His entire body shook like a leaf caught in a breeze. Yet still, his claws did not retract from Duncan's neck.

"The choice is yours," Aldrick said calmly. There was something about his tone that reminded me of my father. It was paternal, as though used to trick me into doing what he wished. "Think wisely about your decision. The lives of those you care about rely on what you do next."

I glanced at the labradorite stone. The Hunters had deposited me right at the foot of it. As I had before, I sensed its thirst for me. As though it understood the conversation and sang with its longing for me to give it what it desired.

"You speak of life as if it is important to you."

I snapped my attention back around to find that Aldrick was no longer alone

"What is the meaning of..."

Althea sauntered from the line of Hunters like a wisp of smoke. Aldrick turned his body to look at the person who moved with free will.

"You say that Mariflora does not affect a monster, then explain what I am. What you have made me." Althea's face was masked with red hair that billowed in the winds. Deepest ruby, as the colour of blood that covered most of her.

Sto—. Althea clapped her hands on either side of Aldrick's face, silencing him. Her thumbs dug into his eyes and squeezed. His scream was a song of pure agony.

I watched, arms pinned helplessly to my side, as dark gore streamed out of Aldrick's eye socket and slipped into his parted mouth.

Aldrick choked on his blood. He grasped at his neck with liver-spot hands, attempting to claw at his skin for reprieve.

There was none to be found for him. His time, as we all recognised, was over.

"And this... this is for my family," Althea whispered into his ear as fire blossomed across her hands and spread across Aldrick's face. The bright spark of furious crimson engulfed his skin, masking his silent scream in the roar of burning flesh.

"Burn," Althea sang above it all. "You cunt."

I felt nothing for him as ash peeled from the bundle of flames and drifted skyward on the spring breeze. Through the haze of licking, hungry fire, I couldn't take my eyes off him as his flesh melted and bones charred black.

Grunts echoed around us as the Hunters regained control of their own minds. The once steady wall was now a mess of shouting Hunters with stark pale faces and blinking, distant stares.

"I ask you all," Althea cried out, whips of flame hissing like serpents from each of her fists. "Now your minds are your own. Will you continue to fight against us?"

Figures slipped from the line of Hunters, scratched and battered but alive. Gyah strode forward, a deep gash sliced above her brow, blinding her left eye with blood. Lady Kelsey followed, limping with the aid of another fey that had joined us from Aurelia. One by one, the humans allowed our kind through until the middle of the gate's circle was filled with us.

Arms engulfed me, pulling me tight into a hard chest. Beneath the harsh tang of death that covered him, I still smelled Duncan beneath it all. His hand cradled the back of my head, his lips pressed atop it.

"It's over," Duncan whispered, voice muffled into my hair.

"Is it?" I replied meekly. I forced my eyes closed. My fingers wound into the material of Duncan's jacket, and I held firm. "Aldrick may be dead, but the gate still stands. Duwar is still a threat."

"Robin is right." I pulled away from Duncan enough to see Rafaela. She used her hammer as a walking stick to keep herself upright. Her grey wings

were torn and thin. Feathers had been ripped out in clumps by the hands of those who attacked her. One hung at her side, unmoving, unlike its twin, which twitched with energy. "For as long as the keys play a part in the realms, Duwar will always have a chance to return."

Althea continued calling out to the humans. "I will regard you all as victims of Aldrick's control until you give me a reason to think otherwise. Lay down your weapons. No one else needs to die today."

There was a clatter of metal as weapons were thrown to the ground in surrender. Many of the humans fell to their knees with their hands raised behind their heads. Those who continued to stand, hands still gripped around a blade, were targeted by our forces, who surged back toward the crowd to deal with them.

I saw Erix then, standing in the same place he had held Duncan. His heavy breathing and hunched frame told me of his exhaustion. He had one hand pressed against the side of his head. He must have felt my eyes upon him because he looked up then. The Gryvern—his Gryvern—sang in the sky above us. A cloud of grey skin, coiling and twisting among one another in a bundle of black-blood-covered bodies. Not a single draeic was left in sight.

Had they fled as Aldrick's control had slipped from them?

"It was not me," Erix mouthed. Each word clear even from a distance.

I blinked, parting my mouth as I formed my reply. *I know*.

"It's now or never, Robin," Rafaela whispered at my side. We locked eyes, nodding in silent agreement.

"What is?" Duncan moved his body before me once again, but I laid a hand out and pushed it into his upper arm.

"Duncan, please. Don't stand in my way."

"From what!" He barked. His blood splashed face was twisted in confusion as he took hold of both of my arms and held on. "How can I stand in your way if you do not tell me what it is you are doing!"

Rafaela winced as she hoisted the hammer above her shoulder where it rested. "Aldrick is not the first and will not be the last whose mind is infected by the will of the Defiler. Gates will be erected, and Duwar will not stop his campaign to be free. But the gates are useless if there are no keys to open them."

"They need to be destroyed. The keys. Duwar will never have a chance of freedom again."

Duncan's face shifted between emotions. He wrestled with what I told him. Before he could refuse or say anything else, I stepped in close and pressed both hands onto him. On tip toes, I raised my aching body and placed a kiss on his hesitant lips. "I need you to stand by me. It will be one less person I'll need to ask for forgiveness from when it is over."

"This was always the plan, wasn't it," He said, looking between Rafaela and me.

I nodded, glancing at Rafaela and wishing I could borrow some of her defiance.

"Why," Duncan breathed. "Why did you keep this from me?"

I shrugged, unsure which excuse to pick from. "This is my choice. The key is in me. For as long as it dwells inside me, or any other Icethorn – we threaten the lives of the people we are sworn to protect."

Duncan looked to Rafaela, distrust thundering in his verdant stare. "How dangerous is it?"

We both noticed the grimace on her expression. She did well to hide it. "The labradorite is the second vessel strong enough to contain the key. If Robin binds the power into the stone, I can destroy it."

"You are asking Robin to do exactly what we have just fought against Aldrick to prevent." Duncan's entire body hardened into a shield before me. "I can't let you both do this. Not until we have all discussed every option. This is not only your fight but also ours. All of ours."

"This *is* the only way," I pleaded.

"Perhaps, but I love you enough to make sure you make this decision with a clear mind. We have time," Duncan spoke softly, although there was no ignoring the demand that lurked beneath each word.

"Erix," I called out, noticing Duncan's wince as I did.

In seconds, my guard was there. It seemed it was my turn to take control of his mind. Doran had done it, then Aldrick. What difference was it if I used him as my tool? I dropped my hands from Duncan's stomach, reluctantly tracing my fingers down his frame. "Restrain him."

"Robin!" Duncan exasperated my name. It was the most painful thing I have ever heard.

"I do not understand—" Erix silenced as I barked at him.

"Don't let Duncan out of your hold. Have your Gryvern stop anyone, friend or foe, from getting near me."

I expected Duncan to fight, but he didn't. Not as Erix followed my command, as I knew he would, and took hold.

Since when did victory hurt? I felt the feeling, like a thorn in my heart, as I tore my gaze from Duncan. The anger that coiled in his eyes would haunt me forever.

I knew little of how Erix controlled the Gryvern, but suddenly they screeched in threat and broke apart, flying down to the ground. The Hunters scrambled for their weapons, and even the fey gathered at their sides at the new threat.

Althea locked eyes with me before the Gryvern thudded into the ground, creating a wall between us.

Erix pulled Duncan away, deeper into the circle of the gate. The mist had returned, twisting around their ankles. Both men looked at me with similar expressions. I couldn't stand to punish myself with their attention any longer. I knew this decision was the right one. They would see.

It was the only way, just as Rafaela had confirmed, to finally stop this.

"They will hate me for this," I said, allowing my inner anxiety to spill out of me.

"Hate is the other side of love," Rafaela replied. "You are saving their lives. Doing this will prevent Duwar from ever returning to this realm and laying waste to it. It is not only the right decision, Robin. It is the *only* decision."

"I hope you are right." I faced the stone before me. *Altar's bones*.

"I give the stone the Icethorn key, and you shatter it?"

"Precisely," Rafaela confirmed.

"If only Aldrick had been alive long enough to see this," I said, reaching out and pressing my palms into the sharp edge of the stone's surface. I felt it sing beneath me. The stone trembled to life beneath my touch. It drew me in with such force, I knew to remove my hands would result in a battle. "It would have been one of life's greatest pleasures to see as he watched all his years of hard work crumble before him."

Ice crept over my fingers. It crackled across the dark stone slowly. I opened the power deep within me and pushed it into the stone. There was no need to spill blood. As Aldrick had said, the key could have been given willingly. He just chose otherwise.

It was not just my innate power that flooded out of me but the wild storm that dwelled deep inside. The presence of cold, which filled me the moment I had accepted the Icethorn power all those weeks ago, awoke.

I closed my eyes as the sensation overwhelmed me. The stone flickered its unseen tongue, tasting the Icethorn key. Then, its teeth peeled back and sunk inside it, latching on like a leech. I cried out. The sudden pain was overwhelming, all-consuming.

I tried to call out for help, but my body refused me.

"Do not stop, not until it has it all!" Rafaela shouted, but her voice seemed quiet.

At what cost? I thought.

My mind pleaded for me to pull away, but I feared the stone had me shackled. It pulled and pulled, sucking the power out of me. I felt the marrow in my bones shiver, my veins knot and blood hiss.

I squinted through the wild winds that tore around me. Rafaela fought against it, hammer poised and ready. Her braids whipped like snakes around her skull.

As the stone drew the Icethorn key out, I witnessed a new horror. A vortex of dark smoke turned the middle of the gate into a sea of shadow. All but one stone was alive, fuelling the gate.

Deep inside me, I felt the gate crack open. Like a door being forced. Not completely, but enough for someone to peer through the crack on the other side.

"It is... is opening the gate!" I shouted, my throat raw and bloodied.

Erix and Duncan were swaddled with the shadow. Duncan, now free from Erix's hold, ran into the centre, my name sliced across his lips. Behind him, Erix flapped his wings and became airborne. He looked down at the reaching waves of shadow that tried to pull him back down.

Duncan couldn't have escaped it. His powerful arms cut through the wade of shadow that seemed to slow him down.

It was up to his waist, then his chest.

Deep in my bones, as the stone continued to drink the Icethorn power from me, I sensed it crack open like a door on hinges that desired oil. I tried to pull back from the stone, but it was too late.

Duncan slipped beneath the wave of shadow.

One moment Duncan was there, the next, he was gone.

And I knew where he had gone.

The gate had claimed Duncan. It had pulled him from the small slip my power had encouraged open. Without Elinor's key, it wouldn't have been enough to free Duwar. But his presence leaked out into this realm and captured what he desired.

I locked eyes with Erix, who flew out of reach of the shadows. For a moment, the world went quiet. I saw into Erix's wide eyes and read his intention.

No.

Erix did not hesitate. His silver eyes dropped from mine, and then he was gone. Diving into the swell of shadow beneath him.

Like Duncan, I felt Erix's soul leave this realm into the one that waited through the crack in the gate.

The key's presence was fading within me. I felt it, the final will of the power clinging onto me. I reached out my will and held on to it, entering a competition with the labradorite stone. I refused to give it up. If it took the key completely, Rafaela would destroy it.

Duncan and Erix would be lost.

Forever.

The Gryvern dispersed with Erix's disappearance. Wherever he had gone, his command on them did not stretch. The creatures scattered, clawing through the air and fleeing from the gate.

Althea was suddenly visible, standing just out of reach from the gate's boundary. She was shouting, commanding no one to pass into it, human or fey. All the while, her attention was on me. I would never forget the look on her face. It would haunt me for all of time.

"Stop resisting, Robin," Rafaela commanded. "Finish it."

I hissed through clenched teeth as I expelled my desperation. "I can't... I need to keep it open."

"They are gone!" Rafaela's hands twisted around the handle of the hammer, her biceps protruding as she kept it hoisted. "Before anyone else is put at risk, give the gate the key and let me destroy it."

I refused to listen. Refused to believe they were gone. I didn't deserve to feel the sadness that stabbed through me. Not when there should only be room for guilt. "Give them more time."

"No," Rafaela spat. "Finish this, or I will destroy you alongside the gate."

Her threat was wasted. How could I fear for my life when my actions had already destroyed me? I wouldn't wish to live if I came out of this without Duncan. Without Erix.

I held on for as long as I could. Rafaela promised me this was a choice, to give the key up. She was wrong.

"Do not resist it, Robin." Her screams coiled with the winds that became one.

Come back to me. Come back to me.

"I. I can't."

I will not give up on you. Come back.

I felt the grasp of the key weaken, loosening its grip one finger at a time.

Cold tears stung my cheeks. I refused to blink for fear I would miss something within the shadows of the gate.

The force pulling me into the stone weakened. It was as though it repelled me. Now the stone had the key, it no longer wanted me. It had what it thirsted for.

I stumbled back, legs giving way as I fell into the bloodied mud at the stones base. The shadows reached for me now. I reached for it, wishing to slip through the crack in the gate. Rafaela brought the golden hammer up. It caught the fading light across its golden head.

"Forgive me," I spluttered into the shadows. Then Rafaela brought her blessed weapon down upon the labradorite plinth. It cracked, fractures running across the stone in veins. Golden light burst outward.

Three attempts. That was all it took.

Pelts of stone exploded outward. The rain of debris fell upon me. I felt my skin split as the stones sliced across it, but I had no energy to lift a hand to shield myself. Nor did I care.

Rafaela moved to the next stone and the next. She destroyed the keys with grace and ease. The Cedarfall key broke first, and then the Elmdew key, which required more force than the rest.

Only the final stone, powerless and keyless, was left standing.

Rafaela fell to her knees. She pawed into the ground, hammer discarded at her side, wings splayed out around her like a tattered blanket.

I scanned my eyes over the gate as the smoke that twisted around us melted into the earth until not a single slither was left.

My breath hitched as my eyes fell on the bundle of two bodies in the middle.

No. No. No.

I dug my fingers into the sodden ground, dragging myself toward its centre. Toward the tattered grey-leather wings of Erix, who unfolded his body from the second body that laid motionless beneath him.

o one refused me as I pushed a cot up beside the one Duncan's body rested on.

I hoped the sickening screech of wood against the stone floor would've woken him. It didn't. Nor did the slight thump as both cots bumped together. Without discarding my dirtied boots, I climbed and curled my body beside his. Like a child lingering within their mother's womb, I laid foetal with my knees tucked up to my chest.

And I sobbed.

My breathing was erratic. Tears scored down my cheeks, their presence leaving wet scars and turning my skin sticky. I felt the feather-down pillow dampen beneath my face. No matter how loud I cried or how my desperate fingers took hold of Duncan's stiff hand, he didn't wake.

If not for the faint yet persistent flutter of his heart which danced beneath his skin, I would have believed he was dead. Regardless of what the healers said— what Elinor Oakstorm confirmed— if it was not for the life that still thundered inside him, seeing Duncan so still and unresponsive was horrific.

The gauze that had been bound tightly around his mid-drift had already stained. It had not even been an hour since it was last cleaned and redressed, and already blood forged its way to freedom.

The wound across his abdomen refused to heal. I had not seen it, but Elinor had described the three long tracks that had been gouged across his stomach.

Duncan had lost a lot of blood, and finding a replacement was close to impossible because of his rarity. Both human and fey. If the wound didn't

heal by itself, every second was one closer to infection or further internal damage.

Two days. It had been two days since the *keys* were destroyed, and Erix and Duncan had returned from the *other side*. Two days, yet the improvement to Duncan's situation was minimal. If Elinor had not arrived the night prior to Rinholm, I was confident we would have lost him. *I* would have lost him. For good this time.

"Duncan," I exhaled his name, defeated. "Wake up. Please, I can't face this without you."

I watched the dark brush of his eyelashes for movement. *Nothing*. His lips didn't twitch, nor did his jaw tense. I dared blink in case I missed a sign that he could hear me. Only when my eyes stung did I pinch them closed, burying my face into the cold skin of his shoulder.

"There is so much I wish to say to you, so many things I need to hear you reply. Please... just... fight this. For me. Come back so I can tell you how sorry I am. This is my doing. My fault. Don't you dare leave me until... until you get the chance to punish me. Just don't leave me."

What little control I had over my breathing was gone as quickly as it came.

Duncan was not kept with the other injured. With the help of Elinor, a makeshift camp had been erected within the castle's grounds for the rest of those needing help. Elinor had brought as many healers as she could from Oakstorm, even confirming more were on their way. Aldrick had hurt Elmdew and its people greatly in the short time he had invaded, many of whom had not made it to see this day.

I couldn't help but see them as the lucky ones.

Like beetles, her healers scuttled around the camp day and night. It seemed the list of Aldrick's victims was never-ending. Every hour, more and more fey had been rescued from camps across Elmdew's lands. In troves, they were brought to Rinholm to be cared for. Even the dead, and there were many, had not been left behind in the terrible conditions they were found in. Pens and cages that even the most feral of animals would not be put within.

I had not been allowed to see them for myself. Not allowed out of these walls. And I understood why.

I was not trusted.

Rafaela was dealt the same judgement. The stone of these walls was like shackles bound to our wrists and ankles.

We were not trustworthy because of what our actions caused. And I didn't blame the brief sideways glances Gyah had provided me or how Althea had kept her distance from me in the days that passed.

As Elinor had reiterated, with a look that blended pity and disappointment, it was not that I sacrificed the Icethorn key that was the problem. It was that I didn't give Althea the chance to make the choice for herself. There was no denying the destruction of the keys was not the right decision, but the manner in which it was conducted was nothing but wrong. I was wrong. And the man beside me, whose shoulder was coated with my tears, had paid the price for my betrayal.

A wave of sickness bore over me. I clutched my empty stomach at the pain that coiled and twisted as though a serpent had taken residency in the place the Icethorn key once had.

"They found Jesibel," I spoke aloud the words for the first time since the news had reached me. It was what drew me to Duncan. Selfishly, I required comfort even if I didn't deserve it.

I swallowed the urge to vomit. Even lying down, I felt the word tilt violently. "It was her. I saw the body. Her face. Duncan... they think she died by her own means. To escape what Aldrick was forcing her to do, Jesibel saw no other way out of her torture. She..."

I didn't wish to close my eyes to see her malnourished body, which was now etched into my mind. Like the other fey that had been found in Aldrick's imprisonment, evidence across her bruised, thin arms suggested she was victim to his blood collection. But that was not what killed her in the end.

Jesibel had drowned herself. The stump of her frayed tongue, and her teeth coated with its flesh, confirmed it. Elinor had the ability to read the imprint of death from just one touch. One subtle brush of Elinor's finger confirmed Jesibel's demise.

She had chewed through her tongue and either choked on the lump of flesh or inhaled the gushing blood until her lungs filled with it.

"Her name, like so many others, has joined the list of those I have failed. Everything I have done was to save her, and I couldn't even do that. I hate myself for not acting sooner. I hate myself for not working harder to free her. Instead, Aldrick used her against me. If I had not fixated on freeing

Jesibel, perhaps Kayne would never have known her name. He would never have exposed my weakness to Aldrick. She... she would not be lying in the undercroft of Rinholm awaiting her burial. Jesibel would be alive. I promised, and that meant nothing. She died believing there was no way out, and that will haunt me, deservedly, for the rest of my days."

Jesibel had killed herself to stop Aldrick from using her to gleam information from my dreams. She died, so he couldn't use her anymore.

Familiar silence drew out in the moments after my exasperated monologue. Only the feather-soft breathing of Duncan responded. It was both enough and not. I needed to hear him tell me it was going to be okay. To remind me of what we had achieved. Greedily, it was his opinion that I desired the most. Even if he looked at me with the same disdain and blame as Althea or plainly ignored me like Gyah, at least I would know.

It was the not knowing that ate me up from the inside; sinew, gristle and all.

Most of all, I wanted to know what happened to him when he disappeared through the gate. Getting answers out of Erix was wasted when he treated me with the same frosty emotion whilst still acting as my guard. He had become a second shadow, hardly leaving me for a minute since he had saved Duncan.

It was strange how Erix could be so close, yet so far.

Erix had little to say about what happened when he dove in after Duncan through the portal into Duwar's realm. All he revealed was that it was a dark and quiet place. One moment they were buried in it, the next, they had returned.

Except, every time Erix was pressed for more information, his silver eyes would dart away to someplace else. His gaze shifting as though his consciousness slipped back into Duwar's realm and the secrets he harboured from it.

If I had the energy, I would have demanded the truth. But who was I to force such things out of people when I had become the greatest liar of all time?

It was my lies that had torn us all apart.

They had saved the world but destroyed mine in the process.

Night had fallen over Rinholm when a knock rapped on the door. I hadn't the energy to lift my head from the pillow as I called out.

"Come in."

There was the screech of the door followed by a soft thud as it hit the wall behind it.

"I have been asked to escort you to the meeting," Erix's voice was distant. Emotionless.

"Let them wait," I replied, short.

"They have been waiting, for two hours, in fact. Althea postponed the requirement for your presence for as long as she could."

My chest shivered with the thought of Althea doing something for my benefit. I wouldn't let myself believe she did so because she cared. It would hurt less to believe in such things.

"I can't leave him," I mumbled, brushing my fingers over the soft rise and fall of Duncan's broad chest. "What if Duncan wakes when I am gone? I can't bear the thought of it."

We both knew it wouldn't happen.

I had yet to look at Erix, but his lack of footfall suggested he had not stepped any further into the room than a single pace. If I glanced up, would I have seen pain painted across his face? Would he attempt to hide the way his gaze always flickered uncomfortably between Duncan and me?

"Let the healers return so they can care for him. Duncan will not be alone. The moment the council meeting has concluded, I will bring you back to him."

I longed to refuse him, but I had no fight left in me.

My body creaked in tandem with the cot as I shifted to standing. The side of my body ached from being laid in the same position since I had arrived. Across my cheek, I felt the imprint of the sheets like fresh scars on my skin. These would fade, unlike the ones deep inside of me. Those scars were there to stay.

I silently bid Duncan farewell. Once I had my back to him, I had to ignore the violent urge to turn and clamber back on the cot at his side.

Erix watched me pace toward him with stifling intent. His nail-tipped hands were clasped together at his front, his wings shifting awkwardly in the Cedarfall uniform, which had been re-tailored to fit around his newly altered frame. Beside the thin-membraned wings, the grey-tint discolouring his skin, and the points of his canines slightly overlapping his lower lip, he looked more the part of my personal guard than the Gryvern, which made up half of him.

Maybe Eroan had painted a glamour across Erix. He would have had time after he tore the glamour from me, removing Kayne's mask for good. Eroan would have had the power to hide or at least dilute the gryvern within Erix. Or maybe, I just saw him differently. In a new light, one not painted through a haze of hate or disdain for him.

"Shall we," I gestured to the open door his body blocked. "I wouldn't want to keep them waiting. There is no need to give them more reasons to hate me."

Erix paused. Hesitation lingered in his stiffened posture. I waited for him to move out of the way. Instead, he looked down the point of his nose at me. Steel-silver eyes so wide they seemed to drink me in.

"Are you alright?"

His question caught me off guard. I wanted to laugh because, of course, the answer was plainly clear. But I betrayed my control with my reaction.

I spluttered, pushing myself into his chest until my face was buried in the warmth of his torso. Erix drew his hands apart, in surprise or disgust, I couldn't tell. "No. No, I'm not."

Pinching my eyes closed, I inhaled Erix. His scent filled my nose and throat like heavy smoke. I felt stupid, cocooning myself into him when Erix refused to touch me in return. After everything, all the hate and regret, I wished he would just hold me. I desired for him to provide me comfort. Comfort which once lingered in his arms. Comfort he would have willingly given me before everything. Before Doran, before Aldrick.

Before Duncan.

I didn't pull away for fear he would see the embarrassment stain my cheeks and neck scarlet. Just as I built the courage, two arms fell around me. Like an exhale of relief, wings followed, folding around my body and holding me upright.

"You are going to be fine; I promise." Erix's words were nearly unintelligible as he spoke them into my mess of black hair.

"How can you promise such things?" I allowed the tears to come once again. If it made me weak, then I was the most brittle of them all. And I didn't care if I held such a title. I deserved it.

"It is my duty, as your guard, to make promises others would deem impossible to keep."

Erix felt my change in posture. He freed me. I pulled back from him, almost stumbling back if his hand did not take my hand to steady me.

"You know you could leave," I said firmly. "There is no need for me to have a personal guard. I lost the one thing which gave me my title. You may think you are fulfilling a duty, but Althea will not force this on you. I am sure there are more deserving—"

"Robin, enough." I choked back on my words. "I take my vows seriously. My bond is final. I protect *you*. It is what I desire and what I will stop at nothing to ensure. Regardless of what you say, how you act, you cannot push me away. I will not allow it."

"Protect me from what?" I said, finding it difficult to hold his intense gaze. "Myself? It seems it is my decisions, actions and lies which cause more damage than anything else."

Erix's stare left mine for the first time. It was brief, but his attention flickered to Duncan. His expression set in a grimace. When his eyes snapped back to me, all evidence of his emotion was gone.

Before I could question it, he stood to the side. "Before Althea comes looking for you herself, perhaps we go to them."

"This conversation is going to be painful. Isn't it?"

"Like pulling a thorn from your foot. Once the task is dealt with, you will soon forget it and move on. I speak on all your behalf, but you each cannot hide from one another."

"Althea hates me, and I don't blame her."

"And has she told you this herself? Because I hardly imagine Althea could ever hate you. Dislike, perhaps. However, an apology can be the greatest gift. It can heal rifts. It is the starting block of building trust. Believe me, I would know."

I forced a smile, thankful to have him at my back. Thankful to have him with me in any capacity.

"Erix?" I asked, voice pitching at the end of his name.

He exhaled. "Yes, little bird?"

I screwed my eyes at him, and his lips curled back into a toothy grin. Something warmed low down in my stomach.

"When you are ready, will you tell me what happened?"

At once, his smile faded. Erix didn't need me to further explain what I was asking. He knew. As before, I expected him to refuse me. To tell me nothing had occurred or for him to repeat the same muted story. It lacked details no one else cared to press for.

Something had happened during the short time Duncan and Erix had entered Duwar's realm. I remembered Erix's palpable shock even now, days later. When he looked at me, his eyes seemed to cut straight through me as though I was not there. Duncan was unconscious in his arms. Erix had not reacted when I shouted his name. He didn't seem to notice when I waved my hand before his lost, all-seeing eyes.

Terror, I recognised it in his gaze.

Whatever had happened, Erix had come back in a state of shock and Duncan was gravely hurt. I didn't believe Duncan had hurt himself by the fall, which Erix had suggested was the cause.

But I hadn't pushed because it wasn't the right thing to do. There were far more important matters deserving of my focus. Especially now, Duwar's fate had been sealed for all eternity with the destruction of three out of the four of Altar's keys.

Erix gazed ahead, the burning sconces on the wall reflecting haunting light across the sharp lines of his face. The turmoil drew his expression into something unrecognisable. "If I am honest, Robin, I hope I never need to tell you what I saw."

My heart thumped in my throat. There was something in his reaction which called for my ice to crackle around the tips of my fingers. It was as though the power, beaten and tired like a hound cowering in its cage, finally felt the need to protect me.

A familiar lost expression riddled with terror shadowed Erix's face. I felt his refusal to look at me now as though it would stop me from seeing his horror plastered, as plain as day, across his face.

"Please, do not ask me again. I... I am not ready."

I swallowed hard, forcing the calloused lump back down into the pit of my stomach, where it seeded and spread its roots of anxiety. Only when I brushed the back of my fingers against Erix's did he seem to snap out of the trance he found himself lost within. I was relieved when he looked back at me. Except he made no attempt to smile.

"Whatever it was, whatever happened there... it is over. The gate has been sealed, and the only way to open it again has been removed from play. Nothing can harm you."

"I am not a pious man, but even I pray you are right."

A lthea waited beyond the door, pacing grooves into the ground. Only when she heard our arrival did she still. I held my breath, expecting to hear her disappointment. Days' worth of silence unleashed as though she could not wait to release it upon me.

She watched me with a calculating stare. When she spoke, her voice shook ever so slightly. "How is Duncan fairing?"

My shoulders sagged forward, unable to hold the weight of his name. I shook my head, dropping my chin to my chest. "Unresponsive, still."

Before I could look up, her arms were around me. A sob cracked free of my ribs as I buried my tear-slick face into the mess of her red hair.

"I thought I was doing the right thing," I spluttered. "I never wished to deceive you or make you feel as though I acted behind your back. I'm sorry."

"Robin," Althea's voice was calm and controlled. "I wish I could tell you I am not pissed off with you, but it is not in my nature to lie. But I have lost so much already." Her voice cracked. "I can't bear the thought of losing you too."

I peeled my face from her hair. Althea's hands fell to mine, and we held on to one another, fingers coiled and firm.

"We will have time to discuss everything, but first, I want us to be reunited. Our courts have always held a close bond. It would be foolish for it to break now. And, for what it counts, I believe the decision you made was the right one. I just wished I was a part of it."

"You have all the right to be angry with me," I replied, squeezing her hands.

"Undoubtedly," she huffed. "And I *will* make you pay. But after, after, we set the world right. The world your decision has made safe from demon gods. Not just now, forever."

Pride righted my posture. "I don't deserve you."

"I know, but I deserve you," Althea replied, retrieving her hands from me. She nudged my shoulder as we both faced the closed door. "Do not let Gyah know I am telling you this, but even she has fought your corner. I don't think she could have been prouder of you. Although if she finds out I ever told you, she will suck the meat from both our bones."

"Sounds about right," I retorted. "With a tongue so sharp, it is no wonder you love her."

"What can I say." Althea winked. "There is something rather special about falling into bed, and love, with your personal guard."

Erix coughed into his fist behind us, reminding us of his presence. My cheeks bloomed with heat, and guilt crept across my consciousness.

I was thankful when Althea drifted on soundless feet toward the door and pushed it open. Inside, the room was bright with the scent of food. My stomach rumbled for the first time in days. The promise of a full stomach enticed me to forget Althea's comment.

"I will wait for you here," Erix said coldly.

"Take the evening off," Althea called over her shoulder. "There are no longer evils lurking in the dark. Robin will be fine."

"You should know better than anyone, Queen Cedarfall. I made a vow. My word is bond. Robin, I will be waiting for you."

If Althea noticed the tension tying Erix and me together, like thick but frayed rope, she didn't say. Instead, she gestured for me to enter with a sweep of her hand.

"After you."

I mocked a curtsy, echoing the title Erix had used for Althea. "How gracious, my Queen."

One sharp punch from Althea into my shoulder had me stifling a laugh. Then we both entered, leaving Erix to disappear as I closed the door on him.

THE THREE REMAINING heads of the fey courts sat around a polished wood table in the heat of a modest room. At the head of the table waited two

thrones, each carved from ivory bone which seemed to glow in the dim light of the room. Delicate vines twisted around the formation of bone. Across it buds of blush pink and purple flowers, each one wilting sadly with the lack of an Elmdew presence.

Althea sat at my side, back rigid and expression stern as she focused on Rafaela, the only one who didn't sit. Elinor was to my other side. I felt her look at me with a strange gaze which sang with longing. Her thin-jewelled fingers laid out on the table before her, tentatively brushing up the long stem of her glass of amber-toned wine.

My glass was left untouched as my fingers busied themselves, plucking at a loose thread across the material of my trousers.

"Aldrick is dead. The Defiler is forever trapped within the realm with no promise of ever being freed again. I do not need to be the one to remind you we all have sacrificed much in this fight, but it is over." Rafaela practically shivered with glee as she spoke.

The deed was done. Both threats had been removed from play, and the keys were destroyed. Which was what Rafaela had always wanted. What she and Gabrial had conspired to complete behind even their fellow Nephilim's backs.

"But they are not all destroyed, are they?"

Rafaela flickered her attention to Elinor. "No, not at this moment."

"Would you wish to see the Oakstorm key destroyed?" Elinor questioned, her stare boring through Rafaela. "It still lingers within me. Could this not pose a threat in our future, immediate or distant?"

"What good is a quill without ink?" Rafaela dismissed. "One key is useless without the rest. My fellow Nephilim likely prepare for my punishment. I imagine it wouldn't change my outcome if I went against them and destroyed the final one."

"Then, for your sake, perhaps we go forward with the knowledge the Oakstorm key remains intact." Elinor smiled brightly, undeterred by Rafaela's tone. "I am complacent with the confirmation this is over."

"Not entirely," I added. "Wychwood is bathed in unrest. Elmdew is without a leader..."

"And the Cedarfall finds itself with a warrior for a queen," Althea finished for me, offering me a sideways smirk.

"That isn't what I was going to say," I replied curtly. "It is going to take time and strain to help Wychwood heal. *That* is what we must focus on now. Looking ahead, not back."

"I think we can all agree with Robin on this matter," Elinor said, patting my thigh with her hand before returning it to her glass. "Our main priority is seeing the courts regain composure."

"Do not concern yourselves with Cedarfall, I will see all wounds are stitched and healed. Just as I am sure, you and Robin have the ability to gather control of your own courts."

"And what of Elmdew?" I asked. "Is there not a clear line of succession?"

My attention drifted to the empty thrones, wondering who would find themselves upon it next.

"There is a boy," Althea confirmed, voice as cold as the ice dwelling within me. "Barely walking. The young child was brought into the realm by surrogacy for the Kings. His reign will not solidify for many years, so his council must be strong. We will need to lend aid to Elmdew. Gyah has had reports from the Wychwood and Durmain border of the removal of the labradorite stones. It has caused a rift, one that allows humans to enter freely—."

"Leave the humans to the Nephilim," Rafaela said, chin raised. "Your realm is not the only one which requires healing. Aldrick sullied Durmain. He has left the once great Kingdom without a ruler. Now the gate our kind have guarded is no longer a threat, it is likely my brothers and sisters will return to Durmain's shores to help rebuild it back in the glory of the Creator."

"And this includes the Hunters?" I asked. "Not all of them have lain down arms willingly. Many will hide and wait for the next leader to emerge from the ashes of their newly titled martyr."

I had longed to flee Rinholm and help chase the Hunters from Wychwood myself. Even after Aldrick's defeat, I still felt like the fight was not over. We had won, and they sang about it, but why didn't I feel like it?

"The Hunters will be dealt with. They will be given a choice. How they survive after making it depends on them."

There was fury in Rafaela's voice. Powerful as her golden hammer, obedient as her belief in the Creator. I had no doubt Rafaela, and the Nephilim would comb the realms, providing antidote to the poison Aldrick had spread, whilst burning out the last of those who still wore his mark with blinded pride.

"What about you?" I asked.

Rafaela's brows furrowed at my question. Her battered, torn wings twitched just as my own fingers continued to fidget on my lap.

"My actions and desires have affected you enough, Robin Icethorn. I would not wish for you to concern yourself with the repercussions I have brought on myself. The punishment which waits for me is not a new concept. Gabrial and I knew it would come with our success. I welcome it gladly."

"I do worry," I said, sitting forward until my ass was on the edge of my seat. "All this talk of punishment does not sit well with me."

"Is there anything we can do?" Elinor asked. "Surely the Nephilim would listen if the heads of the fey courts petitioned for you?"

Rafaela smiled proudly, brushing off Elinor's suggestion with an exhaled sigh. "Not even the Creator could omit me of my sins, Elinor Oakstorm. My duty, my purpose, was to protect the keys, but I went against my vow. I took it a step further and ensured they were destroyed. Whatever is waiting for me, I welcome it."

She looked at me, and I was certain I saw tears swell in her striking eyes. "Gabrial will provide me with comfort. I go gladly, knowing I am a step closer to seeing my sister's face again."

Althea stood abruptly. Her chair clattered with a bang against the floor. "There is no denying my views on your decision and the position it put Robin in. But I can't condone sending you back to the Nephilim if death awaits you. I refuse it."

"Starting a war with the Nephilim over one life is not worth it," Rafaela replied, voice clear and proud. "And there is no saying if death will greet me. My people are just and fair. I appreciate your wishes to protect me, but I am not in need. Believe me."

I sensed Rafaela's finality to the conversation, but the look I shared with Althea confirmed this was not over. Far from it, in fact.

We continued speaking for hours. In the windowless room, time was inconsequential as a concept. Only the melting of the pillar candles across the table and the ever-growing puddle of wax at their base was a signifier of how long we lost ourselves to conversation.

"Forgive me," Elinor stood, face contorting into a yawn. "It has been a long few days, and I imagine those that follow will be no different. It is not criminal to steal a few hours of sleep before I have to face my council. Still,

I sense nothing but resistance from them. Once this conflict has been dealt with, I will continue with the one which rages in the heart of *my* court."

"Say the word," Althea said. "And I will help where I can."

"Doran surrounded himself with men whose narrow views did not vary. It will take some time to convince them of my rule, until I grow impatient and snatch it from underneath them."

"Weak men are fearful of powerful women," I said, echoing something my father had once told me. I couldn't help but wonder if he spoke of my mother.

Elinor placed a fleeting hand upon my shoulder. "Julianne would have told you, given the chance, I have always enjoyed a challenge. Now more so than ever."

My chest warmed at the mention of my mother. I wished Elinor didn't have to leave so I could finally take the chance to ask her everything she remembered of her. Now the Icethorn key no longer dwelled within me, I couldn't help but feel distant from her. It was as if the one physical thing tethering me to her had vanished.

As Elinor slipped through the door, Rafaela bidding her farewell alongside her, Erix forced his way into the room under the muttering of apologies.

"Do you still struggle with the concept of personal space?" Althea threw her comment at Erix. It reminded me of a time, an easier one than this, when we were all friends without the horrible memories wedged between us.

My tired grin faltered as I looked at the frown that drew down Erix's face. He looked directly at me, hesitation lingering on his parted lips.

"Erix. What is it?"

The shadow in his eyes scared me. It was as though he had seen something horrifying. Like he faced his greatest fear and narrowly survived it.

Erix looked at me with wide, all-seeing eyes. My heart plummeted through my chest. Panic seized at my throat and squeezed. The look on his face seemed to reveal my fear. One I had faced multiple times. Duncan's death. Each time it had seemed to flirt with me, the concept of Duncan perishing to nothing. Of Duncan leaving me for good.

I clapped my hands to my ears, unwilling to hear the words Erix had to say. Except his words caught me off guard. They had me removing my

hands slowly, lowering them back to my thighs as I tried to make sense of Erix's revelation.

"Duncan," Erix winced as though the name disgusted him. "He is awake."

I stumbled over my footing, refusing to believe what I saw before me. Erix had not lied. For a moment, I thought he had. How could he have shown such an expression yet revealed such happy news? Was it his jealousy or bitterness taking physical form across his expression?

I would have berated him, but I had no time.

Instead, I ran. Ran through the foreign hallways and rooms. I ran back to *him*.

Duncan stood at the end of the corridor, haloed with moonlight which swelled in through the grand window at his back.

"Tell me I am dreaming," I said, taking careful steps forward. I feared I would rush and shatter the illusion I dared hope was real before me.

"I heard you calling for me," Duncan replied, his words slurred, voice weak. "Then, when I woke, you were not there."

Duncan raised and spread his arms, beckoning me to him. One moment I walked cautiously, the next, I barrelled into his hard chest.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," I said, unsure if I was apologising for causing him pain now or what my action had caused when I opened the gate. His hand traced my back, and the other cupped the back of my head as I melted into him.

"I never wish to hear those words leave your mouth again."

Duncan's skin was both hot and damp to the touch. He was slick with sweat, his breathing ragged. I was partially aware of the wound. It still leaked into the bandage around his waist, but his arms held me in place, soundlessly refusing to ever let me go again. "You should be in bed!" I gasped, voice muffled in the moist flesh of his chest.

"I came to find you."

A sigh escaped of me. It spoke of my exhaustion, the cry of my soul as Duncan's physical presence finally sunk in.

"I'm here," I replied. "You are here... with me."

"Yes," Duncan replied slowly, drawing the lonely word out. "I certainly am."

Reluctantly, I pulled back. His eyes were hooded with shadows. The hair across his pinched forehead was clumped in sweat-damp strands. I reached out and brushed them from his forehead, only to feel just how warm he was to the touch.

"You look like shit warmed up. Let me get you back into bed before Elinor's healers blame me for your escape," I said, threading his arm over my shoulder. I instantly felt him drop his weight onto me.

"Sounds delicious," Duncan joked, eyes fluttering with heavy exhaustion. "However, I cannot promise my performance will be any good. You may be very disappointed."

My chest warmed with his attempt at a joke. I looked up at him, unable to do anything but beam with a smile as he pathetically winked at me.

"How about you focus on getting better first," I said.

"Oh," he moaned, rolling his tired eyes. "Kill joy."

I half encouraged; half dragged Duncan to walk back to his room. It was as though he was drunk on fever, laughing to himself as if unseen spirits whispered jokes into his ears.

All my worries faded with each step into the room. I glanced behind me to see if Erix was still there, but he was not. For a moment, I felt a pang of something painful in my chest, but it soon dissipated when I looked back to Duncan at my side.

Something caught my eye. A flickering of burning fire, glowing crimson. Frowning, I glanced at the strange light. There were no candles burning here, no light visible but the silver of the moon and the stars attempting to glow in competition.

But there was a mirror.

Duncan didn't seem to notice, continuing his focus forward to the promise of rest.

Over Duncan's shoulder, I glanced into the mirror, which reflected the misplaced light.

And in it was a reflection so horrific, it skinned the flesh from my bones.

I blinked, wanting to rid myself of the vision. Wishing it would change and the cruel trick my mind played would go away.

It didn't.

I stared at a body made of molten flesh. I propped it up with my shoulder, my arm wrapped around its sizzling, cracked flesh. Ram-curled horns like a crown atop a hairless head. Hooves thudded in time with Duncan's footfall, except the reflection showed prints of flame and rot left in its wake.

Soon enough, the mirror passed, leaving the glimpse of the demon behind me. My eyes bore into the brick of the castle wall as I focused on the child-like singing Duncan was lost too.

It took a second for my mind to slow down and shield me from the fear threatening to drown me. Then his words became clear. Each one stabbed into my chest, over and over.

"I am here. I am here."

No. I refused to believe it. My happiness slipped through my hold like sand through parted fingers.

Duwar. In the reflection, I had my arm around the demon god. The same one I had seen in the mirror in Lockinge, the same which had poisoned every reflection in the room of mirrors Aldrick had constructed within this very castle.

This was different. So very different.

Duwar did not stand at our sides, following us like a starving hound. He stood in place of Duncan. He was...

No.

No.

"Robin?" Duncan said my name in question. It had sway over me, the way he said it drew me back out of my mind.

My stiff neck ached as I turned to look at him in the flesh. Deep green eyes waited for me. His mouth parted; lips lined with a thin trail of spit. Duncan no longer sang, but the glazed look in his eyes told me he was still not completely here.

"Is something a matter?" He asked.

We had stopped walking. The door to the room was only a stretch away.

A storm built in my stomach, twisting it into knots. I felt bile slither up the back of my throat, threatening to burst out of me.

"I don't know," I replied honestly. "Should there be?"

For a moment, Duncan's gaze cleared. He straightened slightly, removing his weight from me as he peeled back. Then he kissed me. Pressed his sodden, heavy lips into mine. Our teeth almost clashed with the urgency. I tried to pull back, but his fingers encased my wrist and squeezed.

I wondered if he sensed my hesitation when he pulled away. I bit down on the insides of my cheeks as he regarded me down the line of his nose. If I didn't cause pain, I would have faltered beneath his stare.

"I am just so *happy* to be here," he said. No. It wasn't Duncan who spoke. "And it is *you* I have to thank."

A cold tear of ice rolled down my spine. I felt it run across every inch of my skin, spreading across my body in a wave of goosebumps.

"Come now, Robin," he said through a smirk. "Help me back into bed. I am going to need my rest."

I didn't refuse Duncan. I couldn't. Except, I knew without a doubt that it was not Duncan who spoke to me now. This was the demon god, Duwar. The reflection confirmed my greatest fears.

Duwar *had* made it through the gate.

The gate had been closed. The keys destroyed.

And Duwar was here, before me, encased in the flesh of the man I loved.

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