LIONEL HART



CHRONICLES OF THE VEIL

THE DRAWN ARROW

Lionel Hart

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CHAPTER ONE

The first thing Florian was aware of was how heavy his head was, so heavy on his shoulders that his neck might snap. He winced under the weight, starting to reach up to feel what was bearing down so hard on him—and then, as if a switch turned on in his brain, he was aware of everything else. His hand was still in midair halfway to his head, the other pushing a folded shirt into his backpack.

Florian blinked, frozen in place. Where was he? His heart was hammering, so loud in his ears that the sound drowned out everything else. He glanced around, afraid that somehow he was dreaming and that he would still have to do everything again—his father's funeral, his own coronation, all of it.

He was in the guest room. Somehow, he knew his father's room hadn't been fully cleared out yet. A single Golden Arrow was displayed on his writing desk, next to the silver crown carefully set on a display box. This crown was for his "everyday" use, according to his aunt Tatiana—as if he would wear a crown every day. He had only ever seen his father in a crown once.

But if he had the crown, he must have already finished the coronation ceremony. Right? It was as if he had blinked, and somehow been thrust through time.

Looking at the crown brought a hazy memory back—the crown was what had been so heavy on his head. The longer he looked at it the more he could recall, as if it had been a dream and he had only just awoken.

He remembered sweating from nerves more than anything else—although the thick, formal clothes that had been hastily tailored, and the long cape that draped from his shoulders down to the stone floor at his feet, certainly didn't help. He was kneeling, Tatiana standing above him with her hands hovering over the heavy ceremonial crown on his head, as she spoke some ceremonial words that he couldn't hear over the pounding of his heart in his ears. It had been pounding even harder then than it was now.

But he did hear the silence when she stopped speaking; and when he glanced up at her, she nodded and gave him a tiny, encouraging smile.

He remembered standing to face the crowd that had gathered in attendance. His vision was swimming, and none of their faces registered as he looked over them all. He was saying something, too, something he had rehearsed over and over again with Tatiana—he hoped that he was saying it right.

The only face in the crowd he could make out was Kade, front and center, dressed handsomely in a dark navy tunic with silver embroidery along its high collar. He remembered how his eyes kept returning to the flash of silver thread as he looked out toward them, seeing nothing.

He remembered bells ringing in the distance. No, not the distance—they were just overhead, though his memory of them was muted. Or it was the pounding of his heart drowning them out. Tatiana was next to him again, a hand on his back. He knew she was whispering in his ear that it was done now and there would be a feast, but he would have a few minutes to himself first. He remembered following her out of the courtyard amidst the calls and cheers of the crowd. He had never felt more like a child.

But that was all. It felt as though it had been months since that moment, distant as his memory was, but that couldn't possibly be true. What had happened? Why couldn't he remember anything else? How long ago had it truly been?

"You okay?"

Kade's voice made him jump as he stifled a frightened gasp.

"S-Sorry," Florian stammered, whirling around to see the taller man standing in the doorway of his bathroom, his toiletry bag in hand. Kade's eyebrows were raised, taken aback at his surprise. "I, uh. I forgot you were there."

Slowly Kade nodded and stepped into the room, coming to stand alongside him as he set the bag next to his backpack.

"Are you alright?" he asked again, gingerly touching his forehead with the back of his hand, as if he were feverish. "You've been... quiet today."

"Yeah," Florian said, though he still glanced around nervously. "Um, remind me, what day is it? When are we leaving?"

Kade blinked, his eyes searching, but Florian only looked up at him with an anxious grin. Fearful as he was, he couldn't bring himself to tell Kade he had no idea what was going on. Why couldn't he remember?

"Tomorrow," he finally said, his voice soft now. "That's why I'm helping you pack."

Relief flooded through him as he looked away, nodding. He had gotten through it all. Kade wouldn't lie to him, so it hadn't been a dream. Some small part of him worried at the thought of having somehow lost a week's worth of memories, but the rest of him was too glad to be done with it to care.

"Okay," he said, nodding, but his voice must have been shaking more than he thought, because Kade's concerned eyes still lingered on him.

"Do you want to take a break?" he asked, and quickly Florian nodded.

"Um, yeah," he said. "Is it lunchtime?"

Slowly Kade's worried look faded into a small smile, seemingly assuaged that Florian's jumpiness was only nerves.

"Sure," he said, and together they walked out of the room.

He had survived it. He had dreaded every second leading up to it; but now it was over, a memory that felt like a decade ago, rather than a few days. Maybe it was better that he couldn't remember. Everything to come had to be easier than the past few weeks had been.

"God, I'm so ready to go home."

The words came out as a tired groan, as Florian and Kade trudged across the narrow beach and into the dark water outside the Winter Court. Under their feet, the magical stone path that would lead them to the curtain between the Veil and the Earth rose up from beneath the water. Most of his belongings were crammed into his backpack; and Kade was carrying a heavy backpack across his shoulders as well, since they did not plan on returning to the Winter Court for some time.

"Home, huh?" Kade replied, a hint of a teasing grin at the corner of his lips as he turned to look back at Florian. It was becoming easier to recognize his facial expressions now, the slight crinkle in the corners of his eyes as he smiled, or the minute shifts of his eyebrows. They had been largely inseparable since they had returned to the Winter Court from their first, disastrous excursion into the Blight; and for the most part Florian had been grateful for the distraction that his presence had brought.

He grimaced at the remark. "Well, you know what I mean."

In truth, the Winter Court was his home now; but when he thought of home, he still imagined his room in his uncle's apartment on the second floor above their souvenir shop in Coral Shore. That still felt like home to him in a way the Winter Court didn't, and part of him doubted the Veil would ever

truly feel like home. This was his father's home, but his father was gone. He was just... keeping an eye on it in his absence. And even *that* he was leaving largely to Tatiana.

"Hey," Kade said, pausing so Florian stopped short behind him. His expression had softened, part affection and part concern. "It's alright if it doesn't feel like home yet. Give it time."

"I know," Florian sighed, reaching over to grasp his hand. Kade gave it a gentle squeeze, and they continued hand-in-hand. "Do you know what we're looking for? I've only been here that one time."

"I can find it," Kade answered, and they walked in silence the rest of the way. Only the wet sounds of their feet on the dark rock that magically rose up to create their path, and the soft white noise of the choppy waves underfoot, broke the quiet between them.

It had been two weeks since his father's funeral, and one week since his official coronation as the true King of the Winter Court. He had hoped to get back to Coral Shore and Earth sooner, but Tatiana had wanted to go over everything with him, even though she would still be handling most of the day-to-day work. It was all a blank spot in his memory still; vaguely he could remember a few snippets of conversations now, but he would probably need to go over everything with her again when he returned.

She had told him that it was less like being a king and more like being a mayor, which certainly seemed to be the case as far as Florian could tell. With how small the population of the Winter Court was, Tatiana was on a first name basis with pretty much every fae inhabiting the Court; and most of the tasks expected of her were more general upkeep of the castle grounds and the surrounding city, as well as overseeing trade and handling disputes.

It all seemed boring and unpleasant, so Florian was glad to be going back to Earth, at least for a little while. Thankful that Tatiana seemed to enjoy her job, he quickened his pace a bit; and with a hint of a smirk Kade followed suit.

Before long, though, Kade slowed again, his eyes searching the horizon.

"It's near here," he said, and Florian looked around as well, searching for the faint shimmer in the air that marked the boundary between worlds. He tried to recall the exact spot where they had crossed, over one month and a lifetime ago, but this far out to sea everything looked basically the same.

"There." Kade pointed, and Florian could see it: the faintest glimmer in the light, like the shimmer of rising heat in the summer.

"Can I try?" Florian asked, stepping closer to it, and Kade gestured for him to go ahead. He reached his hand out—despite the incorporeal nature of the curtain, there was a faint sensation of

something brushing against his fingers as he reached for it, and they disappeared into a line of light. Pulling it back, he could barely make out the shadowy shape of the hillside in Catalina where it let out. He glanced back at Kade with a grin.

"Good job," he said, smiling back, and together they stepped through the curtain onto Earth.

Instantly it was much warmer and brighter, the light of the early California afternoon surrounding them as they emerged. Florian winced, lifting a hand to shield his eyes from the sudden sunlight. The perpetual twilight of the Winter Court meant he had not seen the full light of day since they had returned from their excursion into the Blight. They were standing in a small clearing surrounded by bushes and plants, and Florian knew the path was uphill from where they were, but he could not see it.

"It's hot," he grumbled as he started to peel off the long-sleeved shirt he was wearing. He had worn a plain tee shirt underneath for this very reason, knowing it would be much warmer when they crossed over. Kade eyed him as he shoved the extra shirt into his backpack, and he grinned up at the taller man. "You're insatiable."

A hint of a flush reached Kade's face, and he glanced away. "That's not..." he started, then stifled a laugh. "Come on, then." Kade took his hand, and they headed for the trail.

Once they reached it, the downhill hike was fairly easy, and they made it to the ferry terminal without issue. This time it was Florian who bought the tickets, a slight pang of sadness going through him as he opened the black leather wallet that had been his father's. The credit card had his own name on it, but it was hard to think of it as his own—it still felt like borrowed money, in a way.

It wasn't until they were on the ferry, and Florian had a chance to start charging his phone, that he remembered his last conversation with Nadia had been on the ferry *to* Catalina, well over a month ago now.

"Oh no," he gasped, watching in horror as his screen lit up with notifications. She had called him every day, left several voicemails, almost fifty texts—Where are you? Are you okay? Please just let me know you're okay.

"What?" Kade asked, looking down at him quizzically; but he was already starting to call her, lifting the phone to his ear with shaky hands.

It only rang twice before Nadia's voice filled his ear. "Florian! Is that you?"

"Hey, Nadia," he said, trying to sound casual, but failing entirely. "I, um—"

"Oh my god, Florian," her voice came, and already he could tell she was on the verge of tears. "I've been so worried about you! Where have you been? Why didn't you answer? I've been begging

your uncle to look for you, but he wouldn't tell me anything, I was so—I was so worried. Are you okay?"

"I'm okay," he said hoarsely. What would he tell her? What *could* he tell her? Would she even believe anything he said? "Listen, I... I'm really sorry. I know I totally fell off the face of the Earth. I don't really know how to explain."

"Where were you? Are you alright?" she asked again, still sounding just as frantic as she had before.

"I'm okay," he repeated. "I, uh... I don't know what to say, Nadia."

"Do you need help? Tell me where you are, I'll come get you right now."

"No, no, it's not that—I'm heading home, actually, so it's okay, I promise. I guess... I, uh, I was with my dad. I'll explain more when I get home, okay? I'll call you then."

"No!" she exclaimed, taking him by surprise. "Florian, I've been worried sick about you for a month! Why couldn't you just call me back? Just one text from you would have—would have—" He winced as she started to cry in earnest now, her voice breaking.

"I'm really sorry," he said softly, guilt pressing down on him so hard that he could barely breathe. "I didn't have cell service, and my phone—my phone stopped working."

"Then why wouldn't August tell me anything?" she asked, her voice still wavering with tears. "What's going on?"

"I promise I'll explain when I get home," he replied, glancing up to meet Kade's eyes; but he looked just as uncertain as he felt. "It's hard to explain. But I'll call you as soon as I get home and we'll get together, okay?"

For a long moment she didn't answer, only the sound of her sniffling and breathing coming from the other end of the phone.

"Fine," she finally snapped. "You'd better have a good explanation for all this, Florian."

"I do, I promise," he said, and she hung up. With a long sigh, he put the phone back in his pocket.

"Your friend?" Kade asked, his eyebrows furrowed in concern. Florian nodded before leaning forward to put his head in his hands.

"God, I totally forgot to tell Nadia anything," he groaned. "What am I going to say to her? All she knows is that I just ghosted her for a month. I'm a terrible friend."

"That's not true," Kade interjected. "It's not like you were on vacation. You had a lot going on."

"I guess," Florian replied bitterly. That was true, but it wasn't as if he could really tell Nadia what exactly was going on. She had sounded hurt and suspicious—he could only imagine what she must

have thought of him now. "What can I even tell her?"

For a long moment, Kade was silent. When Florian glanced back up at him, he was looking out at the ocean, a thoughtful expression on his face. For an instant he had the miserable thought that Kade was ignoring him, then he recognized the pondering look on his face. He had always been one to consider his words before speaking, Florian reminded himself. Kade wouldn't ignore him.

"It's up to you," he finally settled on, and Florian sighed. It wasn't exactly helpful. "It's not that humans aren't allowed to know, but... Even if you told her the truth, she might not believe you."

"That's what I'm worried about," he groaned. "But I don't know what a more convincing lie would be. Why would I have been gone for a month? Why wouldn't I have just texted her back?"

Kade shook his head. "Then tell her the truth. Whether or not she believes it is up to her, then."

Florian managed a wry smile. "Yeah? Not gonna get me in trouble for tattling to a human?"

"What's tattling?" Kade asked, and Florian laughed. "And anyway, you're King of the Winter Court. You can't get in trouble with anyone. There's no one above you to get you in trouble."

Florian wrinkled his nose. It was a blessing and a curse, he supposed; but at that moment he hated the thought of being a king. "Not when we're on Earth," he sighed, turning away to look out at the ocean. "I'm just a regular guy here."

Kade did not respond, but instead put one arm around his shoulders, a quiet gesture of comfort. Florian kept his eyes on the horizon as they sailed and watched the light of the sun flickering off the dark blue of the ocean, choppy waves rising up in their wake as the ferry made its way toward the mainland. It had been a marvel to walk along the ocean's surface in the Winter Court, but he still liked the Earth's ocean better. He had spent all his life just a few blocks from the beach. The ocean was familiar, welcoming, safe—everything the Veil wasn't.

Before he realized, Florian began to doze off, until Kade gently shook his shoulder, startling him awake.

"Sorry," he said softly. "We're here."

He stumbled to his feet, taking the backpack from Kade's hand. Together they disembarked, and they were truly on their own.

CHAPTER TWO

They arrived back in Coral Shore in the early evening, the Lyft dropping them off in front of the souvenir shop. It was early enough that the shop would still be open, but he decided to head straight into the apartment; the thought of going into the shop first made him nervous. Florian took in a deep breath, grabbed Kade's hand, and led him up the stairs. He fumbled with the keys as he unlocked the door, but finally they were back inside the little apartment, his home. They stepped into the kitchen, and Florian's eyes lingered at the table—where he had met Kade for the first time, where he had met his father—before turning to Kade.

"Just put your stuff anywhere," he said, gesturing toward the living room. "You can sleep in my room."

"Alright," Kade agreed, and set his backpack down on the couch as Florian headed for his room.

It was just as he had left it. Florian breathed a sigh of relief; he had not truly thought his uncle would get rid of or even touch his things, but seeing the familiar space was comforting. The moment that he set down his backpack, though, he could hear footsteps coming from the stairwell, heavy and quick. August must have heard them arrive. Steeling himself, he stepped back out into the hall, as he heard the front door open.

"Florian!" his uncle's voice called out, and August emerged from the entryway, eyes wide.

"Hi," Florian replied, his voice small as he walked toward him. August all but leapt at him, closing the distance quickly and grabbing Florian in a tight hug.

"Oh, Florian," he sighed as he squeezed him, and tentatively Florian returned the hug. August smelled like the ocean, like salt and sandalwood. "I'm so glad you're alright."

The worry in his voice and the comforting familiarity of his scent was more than enough to break Florian's tenuous hold on his emotions, and tears began to burn at his eyes.

"I missed you," he managed to choke out, burying his face against his uncle's shoulder. He hadn't meant to cry.

"I missed you too, kiddo," August sighed, giving him one last squeeze, before releasing him and holding him at arm's length to get a better look at him. Florian wiped his eyes, embarrassed; but August's wistful, nervous smile didn't waver. "I guess you're really not a kid anymore."

Florian managed a bitter laugh at that. "I guess not."

"I'm so sorry about Jerah," he said softly, and Florian winced. "I... I guess I don't even know what to say. How are you holding up?"

"I'm okay," he said quickly, glancing over at Kade. He stood silently in the living room, politely looking away. "I'll be alright."

"I don't blame you for wanting to get away from it all," August sighed, following Florian's eyes as if noticing Kade for the first time. "Thank you for coming with him, Kade."

"Of course," Kade replied stiffly, looking over at them just long enough to give August a curt nod.

"How long do you think you'll be in town?" August asked, turning to Florian once more.

"I'm not sure. Probably not very long. We're heading up to Canada, so we can see Kade's family and do some stuff there."

"That's a good idea. The wolf clan has always been loyal to the fae, but going to see them directly should help keep a positive relationship," August said. A hint of a smile crept onto his face, the first sign of joy from his uncle that Florian had seen so far, as he added, "Since you're the king now and all."

"Ugh," Florian groaned, stepping away. "Don't remind me." August chuckled, then looked back over at Kade.

"Well, I'll get some extra blankets and pillows for you, Kade," he said. "The couch might be a little small for you, but it's probably still more comfortable than the floor."

Kade and Florian exchanged a nervous glance. There was no point in hiding it, Florian thought, but still he felt suddenly anxious.

"He can stay in my room," he said quickly, before he could think better of it. August looked at him, confused, till he blurted out, "We're, um... We're dating?" The last part came out as a squeaky question, and he cleared his throat before saying again. "We're dating."

August blinked. "Oh." He looked between the two of them again, his brows starting to furrow. "Well, um. Alright then."

Florian couldn't get a read on what his uncle was thinking—whatever flicker of emotion that was on his face vanished after a brief instant. August moved toward his room, speaking over his shoulder

with a suspiciously light tone, "Well, I'll still get you some extra pillows. Florian, could you help me?"

"Uh, sure," he stammered, exchanging one last confused look with Kade, and went to follow his uncle.

When they were in his room, August closed the door behind them and gave Florian an appraising look. "What?" Florian asked nervously, frowning. August hesitated.

"How long ago did you and Cameron break up?" he finally asked, and Florian scowled.

"Is that what this is about?" he muttered.

"I'm serious. How long has it been?"

"Like six months." It was closer to four, but why did he care?

"And you think it's wise to start something so soon?" he pressed, then sighed. "Florian, you know I wouldn't say anything if I didn't think it was important. I'm worried about you."

"Why? I'm fine," he said, shifting uncomfortably.

"Because your dad just died," August answered, and Florian winced. "Because Kade is loyal to the fae kingdom, maybe to a fault. I don't want either of you to get hurt, and I don't want the relationship between the fae and the wolf shifters to be damaged, either. I may have lived on Earth for a long time, but I remember what the court politics can be like."

"This has nothing to do with any of that," he protested, heat burning in his face. August had never interrogated him like this before, catching him entirely off-guard—the implication of what he was saying wasn't exactly reassuring, either. "This happened before—before what happened with my dad. Alright? And it's not, like, a rebound or whatever. Am I not allowed to date now because I had one shitty boyfriend?"

"You know it's not that," August sighed as he turned away from Florian, shaking his head. "I just worry about you, Florian. This is a lot of change in your life all at once."

"Well, don't," he grumbled, and pushed past him toward the closet, where he knew the extra bedding was. "Now are you going to get the pillows or what?"

Kade was sitting on the edge of the sofa when they emerged a moment later, his back straight and discomfort obvious on his face.

"Come on," Florian said, gesturing for him to follow with his free hand. Kade picked up his bag and followed Florian into his room, pointedly keeping his eyes on the ground to avoid meeting August's gaze.

"Sorry," he muttered, when they were safely in Florian's room. "I didn't mean to... make things difficult for you."

"Don't be sorry," Florian sighed, tossing the extra pillow and blanket onto his bed. "He's not usually like this. I don't know why he thinks I can't make decisions about my own life all of a sudden."

Kade was silent, watching him with uncertainty, and Florian groaned before throwing himself down, on top of the pillows.

"He even said I'm not a kid anymore, then still treats me like one," he muttered. "God, and I still have to talk to Nadia. Fuck. Today sucks."

"We could wait until tomorrow," Kade offered quietly, but Florian shook his head.

"No, it might be good to get out of the apartment. Let Uncle August cool off a bit, I guess," he sighed. He couldn't remember ever having thought that before—he couldn't think of a time August was ever really mad at him, easygoing as he was. Hell, he could count on one hand the number of times that he could remember being grounded.

"He didn't seem mad," Kade said. "Just worried."

"You sound just like him," Florian replied, rolling his eyes; but he pushed himself back up onto his feet all the same. "Come on. We should buy some snacks and stuff anyway while we're here."

The snacks were just a ruse. Once they were out of the apartment and walking down the street to the corner store, Florian nudged Kade and muttered,

"We should probably, uh, get some condoms too."

He felt Kade stifle a laugh next to him. "Yeah?"

"Well, yeah," he stammered, feeling suddenly embarrassed. "It's different here. I can't just, you know, not have those parts whenever now."

"Not arguing," Kade said, holding up one hand. A fond smile played at his lips when Florian glanced nervously up at him. "Whatever makes you most comfortable. It's fine."

Florian nodded quickly, looking away as he felt his face still warm and flushed. Everything still felt so new and strange—he was glad for the distraction, of course, but...

"Isn't this it?" Kade asked, stopping and grabbing Florian by the wrist, before he could get too far ahead.

"Oh, uh, yes," he said, all the more embarrassed, and hurried inside ahead of Kade.

He *did* want to get snacks, so they walked up and down the aisles of chips and candy first, Florian grabbing his favorites and pointing out what he thought Kade might like. From what he could tell, the

other man had a bit of a sweet tooth (much to his amusement), so he pulled a few candies and chocolates from the shelves and put them in Kade's hands. He grinned up at Kade just to elicit the faintly amused smile Florian was starting to recognize more and more.

Then they were in the medicine aisle—the corner store didn't exactly have a huge variety to choose from, but still Florian hesitated, looking over each of the little boxes with some concern. He had never really been tasked with buying condoms before.

"What's up, Florian?"

His heart plummeted to the very bottom of his stomach at the all-too-familiar voice, and he looked up to see Cameron peering at him from over the aisle, a stupidly amused smirk on his face as his eyes flickered between him and Kade.

"Oh," he said, trying to sound as disinterested as possible, despite his suddenly pounding heart. "Hi, Cameron."

"Thought maybe you'd finally skipped town," he said, stepping around the corner of the aisle to stand next to him. His shoulder-length, dirty blond hair tumbled in messy waves out from under a loosely worn beanie, as if he had just come from the ocean. He was still holding his vape in one hand, so he must have been smoking on the beach—nothing new there—and came by to get snacks, same as them. On his other side, Florian could feel Kade tense, instantly distrustful. "I hadn't seen you in a while."

"Yeah, I'm moving," he answered, glancing away from the row of condoms in front of them. Of all the places they could have run into him, why here? Cameron seemed to notice too, and a snort of a laugh escaped him.

"Damn," Cameron said, his attention moving to Kade, as he eyed the taller man up and down. "So does this guy not know you have a pussy or what?"

Florian's face burned red, and he opened his mouth to snap out something; but Kade had already stepped in front of him.

"Hey," Kade said, eyes narrowed, as he looked down at Cameron with an expression that was somehow both disgusted and utterly bored. "Shut the fuck up."

Cameron burst out laughing at that, though he did take a step back. "Get a load of this guy," he laughed, shaking his head. "Whatever, man. Twinks are a dime a dozen around here. Hey, if you ever want to fuck a dude that actually has a dick, I can point you in the right direction."

"Seriously, Cameron, fuck off," Florian muttered. Even as he spoke, Kade surged forward to shove the other man up against the row of glass doors filled with cold drinks behind him, Cameron's vape clattering to the ground.

"Apologize," he growled, and for an instant Florian relished the look of panic that had overtaken Cameron's features, his flip-flops sliding off his feet that were now a solid inch off the ground. "Apologize to him."

"Hey!" a shout came from the front register, and Florian winced as he looked back at the attendant scowling at them. "Knock it off or take it outside!"

"You heard the man," Cameron said, the same stupid grin on his face though with a more nervous twist to it now.

Kade glared at him for a second longer, then dropped him and stepped away in one fluid motion. Cameron stumbled as he dropped, looking between Florian and Kade, before bending down to pick up his fallen vape pen and slide his sandals back onto his feet.

"Whatever, dude," he laughed nervously, and started to walk away, before turning to Florian once more. "Good thing you're moving, cuz my friends'll kick his ass next time I see him."

"Doubt it," Kade replied coolly, already turning his attention back to the medicine aisle. Florian stifled a laugh. He waved Cameron off and didn't turn to watch him go, though he breathed a sigh of relief when he heard the bell on the door jingle as it opened and shut.

"Sorry," he muttered, leaning closer to Kade. "I really didn't think we'd see him around."

"You really dated that guy?" Kade said, raising an eyebrow down at him, and this time he did laugh.

"Yeah," Florian muttered, chagrined. "Look, in my defense, he didn't used to be so bad. He got some shitty friends after high school, I guess."

"Hmm," was all Kade replied, though the slight smile on his face was reassuring.

Florian didn't want to be there any longer than they had to, so he grabbed the first box with a brand that he recognized, and they stepped up to the register.

"Sorry about that," Florian said nervously as the clerk started ringing him up, but the man waved him away.

"Don't be. That kid's always causing trouble," he sighed. "Just had to make sure you didn't break anything. Honestly I kinda wish you had taken him outside and smacked him around a bit."

"Next time," Kade said, deadpan as ever, but it made Florian burst into laughter all the same.

CHAPTER THREE

By the time they were back in the apartment, Florian knew he couldn't push off his conversation with Nadia any longer. August had gone back down to the shop, though Florian expected that he was probably closing up and would be back soon, so having her come up to the apartment wouldn't be the best idea.

"You're nervous," Kade remarked, as they set their haul from the corner store down on the edge of Florian's bed.

"Is it that obvious?" Florian grimaced. "Yeah, I have to call Nadia... I'm still not sure what to tell her. Or where to meet her. I feel like Uncle August probably doesn't want any more guests, and I don't want to have this conversation with him around anyway."

"The beach is right there," Kade replied, and despite his nerves Florian laughed.

"Seems like the easiest solution, I guess," he sighed. "Alright, let me text her."

Nadia agreed to meet him at the bonfire pit on the beach nearest the souvenir shop, so he and Kade headed back out.

"Are beaches on Earth really so crowded?" Kade asked as they walked.

"I mean, right now it's probably not too bad," Florian said, then frowned. "Wait, what do you mean?"

Kade pressed his lips together before answering, a hint of embarrassment creeping onto his face. "Well, your father showed me a few Earth movies when we would travel. Whenever there was a beach there were so many people. Are they always like that?"

Florian laughed—it was easy to forget Kade was from an entirely different world, and he had probably only ever known the empty shore along the cliffs of the Winter Court. Though, the thought of Kade sitting and watching a movie was cute, somehow. He'd have to pick some for them to watch together while they were here.

"It shouldn't be too crowded now, I think," he said, grinning indulgently at the taller man as they walked. "But it can get pretty busy, especially in the summer when it's hot. The busy season starts up

in a few weeks now."

Kade frowned. "That sounds unpleasant."

"Yeah, I try to avoid it when it's too busy," Florian agreed. He pointed, and they started to cross the street onto the beach. "There's the fire pit. We got lucky, no one's using it."

With the early evening air getting cooler and the sun starting to go down, the beach began to empty with only a few people sitting near the water, and a few groups still gathered around picnic benches or distant fire pits. Once the sun had fully set, Florian knew the last of the stragglers would likely pack up to leave, and the beach would technically be closed, although it was rare anyone came out to actually enforce it. The area around the fire pit seemed mostly empty, and Florian hoped that it would stay that way, imagining all the different ways their conversation could go.

He and Kade sat down at one of the benches around the fire pit, but barely a moment had passed before he heard Nadia's voice calling out to him.

"Florian!"

He shared one last nervous look with Kade, then stood up to look in the direction of her voice. Nadia was jogging across the street, her hair pulled into a messy bun that was falling apart as she ran. Her eyes were wide, and her expression looked nearly on the verge of tears.

"Hey," he managed to call out. Without answering, she ran straight for him and hugged him tightly, squeezing him so hard that he thought he might break a rib. He couldn't bring himself to make her stop, though, and only hugged her in return. "Sorry..."

"Where have you been?!" she exclaimed, pulling away so she could look him in the eye. Her worried expression had morphed to anger instantly. But then she caught sight of Kade standing behind Florian, and she faltered. "Oh—uh, who's this?"

"Oh," Florian stammered, glancing nervously between them. Kade's expression was perfectly neutral, the same blank slate that Florian had seen so often when they first met. "Well, um, it's a long story, but this is Kade. Kade, this is Nadia."

"Hi," Kade said flatly. Nadia glanced between him and Florian, raising an eyebrow.

"Hello," she answered, suspicion still in her voice. Though from the way she looked at Kade, Florian could tell she was now more intrigued than upset.

"Kade is," Florian started, then faltered. "Kade is, um, my boyfriend."

"Florian!" Nadia exclaimed, stamping her foot in the sand. But a grin split her features, and Florian hesitantly smiled back. "What the hell, dude? What have you been doing?"

"It's a long story," he laughed, nervously rubbing his arms as if he were cold, though the early evening temperature was entirely pleasant. "Want to sit down with us?"

She sighed and sat down next to Florian, Kade resuming his spot on the other side of him.

"So..." he continued. All at once it felt as if his mind were both racing and entirely blank, knowing what he needed to say with no idea how to say it. "So, I, uh, was with my dad for a while. After our trip to Catalina. I decided to stay with him for a bit."

"How did that go?"

"Well, it was good, but, uh..." Florian trailed off. The words were agonizing to speak aloud. "Um, he died... about two weeks ago."

Nadia gasped, her hands flying up to her mouth. "Oh my god, Florian!" she exclaimed, freeing one hand to reach for him and pull him into a hug again. "Oh my god, I'm so sorry. That's awful. That's horrible!"

"Yeah," he said faintly, returning the hug. What else could he do?

"Was he sick?" she asked. All the lingering frustration was gone from her voice now, only sympathy and surprise remaining. "Is that why he came to see you? Did he know?"

Florian couldn't stop himself from laughing bitterly at that. "No, but I think I almost would have been more okay with that. It was just a... an accident."

"I'm so sorry, Flor," she sighed, squeezing him once more. "That's... God, that's a lot to deal with all at once."

"I'm sorry I never called you or anything," he murmured, shaking his head. "I really didn't know you had called or texted, though."

"Where were you?" she asked.

Florian exchanged a nervous glance with Kade. His face had remained blank, but he gave an almost imperceptible nod—not much to go off of, but it was a small comfort all the same. Florian looked back to Nadia with a sigh.

"I don't know how to explain this," he started, unable to meet her gaze. His eyes settled on the ash and refuse in the fire pit across from them. "It's going to sound crazy, but just try and keep an open mind, okay?"

"What do you mean?" Nadia asked, and he could practically hear the frown in her voice—could imagine the way her eyebrows furrowed, and her lips pursed.

"The reason my dad left me back then is because he was a king. And I was a prince. And there was this... this prophecy about me, and he wanted to keep me hidden and safe," Florian said quickly,

before he could stop himself.

He had always thought that coming out to his friends when he was younger and still in the midst of transition, then later coming out as gay to his uncle, had been the most difficult things he'd ever had to say. But forcing out those few sentences to Nadia was already giving every one of those conversations a run for their money.

She was silent, so he started to speak again, if only to fill the silence. "There's this, um, this other world. It's magic. And he took me there, and that's where I was staying with him, and that's why I couldn't call you or anything... And I'm going back soon, so, um, I might not really call or anything again when I do."

"Florian, stop," Nadia finally interrupted, her voice tremulous—he winced, knowing she was holding back tears. "You're not funny. This is just mean. It's a terrible joke."

"Nadia, I promise I'm not joking," he said, forcing himself to look at her. Her eyes were glassy with unshed tears, and her nose wrinkled with how hard she pressed her lips together in a tight frown. "I know how it sounds. I thought the same thing when my dad told me. But I promise, I promise it's real. I wish I could show you."

"What did he give you?" Nadia said, abruptly standing up. "Was he on drugs? What did you take?"

"Nothing!" Florian exclaimed, shaking his head, as he leapt to his feet to follow her. "Nadia, come on. You know me. I wouldn't be making this up. I promise it's not drugs or anything like that."

"No!" she cried, sending a bolt of pain through Florian's chest. "I knew it! When your uncle wouldn't tell me anything, and you had just disappeared—"

"He's telling the truth," Kade interrupted. Quiet as he was, it was enough for Nadia to fall silent, her eyes flickering between them suspiciously.

"Nadia, listen," Florian said again, grabbing her hands. Her expression was still pained, but at least she didn't try to pull away or interrupt. "I know how it sounds. I really do. I thought the same thing when my dad was telling me, but... God, I wish I could prove it to you. But I can't. Will you just trust me? I promise I'm not doing anything illegal or bad or whatever. No drugs. Just trust me."

For a long, tense moment she was silent; then her eyes squeezed shut, and she let out a long, heavy sigh. When she opened her eyes again, her expression had softened.

"I'm just glad you're okay," she muttered, shaking her head. She pulled him into a hug again. "I can't believe you got a new boyfriend without telling me."

Florian managed to laugh at that, squeezing her tightly. The situation still didn't feel exactly ideal, but he was glad that at least she didn't seem to be mad at him. That would have to be enough for now.

"He's shy," Florian replied, just loud enough for Nadia to hear, and she snorted as she stepped back.

"He doesn't *look* shy," she said, turning her attention to Kade and looking him up and down once more. He sat up a little straighter, but Florian could see the barest hint of color rising in his face under her scrutiny. "What did you say your name was? Kade?"

"That's right," Kade answered, meeting her gaze, as she took a step closer to him.

"Nadia, it's fine," Florian muttered, looking away in embarrassment, though it also sparked a tiny ember of hope that she still cared enough about him to scope out his new boyfriend. He should have expected her to want to interrogate Kade.

"Do you have a job?" she asked sharply.

"No?" Kade said, at the same time that Florian exclaimed, "Yes!"

"What does that mean?" she snapped, putting her hands on her hips.

"He worked for my dad," Florian said quickly, before Kade could add anything. "So yes."

"Ohh," Nadia said, and she looked back at Florian to wink at him. "So he works for you now?"

Florian paused, bewildered. He supposed it *was* technically true, and he shared a heated look with Kade for an instant. He shrugged.

"Yes," Kade said, tone as flat as ever; but Florian burst out laughing.

"I mean, I guess so," he chuckled, shaking his head. "That's one way to put it."

"Well, I'm just glad you're seeing someone with a job this time," she teased, nudging Florian in the ribs, and he groaned in response.

"We actually ran into Cameron at the store like an hour ago," he said, and she squealed with laughter. "Right? I think he was jealous."

"Oh, I hope so! God, I would have paid to see that," she laughed.

They sat together for a little while longer, talking as if it were an average weekend. Kade was quiet, listening more than speaking; but Florian knew that was how he was most comfortable. Nadia was clearly still suspicious about what he had been doing the past month, and he was sure she didn't really believe him, but to her credit she didn't bring it up again. Otherwise, she was acting pretty normal, all things considered. He would take what he could get.

Eventually, though, Nadia stood and brushed sand off her legs, looking out across the street. The sun had set, and the street lights were turning on.

"I better get going," she sighed, leaning down to hug Florian again. "Flor, I'm glad you're okay, but please don't go another month without talking to me, alright? I was really worried about you."

"I know," Florian said, hugging her back. Guilt panged in him as he said it. They had no idea how long they would be in the Veil next time. "I won't."

"And it was nice to meet you," Nadia said, stepping closer to Kade. He stood as she approached, and Florian had to stifle a chuckle.

"You too," he said, and Nadia held her hand out to him. He looked at her hand blankly for a moment, then gave a start as if remembering what he had to do, taking her hand and giving it a slight shake.

"Be good to him, okay?" she said, and Florian groaned. "You probably already know he's kind of a baby. He's a lot softer than he looks."

"Nadia," Florian hissed, flushing.

"Okay," Kade agreed, nodding once with a serious expression.

She giggled as she looked back at Florian. "I think I like this one," she teased.

Kade sat back down next to Florian as they watched her go. When she had crossed the street and turned the corner, disappearing from their view behind one of the many beachfront shops and buildings, he finally turned back to Florian.

"Flor," he repeated softly, a grin spreading across his face, and in an instant all the tension drained out of Florian as he laughed.

"I guess you can call me that," he sighed, shaking his head. "I didn't take you for much of a nickname kind of guy, though." His laugh trailed off, as Kade wrapped an arm around him, hugging him much more gently than Nadia had. Florian sighed, leaning into the touch and pressing his face into Kade's shoulder, warm and strong and comforting.

"Softer than you look," Kade murmured, his voice a low rumble like distant thunder; and Florian smiled in spite of himself.

"I'm not soft," he grumbled, wrapping his own arms around Kade as he said it. "This is nice, though."

"Definitely soft," Kade said. "And brave."

"I don't know about that," Florian laughed, shaking his head against Kade's shoulder. "I don't think she believed me at all. Who knows what she thinks?"

"You still told her," Kade replied, shrugging. "That's the important part. You did it. That's brave."

"Maybe I should have just lied," Florian sighed. Kade made a soft, noncommittal noise, but moved his thumbs in slow circles along Florian's shoulders.

"I think you did the right thing," he finally said after a moment of consideration. "I'm proud of you."

It seemed a silly thing to be proud of, but it still made Florian smile anyway. He took in a deep, slow breath, savoring the moment and the herbal, warm scent of Kade's skin. It was easy to forget the rest of the world for a moment, as they held each other and looked out at the ocean. The sky was a deep purple and seemed to go on and on. It wouldn't last forever, but it was nice.

"Ready to go back?" he asked after a few minutes, barely above a whisper. He felt Kade breathe in deeply, then released him as he nodded. Florian took him by the hand, and they left the beach.

CHAPTER FOUR

When they arrived back at the apartment, August was sitting on the couch watching television, but he picked up the remote to mute it and leaned over the edge of the couch to look their way as they stepped into the entryway.

"Hey," Florian said awkwardly, their uncomfortable conversation coming back in a rush.

"There's some takeout on the counter if you haven't had dinner yet," August said, gesturing toward the kitchen. His gaze lingered on Kade as he said it, but the taller man was shaking the sand out of his shoes and didn't seem to notice. "Come here, Florian."

Florian scowled, glancing at Kade, who looked back at him with a blank expression and shrugged. "Alright," he sighed, and stepped into the living room to sit down next to August.

"Look," his uncle sighed. "Sorry about earlier. Maybe I overstepped."

Florian glanced away uncomfortably. "I understand," he muttered. And he did understand, really, not that it made the conversation any less awkward. Objectively, it *was* a lot of change in his life all at once; and now that it had been a few hours, he couldn't blame August for worrying about him.

"I just want to make sure you're alright," he continued, his voice low. "And... I don't know Kade that well, but he seems like a good kid; and I know Jerah loved him, and he looked up to Jerah a lot. But I worry that maybe this is going to be too much all at once for the both of you, or you're doing this for the wrong reasons."

Florian opened his mouth to snap something in response, but Kade beat him to it.

"I'm right here," the other man's voice came from the kitchen, in the same cool, level tone he had used with Cameron at the corner store. August winced, glancing over in his direction.

"Well, come over here, then," he sighed, and Kade stepped out of the kitchen to face them, a slight frown on his face. "Sorry, Kade. I don't mean to be rude, really. I'm just telling Florian I'm worried about him, about you both."

"I appreciate your concern," Kade replied. "But I can promise you it's unfounded. Florian and I..." He hesitated, and Florian recognized the faint look of embarrassment rising in his features. "The first

time we met here, I liked him. I thought he was handsome. This has nothing to do with the Winter Court or the wolf clan. Florian and I, this would have happened regardless of—of King Jerah. So there's no need to be concerned."

Embarrassing as it was, Florian felt a faint hint of pride and affection bubbling in his chest at the words. Kade had thought he was *handsome*, even back then.

Next to him, August sighed and leaned back onto the couch. "Alright. You don't need to tell me twice," he said, shaking his head. "I won't bring it up again. Are we good? Anything else that needs to be cleared?"

Kade and Florian exchanged a glance, and Florian shook his head. "We're good."

"Good," August said, standing up and gesturing at each of them with both of his hands. "In that case, some ground rules while you're staying here. No sex in the apartment."

"Uncle August," Florian groaned, feeling his face burn crimson.

"I'm serious! This is my house. If you want to be a king and make your own rules, go back to the Winter Court," August replied, though a grin had spread across his face as he said it. "No sex in the apartment. I guess that's it. He can sleep in your room if he wants."

"Yes, sir," Kade replied stiffly, and August chuckled, shaking his head and sitting back down. A visible embarrassed flush had risen in Kade's face as well.

"Fine," Florian muttered, getting up to join Kade. As far as rules went, that seemed pretty lenient. "I guess we'll have to go out to the back alley instead."

August started to laugh, shaking his head; but Kade's face twisted into a bewildered look, and Florian burst out laughing as well. "I'm kidding, I'm kidding," he added quickly, to Kade's obvious relief.

"Maybe he'll be a good influence on you after all, Florian," August teased.

When Florian checked the next day, he didn't find any direct flights to Iqaluit, the city in Nunavut where, according to Kade, a curtain to the wolf kingdom lay close by. Instead they would have to go to Montreal and take a smaller plane from there. He bought tickets for a flight in five days, feeling a strange mixture of guilt and gratitude when he used his father's credit card to do so.

With time to kill, they spent most of their time out on the beach—Kade had never been in the ocean before and seemed quite interested in the whole experience. He wasn't a great swimmer, but Florian did his best to teach him. Mostly, they stood in waist-deep water and let the waves crash into them, lifting them off their feet a bit, before settling back down in the sand. It was fun, Florian thought, and

Kade seemed to be enjoying their break as well. He had never seen the other man smile and laugh so easily. When they were tired, they would lay out in the sun, dozing and cuddling and sometimes kissing. That made it *much* harder to keep his hands out of Kade's pants, though, so he tried to keep kissing on the beach to a minimum.

Though August didn't ask, he still spent a few hours in the morning down in the shop, mostly making necklaces and bracelets from shells that he gathered when they were on the beach, and occasionally getting up to help customers. Making jewelry and small trinkets was his favorite part of the job, and he had no idea when he would have time to come back and work on his own projects for the shop again, so he resolved to do as much as he could while they were home.

Kade sat with him each morning, helping in little ways; Florian worried that he would be bored, but he seemed content just to be there, watching him work and observing the people that came in to shop. He even seemed to be warming up to August and Nadia, who came by to see Florian at least once a day.

The days passed slowly, lazily, but soon enough it was the night before their flight. They set out everything for their trip in the living room, so they could get up and go first thing the next morning.

"Are you nervous?" Florian asked softly as they lay in bed, looking up at the ceiling in the dark. His mattress here was much smaller than the one that they'd shared in the Winter Court, so they had to huddle close together for both of them to fit, though neither had voiced any complaints so far. Next to him Kade took in a deep, sleepy breath.

"No," he answered. "Are you?"

"A little bit," he admitted.

"What are you nervous about?"

Florian paused, considering. He had only been on a plane a few times before: twice for vacations when he was young, and once for a school trip when he was in high school. He had never been to Canada, much less a place as remote and cold as Nunavut; and he would be meeting the wolf clan for the first time, Kade's family.

"What if your family doesn't like me?" he said. The other things seemed too silly to admit to being nervous about, but he heard a sharp breath of a laugh escape Kade.

"They'll like you," he said. "Well, most of them. My mom is... difficult to get along with for just about everyone. Other than her, they'll all like you. You're the Fae king."

"Tell me about your mom," Florian prompted. He could only recall Kade ever having mentioned her once or twice before—for how much he and Jerah had discussed Kade's father, his mother

seemed a mysterious figure in comparison. Kade sighed, rolling onto his back as he considered it.

"She's very opinionated and set in her ways," he finally settled on. "She resented my dad a lot for leaving so often to help Jerah, and she was really angry at me when I left to do the same. That's... Kind of why I never really went back."

"Oh," Florian replied, mulling it over.

"But I think I understand where she's coming from," Kade continued after a beat of silence. "I get it. She felt like my dad was forgetting his responsibility to the clan, and she had to pick up the slack. So she might let some of that project onto you. But once she gets to know you, I think she'll like you, too. So don't be nervous."

"I'll try," Florian sighed, but the words weren't exactly comforting.

"My brothers and sister will like you," Kade said. Florian could hear the smile in his voice as he said it. "They're always happy to see me when I come home. If they know I like you, they'll like you."

"What about everyone else?"

"They'll like you too."

"Because they support the fae kingdom."

Kade paused at that. "Yes," he said slowly. "That's a big part of it, of course. Florian..." He trailed off, sounding uncertain. "I like you for you. It's true that I cared a lot about Jerah, but that has nothing to do with you. You could have been anyone, and I would have felt the same. You being Jerah's son is just how we met."

Florian wasn't entirely reassured, but it was nice to hear anyway. He rolled onto his side so he could press closer to Kade, who wrapped one arm around him.

"Okay," he murmured, his voice muffled against Kade's chest. "I trust you."

They set out early the next morning, getting another Uber to the airport. The cost made Florian sweat, but from what Tatiana had told him, the coffers of the Winter Court were deep and old even on Earth. She had reassured him before they left that whatever travel costs they incurred were of no worry. Still, he had never spent so much money in such a short amount of time in his life, at least not on something that felt so... frivolous. He wondered if the nervous feeling it left him with would ever fade.

Luckily, he had managed to snag a direct flight to Montreal—a layover in between would have added several hours to what was already a seven hour flight. He felt restless, and Kade, who was sound asleep in the seat next to him for half the flight, didn't do much to ease his anxiety. But

eventually they touched down in Montreal, with their next flight to Nunavuk scheduled for the next day.

"Go shower," Kade told him, once they settled into their hotel room. "You'll feel better after."

Florian scowled at him—he had been nervous all day, but for Kade to comment on it so easily felt like a jab. But more than that, he was full of pent-up energy with nowhere to go, and it had been days since Kade had been inside him.

"Come shower with me?" he offered, relishing in the hint of color that rose in Kade's face and the slight grin pulling at his lips. Surely he wanted it as badly as Florian did.

"Alright," he said. "Get in, and I'll join you in a minute."

Grinning, Florian began to undress in front of him, kicking his underwear toward the taller man. Kade rolled his eyes and gathered his dirty clothes into a pile, but there was an unmistakable heat in his gaze when he looked toward Florian.

"Don't keep me waiting," Florian teased, before closing the bathroom door behind him.

Much to his chagrin, the hot shower did make him feel better almost instantly, washing away the grime and sweat of their travel and his nerves. His hair was drenched and his body slick with soap when he heard the bathroom door open again. Kade pulled back the curtain, naked and already hard.

"Feeling better?" he asked, as casually as if they had showered together a hundred times before, and Florian stifled a laugh.

"Yeah, I guess," he said, reaching for Kade as he stepped into the shower. "Better now that you're here."

Kade leaned down to kiss him. "You're lucky it's big enough for both of us, then," he murmured as he pulled away, and Florian grinned wickedly in response.

"Big enough to do this, too," he said, and dropped to his knees.

"Florian," Kade started to protest, only to be cut off with a gasp, as Florian took his cock into his mouth. Despite his protest, his hand trailed through Florian's hair, grabbing at the base of his skull. Florian breathed him in, the taste of him flooding his senses, as he let Kade push into his mouth until the tip brushed the back of his throat. "Fuck, Florian."

His hold loosened, so Florian pulled back and looked up to see Kade watching him and biting his lip. He swirled his tongue along the tip, curious, still holding Kade's gaze until the other man squeezed his eyes shut. His hands lingered loosely in Florian's hair, leaving him free to suck up and down his cock: his tongue exploring along where the head pushed out from his foreskin, then settling to press against the sensitive spot on his underside. The needy, unrestrained sounds coming from the

back of Kade's throat were unbearable—with one hand Florian reached down to touch himself, as the other moved along Kade's length in tandem with his mouth. He hummed a faint noise of pleasure; and above him Kade cursed and pulled one hand away from Florian's hair to grip hard at the base of his cock.

"Wait," he panted, pulling his hips away. Florian released him, but not without a slight frown as he looked back up. "Fuck. I don't want to come yet."

"You didn't like it?" Florian pouted, but couldn't stop the teasing grin from overtaking his features when Kade looked down at him with a heated expression.

"You know that's not it," he replied, pulling Florian to his feet. "Turn around. I'm going to fuck you right here."

"The condoms," Florian protested, and Kade bit his lip. "They're still in my bag."

"Right," he sighed, and took a slow step away from Florian. "Okay. Finish washing up first."

Before Kade could protest, Florian grabbed the soap and started to wash him. He sighed in contentment, though, and let Florian scrub him clean. Slowly, he felt along each hard muscle and the scars that littered his torso, a pattern he was just starting to memorize. The soft intimacy of Kade letting him wash his body was more tender than arousing, but the lingering taste of his cock in Florian's mouth more than made up for it. By the time they had both rinsed off, Florian barely dried himself before leaping into bed, grinning widely at Kade behind him.

"Come on," he urged. Kade stepped up to him, but rather than get into bed with him, he grabbed Florian's hips and pulled him to the edge of the mattress. "Hey!" he protested, only to yelp as Kade got on his knees and buried his face between Florian's legs.

He bit back a moan as Kade's tongue found him. The first time he had gone down on Florian, he had been eager but clumsy—but he had listened so carefully when Florian told him what to do that it only took a few tries to improve vastly. Now, he was clearly going right for the kill, sucking hard on his cock while just brushing his tongue against the head of it, his fingers teasing just at the edge of his entrance.

"Fuck," Florian panted, his hands clenching into fists in the sheets around him. When he looked down, Kade's eyes were locked onto his, full of heat and desire. The intensity of his gaze alone was nearly enough to make him come, but along with the warmth and suction of his mouth—and just how long it'd been since the last time—it all pushed him right up to the edge far too quickly.

"Kade," he whimpered, reaching with one hand to try and push him away. "I'm—You're gonna—" Something almost like a growl rumbled through Kade as he pushed ineffectually against him. Florian

pulled at his hair, barely long enough for him to hold, and managed to pull him back just a bit. But Kade's teeth grazed against his cock as he did, making Florian see stars, as pleasure shot up his spine. "I'm—I'm coming, fuck—Kade, oh, oh, *fuck*—"

Florian gasped for breath as his hand fell away from Kade's hair, his cock still twitching weakly against his tongue. When he looked this time, a self-satisfied grin had curled into the corners of Kade's mouth.

"We're even," he said, his voice a low rasp, before pressing a soft kiss to his inner thigh and getting to his feet. Florian groaned, pulling his legs up closer to his torso and rolling to his side, watching through heavy-lidded eyes as Kade fumbled with the condom wrapper he'd procured from one of their bags.

"Come here," Kade murmured once he'd gotten it on, falling into bed next to him. Florian pushed himself closer to Kade, who wrapped his arms around him and kissed him. He could taste himself on Kade's lips.

It took only a moment for his impatience to win out. He pulled away to climb on top of Kade, grinning down at him, as the other man's rough hands came to rest on the backs of his thighs. Florian could feel his cock pressed up against his ass, and he moved his hips against it, making Kade suck in a startled breath.

"Mm," Kade grunted, a slight frown crossing his features, and Florian paused. "Already feels different. I don't like it."

Florian laughed, and despite his complaint Kade also chuckled, grinning up at him. "It's okay," Florian sighed, reaching down to pull his cock closer, lining it up with his entrance. "Just a little longer. Then you can fuck me however you want." He lowered himself onto it as he spoke, and the last words came out as a breathy moan as Kade filled him.

"Fuck," Kade panted, his gaze squarely at the point where their bodies were joined.

"Still good?" Florian teased, tentatively rocking his hips. The condom made no difference to him—and, judging from the soft gasp that escaped from the back of Kade's throat, it wasn't quite so bad as he had said, either. Kade let out a breathless bark of a laugh, his eyes finally leaving Florian's cunt to flicker up to his face.

"You're a tease," he groaned, and his grip on Florian's thighs tightened as he pushed up against him. Florian bit back a moan, only to cry aloud when one of Kade's hands left his thigh to instead thumb roughly against his cock, still throbbing from when he came.

"Yeah, there," he panted, all thoughts of teasing gone from his mind now. Kade's hips rocked against him, moving just slow enough that he knew he wouldn't come from it, but hitting him in the exact spot to send fire coursing through his nerves with each thrust. He wanted more. "Faster," he prompted, but Kade shook his head.

"Like this," he said, and he kept fucking up into him at the same maddening, not-quite-fast-enough pace. Florian groaned, his head tipping back. "I like—seeing you like this."

In spite of himself Florian grinned, eyes squeezing shut. "Tell me."

He could feel Kade hesitate, but after a moment his voice came: nervous at first, but still full of heat. "I like seeing you on—on my cock. Spread open like this, on top of me. I can see all of you."

Florian bit his lip, heat prickling up his chest. The lewd words made him feel like he should have been embarrassed, but only made his cock twitch with arousal. He rocked his hips against Kade, making him move faster, which finally seemed to break his will and make him fuck him properly. Kade's fingers dug hard into his hips as he slammed upward into Florian, making them both cry out.

"I'm close," Florian panted, grabbing onto Kade's wrists to hold himself up with one hand, the other reaching to rub against his cock where Kade had pulled his hand away. "Fuck—don't stop." Only Kade's ragged breathing answered him, and it took just a few more thrusts for him to come, gasping as his body tensed and pulsed around Kade.

"Oh, fuck, Kade," he whimpered. Kade groaned, watching him.

"Say my name again," he breathed.

"Kade," Florian panted, then yelped as he fucked into him harder than before, pushing him right up to the edge between pain and pleasure, with his fingers digging into Florian's hips. "K-Kade!" That was all it took for Kade to follow. Florian felt the other man's body tensing under him, his eyes squeezing shut and mouth falling open as he came—he could just barely feel his cock twitching inside him as he came, though there was no wet, sticky heat that followed.

When their breathing eventually slowed, Florian let himself slump forward, feeling Kade's cock slide out of him. That was one benefit of the condom, he thought with a faint grin as Kade sucked in a sharp breath of surprise—let him deal with the mess afterward for once. He pressed his face into Kade's shoulder, their sweaty torsos pressed flush. After a moment, Kade's arms came up to wrap gently around him, and he could feel Kade's lips press softly to the top of his head.

"Are you okay?" Kade asked softly after a few moments of tired cuddling. "I didn't hurt you?"

He was a little sore now that he was thinking of it, but Florian managed a wry laugh, shaking his head against Kade's shoulder. "I'll be okay."

"I could barely feel you at all. That's why," Kade said, the pout obvious in his voice; but when Florian looked up at him, he had a similar soft, amused smile on his features.

"Well, this time tomorrow hopefully we'll be in the Veil," Florian teased. "And then you can fuck me however you want."

"Mm," Kade said, watching as Florian pushed himself away to sit up on the edge of the bed. "There you'll be the king though."

The words grated him a little less each time, but still he wrinkled his nose for a brief instant at the implication before turning back with a grin. "Then you'll just have to fuck me like one."

Their flight to Nunavut the next morning wasn't too early, much to Florian's relief, so they got to sleep until a decent hour before checking out of their hotel and heading back to the airport. This flight was shorter, too; and by the midafternoon they had arrived at the smaller Iqaluit airport, already much colder than Montreal had been.

"This is going to be miserable," Florian groaned as they stepped out into the cold afternoon. Kade smirked down at him, wrapping one arm around his shoulders.

"The walk will keep you warm," he said, but Florian only scowled in response. It was meant to be reassuring, but sounded twice as miserable, as far as he was concerned.

Here, they had to rent a car, since their destination was so remote, even for a place as far-flung as Nunavut.

"I can drive," Kade offered, as they were packing their things into the sleek white hatchback they had chosen.

"Do you even have a license?" Florian asked suspiciously.

"Of course I do," he sighed. "I came to Earth with your dad a couple times a year, usually. He helped me get my passport and everything."

"Oh," was all he could reply. A tiny pang of sadness bubbled up in him at the words, imagining his father teaching Kade how to drive, but he pushed it back down before he could dwell on it too long. "Yeah, alright then. You would know where we're going better than me."

They drove until the sun was starting to set. Florian slowly began to make out the shape of what looked like low buildings on the horizon, far in the distance. It was a small town, or maybe even a little village; as they drew closer, Kade pulled off the paved street onto a dirt road leading toward the cluster of buildings.

"Is it there?" Florian asked, frowning.

"No, but it's close," Kade replied. "We have a contact there who lets us in. The curtain is part of a fenced-off wildlife preserve. Not like there are many people who would stumble on it by accident so far north, but still."

"A contact? Like a human?"

"No, a shifter. Sort of like your Uncle August. She was born in the Veil but left to live on Earth."

"I see," Florian replied, wondering how common it was for residents of the Veil to live on Earth. How many Veilians might he have met in his life who were secretly the same as him? With how small the populace of the Veil seemed to be now, he thought it unlikely, but certainly not impossible. There must have been others, maybe even descendants of others who had left the Veil generations ago.

"Still nervous?" Kade asked, glancing briefly over at him, before looking back to the road. They were driving down the same dirt street that the village was clustered around. Florian hesitated—he had been trying not to think about it, but he did still feel jittery and sick to his stomach.

"A little bit, yeah," he admitted, looking out the passenger side window to watch the buildings going by. They all looked worn, almost dilapidated—several looked abandoned altogether.

"It's okay. I'm... nervous too," Kade said slowly, and Florian looked back over at him in surprise. "My dad and Jerah were pretty close. I don't know how he's going to be. And my mom... Well, my mom is my mom. Hopefully she'll just be in a good mood for having me home." After a moment, he glanced back over at Florian with a slight grimace. "Sorry. Don't mean to make you more nervous."

"It's okay," Florian laughed. "I'd rather know what to expect, I guess."

"My siblings will be happy, at least," Kade added.

"How many do you have?" Florian asked.

"Three. Two brothers and a sister."

"And you're the oldest?"

"Unfortunately," he said, a small, chagrined smile pulling at the edges of his lips.

"Tell me their names so I don't forget," Florian prompted. This time Kade did laugh, a huff of breath as a wider grin split his features.

"Okay," he said. "My brothers are Bowen and Yuka. My sister's Amka. Kallik's my dad, and Meriwa is my mom. Bowen's closest in age to me, then Amka, then Yuka's the youngest."

"Bowen, Amka, Yuka," Florian repeated. "And Kallik and Meriwa."

"See, you got it," Kade said, and he reached over to squeeze Florian's leg. "They're going to love you."

Florian flushed. He didn't exactly feel convinced, but the words were nice to hear all the same. Kade's hand remained on his thigh, so he reached down with one hand to lace his fingers through.

They drove to the end of the row of buildings, turning to follow the dirt path that narrowed and led away from the town. The buildings around them became more sparse and scattered, until finally there were no more. Eventually the road led up to a chain link fence with a forested area on the other side of it, and what looked like a small cottage set alongside the fence. Kade pulled their car up in front of the cottage.

"This is it," he said, giving Florian's hand one last squeeze before finally pulling away. "Ready?" "Yeah," Florian agreed, and they got out of the car.

As they were pulling their bags from the trunk of the car, a rattling sound came from the door of the cottage—an old lock being unlatched. The door swung open with a heavy creak, and a woman stepped through, peering at them curiously. She looked older than Florian would have expected from someone from the Veil—everyone that he'd met so far had a particularly youthful look to their face. But this woman's face was lined, her hair that was mostly gray pulled into a loose bun at the nape of her neck. Her eyes narrowed with suspicion as she caught sight of Florian; her blue eyes struck him, a deep cobalt just a shade brighter than was natural—the telltale sign of a Veilian native. But then her glance flickered to Kade, and warm recognition flooded her face, the crow's feet around her eyes deepening as she smiled.

"Kade!" she exclaimed, stepping toward him. Her breath came out as a puff of steam as she spoke, making Florian even more aware of the cold. "Goodness, you startled me. I wasn't expecting anyone Earthside. What are you doing here? And who's this?"

"Nan," Kade greeted, smiling at her. "It's good to see you. I'm going home. And this is..." He glanced at Florian, and the way his eyes flickered from Florian's face to the ground, he could tell he was trying to consider something quickly. "Forgive my rudeness. This is the newly-crowned King Florian of the Winter Court. I'm escorting him back to the Veil. King Florian, this is Nanurjuk, the wolf kingdom's designated protector of our curtain."

The woman, Nan, stared at Florian for a long moment with wide eyes and her mouth still half-open, then she seemed to shake herself into action and bowed her head.

"King! By the Wolf-God, I had no idea!" she exclaimed, shooting Kade a bewildered look. "But what happened to... Is Jerah...?"

"This is Jerah's son," Kade said, wincing as he said it. "Jerah... There was an accident. Just a few weeks ago now."

"I had no idea he even had a son," Nan sighed, making a soft clicking sound with her tongue as she shook her head. After a moment, though, she looked to Florian with a slightly brighter expression. "Well, new King Florian, I'm honored to meet you, truly, and you can just call me Nan. And my sincerest condolences, of course. Jerah was a good man, and I'm sorry to hear of his passing."

"Oh, thank you," Florian stammered. He still had no inkling of how to act around people who knew he was a king—but this woman was a wolf shifter, so it wasn't like he was *her* king. All he could do was be polite. "I, um, I appreciate it."

"Oh, he's just a child! They made this poor boy the king?" she said, looking between Florian and Kade. Florian could feel his face burning red, and hoped the windchill disguised his embarrassed flush.

"He is definitely not a child," Kade said stiffly, the color rising in his face as he said it, and Florian had to stifle a laugh.

"I'm twenty-three," he offered, but the woman only seemed more perturbed, shaking her head.

"Twenty-three! You're both just little boys. Tell me about it when you're in your second century."

Kade and Florian shared a look; he could tell Kade was also trying not to laugh. With a sigh, Nan dug her hands into the pockets of her parka and pulled out a keyring with only a few keys jangling on it.

"Well, I suppose you'll just be wanting to get to the curtain, then," she said. "Goodness knows I don't want to be out in the cold much longer. Have someone coming for the car, or should I call it in?"

"Will you take care of it?" Kade asked, handing Florian his bag while he shouldered his own, finally closing the trunk of the car. "I don't think we'll be coming back this way for a while."

Nan frowned, her confusion obvious, but luckily she didn't press. "Not a problem. Just do me a favor. Tell your father the Wolf-God still smiles on us even Earthside, and I pray for his improved health."

"I'll tell him. Thank you."

They followed her along the length of the fence until finally they arrived at the gate, bound closed with a heavy lock and chain. Nan fumbled with the lock for a moment, hissing at the cold metal, then unwrapped the length of the chain as the lock finally came free.

"There you are," she said, gesturing for them to go through. "Safe travels to the both of you."

"Thank you, Nan," Kade said.

"Yes, thank you," Florian added. She smiled, bowing her head a bit toward him, and they walked through. Behind them the chain rattled as she locked back up.

"See you next time," she called out.

It only took a minute before the forest filled their vision, all sight of the gate and town lost behind them. When they were alone, Kade chuckled under his breath, and Florian looked up at him with a raised eyebrow.

"A child," he repeated, shaking his head, and Florian laughed. "Really. Well, I guess when you get to that age, everyone seems like a child."

"How old do people in the Veil usually live to?" Florian asked, realizing he didn't know. In the studying he had done with his father, it seemed most fae lived around two hundred years or more; but if it was different for shifters, or if the people in the history books were outliers somehow, he had no idea.

"Hmm. I'd say somewhere around a hundred and eighty to two hundred is pretty normal," Kade answered.

"Do you know how old my dad was?" he asked. Kade sighed, visibly hesitating.

"About a hundred, I think," he said. Florian winced, wishing he hadn't asked. His father still had half his life ahead of him, yet...

He shoved the thoughts out of his mind. If he dwelled too much on his father, he started to feel... distant, somehow, as if his mind and his body were not quite syncing up. And sometimes he would see flashes of that terrible moment in the mine: nightmares of cold water and sharp teeth and blood soaking through all his clothes. No, he couldn't afford to think of it now.

"You okay?" Kade asked, his voice soft, but still enough to snap Florian back into the present.

He blinked, shaking his head to clear his thoughts and quickly answering, "Yeah. I'm okay."

Kade lifted one hand to lightly touch his back. His mouth opened, as if he were about to speak; but he paused, then closed it without saying anything.

They walked on, Florian following Kade deeper into the forest and looking for the faint shimmer in the air that he knew would reveal the location of the curtain; but amidst all the trees, he couldn't make anything out. Kade seemed to know where he was going, though and after a few more minutes of walking, he paused and looked around slowly. "It's around here," he said.

They separated to make a slow circuit around the area, but it was Kade who finally called out to Florian. "Found it."

Florian darted around the trees that had blocked his view of Kade to join him. The spot looked just as mundane as he expected, a faint shimmer in the air that hovered between two tall trees. Kade held his hand out to it, his fingers disappearing into the light.

"Ready?" he asked. Florian took in a steadying breath.

"Yes," he said, and they stepped through back into the Veil.

CHAPTER FIVE

On the other side, the air was even colder, biting at Florian's lungs as he breathed in. He winced, pulling the hem of his shirt up and over his nose to block out the worst of the chill as he looked around. They were in a forest, surrounded by tall evergreens—it was not terribly different from the landscape they had just left. If he didn't know better, Florian might have wondered whether or not they had made the crossing at all. Next to him, Kade took in a deep breath and held it for a second, then let it out in one heavy exhalation, his warm breath steaming away from his mouth in a great cloud.

"Are you okay?" Florian asked, brows furrowing. Kade nodded.

"Yeah," he said. And to Florian's surprise, Kade smiled before he reached for his hand. "Let's go."

He had insisted on Florian bundling up before they left, so he could not quite feel Kade's hand through the knit gloves he was wearing; but somehow Kade seemed perfectly comfortable in just his heavy coat and winter boots. It made Florian think of how the Winter Court was always comfortable for him, and he wondered if Kade even felt the cold here. A light dusting of snow covered the ground, making their footsteps crunch as they walked.

As Florian looked closer at their surroundings, there were some slight, but noticeable differences: the trees were taller and thicker than they had been Earthside, and the shape of their leaves were different—they were sort of wobbly where he expected them to be straight, as if someone had taken a crimping iron to the pine needles of every tree in the forest. Some of them had small clusters of tiny purplish-blue berries, but most had only leaves. The sky was a bit brighter too, Florian realized; the tree cover blocked out most of the light, but from what he could see of the sky, it was a pale grayish blue like the moments right before sunset on a cloudy day. And it was cloudy; he couldn't see the sun at all.

"Wait," Kade said suddenly, stopping. Florian stumbled to a stop next to him and watched as his eyes flickered around their surroundings. He must have heard something. Kade let go of his hand to move his arm protectively in front of him, the other hand on his sword, but he called out loudly,

"It's Kade. I have the King of the Winter Court with me."

There was a beat of silence, then Florian could just make out something stirring about thirty feet from them. From behind a tree trunk, a huge white wolf padded out into the open, ears pricked up curiously and vivid blue eyes locked on Florian. He took in a sharp breath, his chest prickling with uneasiness as he took a step back; but when he glanced at Kade, he didn't seem concerned. The wolf cocked its head curiously, and Kade snorted, pulling his hand away from both Florian and his sword.

"Good to see you, too, Bowen," he said flatly, stepping closer to the wolf. Florian's pulse slowed as the wolf trotted closer, stretching out then tossing his head and leaping right past Kade—only for his heart to start hammering all over again, as the wolf rushed up to him.

"Kade!" Florian yelped, stumbling backward. The wolf skidded to a stop a few feet from him, dropping into a play bow with its tail swishing back and forth eagerly.

"Knock it off, Bowen," Kade snapped. "You know he can't understand you unless you shift back."

But Florian had learned a little from shifting as a wolf with Kade, and he could tell that when the wolf sneezed, Bowen was laughing. The wolf shook its body, then was enveloped in a bright blue light the same color as its eyes. When the light faded, a tall, skinny man was straightening to his feet, grinning widely at Florian. Florian stifled a gasp—he looked nearly identical to Kade, but as Kade stepped closer to them he could see that Bowen was taller than him by at least an inch. He was thinner too, lithe where Kade had muscle; but their features would have been identical if it weren't for the wide smile and mischievous glint in his eyes, which were blue where Kade's were orange.

"Sorry, sorry," the man laughed, lowering his head in a quick bow, before meeting Florian's eyes again. "I'm Bowen. Didn't mean to startle you, your highness. Just keeping watch, as is my duty. Had to make sure you weren't an imposter."

Behind him, Kade visibly rolled his eyes. "We all know you're only on watch duty to keep you out of trouble. Leave guests out of it."

Bowen glanced between them with a chagrined face, before shrugging and stepping closer to Kade, shoving his shoulder playfully.

"Yeah, missed you too," he laughed, and kept walking. "C'mon, I'll walk you into town."

Kade caught Florian's eye, catching the nervous flush that had risen to his face. Of course Kade's brother would be just as attractive.

"Don't let him scare you," Kade muttered, gently placing a hand on Florian's back to guide him along as they walked.

"I'm not scared," Florian stammered, but he sounded so flustered even to his own ears that he was sure Kade didn't believe him. But that seemed less embarrassing than Kade knowing he was flustered because his brother was hot, so he didn't say anything more. Kade's gaze softened, his eyes just starting to crinkle at the edges; his thumb rubbed a soft circle on Florian's back for a moment, before falling away as the distance between them and Bowen grew shorter.

"Hey, sorry to hear about your dad," Bowen called over his shoulder as they walked, and Kade visibly scowled. "He was a cool guy. We'll miss him."

"Have some respect," Kade sighed. Bowen turned around, walking backwards to glance suspiciously between them. Florian felt the heat rising in his face again, and when he glanced at Kade, he could see a hint of color in his cheeks as well. Bowen raised an eyebrow, but there was a sudden knowing gleam to his expression—another point of difference between the brothers, his face was far more expressive than Kade's.

"Oh, that's how it is?" he said, his tone suddenly conspiratorial. "Damn, Kade, I knew you were big on the whole honor and duty stuff, but this seems extreme even for you."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Kade snapped, adding in a softer tone to Florian, "Don't listen to him."

"Okay," Florian said. When he glanced up at Bowen, the taller man grinned widely at him, and he looked away quickly. However he had expected this encounter to go, this was certainly *not* it.

Bowen was silent as they continued to walk, and soon Florian could see the shapes of buildings through the trees. They emerged at the edge of a forest uphill from a cozy-looking village nestled in a shallow valley, more trees rising up in a slope far on the opposite side. The village was more long than it was wide, following a single wide path through the valley in a slightly meandering oblong shape until it curved behind another hill and out of Florian's line of sight. Smoke rose from many of the chimneys, and a light dusting of snow covered the wood and stone roofs.

He turned to Kade, enamored with the sight of the snowy village; but before he could say anything, a distant howl rose from the direction from the village, soon answered by another, and another. Florian blinked, looking around—he didn't see any wolves, but they sounded nearby. Next to him, Kade sighed.

"Just means they know we're here," he said, fidgeting with his backpack before gesturing for Florian to follow him. "C'mon. Let's go see my dad."

"Sure," Florian agreed, cautiously following him down the hill. With the snow and the steep incline, he felt like he might slip if his foot landed in the wrong spot—but ahead of them, Bowen had

loped down the hill easily and was ambling for the center of the village. "Is, uh, is your brother gonna be there too?"

Kade snorted. "Maybe. I doubt it."

They trudged in silence down the hill and onto the packed dirt path that snaked through the center of the village. Florian could still see Bowen ahead of them, a few figures peeking out from their homes —and beyond that, a wolf peering at them from where it sat on a low stone wall. When he met the wolf's eyes, it blinked and tilted its head, then stood and trotted away.

Now that he was looking, though, Florian saw more than a few wolves wandering along the road. Were they real wolves, he wondered, or shifters? Did they just normally go around as wolves? His curiosity about it all grew more and more the longer they walked; but Kade looked tense, so he decided to ask some other time.

Along with the wolves were a few humanoid figures going about their day, though most people seemed to be indoors now. Some called out to Kade, waving, and he greeted them politely in return. Some looked at Florian without any recognition, and others bowed their heads to him as they walked by, which he returned with a tight-lipped smile and a wave, still uncertain what exactly was expected of him.

Eventually, they came to what looked like a town square, with a wooden building standing taller than the rest. Kade pointed, as Florian noticed Bowen standing at its door and waiting for them.

"That's where my family lives," Kade said. "My dad is probably there now. It's where we'll sleep too."

Florian nodded, following him silently. Bowen grinned at them as they approached.

"Took you long enough," he said, turning to open the door for them. "C'mon in. Your highness."

Kade led him through the door. It opened up into a long foyer, with a rack along one wall where several pairs of boots in various sizes rested. Some looked quite small, like children's shoes.

"Take your shoes off," Kade said, gesturing toward the rack as he moved to pull his own boots off. Florian kicked some of the snow off his heels and peeled his boots off, setting them on the rack. It was warm inside, but he could still feel a slight chill seeping through his socks. He kept his coat bundled around him all the same.

"I'll tell the kids you're here," Bowen said, walking past them to one of the two doors at the end of the entryway.

Then Kade led him through the other door on the opposite end of the foyer, down a hallway where they passed a few closed doors, until finally he stopped at one at the very end of the hall. He knocked, and after a moment a faint voice could be heard from the other side.

"Is that you, Kade?"

"It's me," Kade answered, leaning closer to the door as he raised his voice. "Can we come in?"

"Come in, come in," the voice answered, and Kade pushed the door open, Florian following him into the room.

It was a decently sized bedroom: a large bed pushed up against one wall, and a fire crackling in the fireplace on the opposite. Sitting in a chair near the fire, bundled in blankets, was the man who must have been Kade's father. Their features were similar, though the older man had his fair share of wrinkles on his face, salt-and-pepper hair, and tired, dark blue eyes. But he was smiling as they entered, gesturing for them to approach. Florian knew he was sick, but here he looked almost frail; and even through the older man's thick sweater, he could see that his limbs were on the cusp of being worryingly thin.

"Kade, so good to see you, my son," the man said. He held out his arms, and gingerly Kade leaned down to hug him. "And the new fae king. I'm glad you got here safely."

Florian opened his mouth to respond, but a shout interrupted him from the other end of the bed, where Florian now saw a door leading to a bathroom.

"That's how you greet your mother now?"

A woman emerged from within the bathroom, carrying a basket full of folded blankets in her arms. Her black hair was pulled into a low bun; a few streaks of gray on the sides and a few lines on her forehead were the only signs of her age, making her look much younger than her husband. Despite her sharp tone, a wry grin played on her face, and her eyes, the color of burnished gold, were crinkled with joy. It reminded Florian of the way Kade's eyes looked when he smiled. Kade shook his head with a slight laugh as he straightened up and stepped toward her. She deposited her basket of blankets onto the bed and pulled him close to her, hugging him fiercely.

"Hi, mom," he said, patting her back—he was tall enough that the top of her head didn't even clear his shoulders.

Florian turned back to Kade's father—Kallik, he reminded himself. "Thank you for letting us stay here," he said politely, and the older man waved his hands dismissively.

"It is our honor," he said, reaching for Florian's hands and pulling him closer. "I must tell you how sorry I was to hear about Jerah. I never thought I would outlive him, never. The thought grieves me, truly. He was a good man and a wonderful friend. I'm sorry for your loss."

"I'm sorry for yours. You knew him better than me," Florian protested with a nervous laugh, but Kallik's expression remained quite serious.

"We are always friends of the fae. You'll always be welcome here," he said, bobbing his head in a series of bows. "King Florian, right? You'll always have a place in our home."

"Thank you," Florian repeated, glancing toward Kade again.

"King! Wolf-God, he's just a little boy," Kade's mother chided, stepping closer to him. Where Kallik's hands had been almost reverent when clasped around his own, Meriwa handled him roughly with a strength that surprised him. She grabbed his shoulders, turned him to face her, and said, "Let me look at you. So skinny! I thought the Earth is supposed to have an abundance of food."

Florian blinked dumbly at her, entirely at a loss for words. Behind her, he could see Kade stifling a smirk, but he still swooped in to place a hand on his mother's shoulder.

"You're scaring him, mom," he said. "And he's only a little younger than me. And anyway, he's a king."

"He is a king," Kallik agreed, sounding irritated. "Treat him with some respect, Meriwa."

"No king of mine," she snorted, but took a step back from him all the same, letting her arms fall away and instead folding them across her chest. "And just like his father, too, leaving his responsibility behind."

"Mom," Kade said, sounding exasperated. Florian's heart was pounding in his chest; he wanted to interject, but for all his racing thoughts, he couldn't put a coherent sentence together.

"All these men, always the same," Meriwa muttered, moving back to her basket of blankets. She pulled some out and started sorting them into a wardrobe on the opposite wall. "Off to have their adventures, leaving their women behind to keep things running. Psh! I'm sure poor Tatiana is saddled with all the responsibility as always. The title should have gone to her, not some child raised on Earth. It's a shame."

"Meriwa!" Kallik snapped, outright scowling now. "This is our guest. A king, whether you like it or not. Would it kill you to have some respect?"

"Please," Kade added. The woman sighed, glancing back at Florian.

"Begging your pardon," she said, though her tone didn't change. "You're still awfully young. Maybe you'll learn yet."

"Florian has learned a lot in the time he's been in the Veil," Kade said quickly, taking a protective step toward him. "He's brave, and kind—all good qualities for a king. And he's..." He trailed off,

glancing nervously at Florian with color rising in his face. The air in the room suddenly seemed much colder than it had been, the atmosphere instantly shifting. "He's, um, my..."

"Kade," Kallik interrupted in a low warning tone, and when Florian looked back at him, his eyes had narrowed suspiciously. "What are you saying?"

Despite the flush in his face, Kade's brows furrowed defiantly, and he stood up straighter next to Florian. "He's my boyfriend," he said, and despite himself, Florian smiled. It still felt good to hear.

"Damn it, Kade," Kallik sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose between two fingers. "I told you you'd have to stay focused if you were going to serve the fae."

"I was focused. I am focused," Kade snapped. "For five years I've been focused on nothing but the Winter Court."

"It's not that he isn't focused, Kallik," Meriwa interjected. Her eyes lingered on Florian—something in her expression had changed, but he couldn't quite pinpoint the emotion on her face. "It's that he's too ambitious by far."

"Ambitious?" Kade said, sounding stunned, as he turned to look at her. "Is that really what you think? That I'm trying to, what, take the Winter Court for myself? Really?"

"Maybe she's right," Kallik sighed.

Florian frowned. He hadn't expected their first meeting to go this way, but seeing Kade all but withering under his parents' scrutiny sparked a hot anger in his stomach. Nobody would take their relationship seriously unless he *made* them take it seriously, it seemed.

"Whatever you're thinking is going on, you're wrong," he said, and all three looked at him sharply. He drew himself up to his full height, chin up, making no effort to hide his irritation. "You think he's using me for some kind of power he doesn't already have? Is that it?"

"King Florian—" Kallik started, and Florian rounded on him angrily.

"You said it yourself. I *am* a king," he snapped, and it almost pleased him to see Kallik shrink away, glancing down at his lap. "I think I would recognize someone using me for power if I saw it. I was interested in Kade first. It was my idea, and it happened before Jerah died. If Kade really wanted my power, he could have killed me at any point. Like you said, I lived on Earth almost my whole life. Kade is the one who taught me how to fight. If anything, he's already the one with more power between us. But I trust him, and I care about him, and I know he—"

For the first time he faltered, glancing over at Kade. The taller man's expression had morphed entirely, his eyes wide and utterly enraptured—he looked completely smitten. "I know he cares about me. This has nothing to do with my father or the Winter Court."

For a moment there was silence, as his words lingered heavily in the air. Kallik couldn't meet his eyes—Kade was looking at him with the same dumbfounded look—and Meriwa's eyes were narrow. Then, finally, she started to laugh, tension starting to drain from the room.

"Oh, good. You seemed a little spineless at first, boy," she laughed, shaking her head. "I suppose you're adults after all, so you'll do what you want. Maybe he'll be good for you, Kade. And, Florian, try to get him out of his shell a little bit. His standoffishness is his worst quality."

"Um," Florian said, entirely taken aback. Considering she had immediately treated the revelation with suspicion, he hadn't expected that sort of reaction from her. "Uh... Alright."

"Anyway, I have the rest of this laundry to deal with," she sighed, continuing as idly as if they had just been discussing the weather. "Kade, be sure to say hello to your brother and sister before dinner. Your cousins would like to see you too. Ani had her baby, oh, two months ago now, I know she'd like you to meet her."

"A baby girl?" Kade asked, snapping out of whatever reverie he had been in. There was still some warmth to his cheeks as he turned to face his mother. "What are they calling her?"

"Sesi," she sighed, rolling her eyes. "The plainest name possible. Can you believe it? Some people have *no* imagination." She continued muttering to herself even as she left the room, the door swinging shut behind them.

Next to him, Kallik sighed deeply. Florian looked back to see that he was peering up at him with a cowed look.

"Please accept my apologies, King Florian," the older man said. "I... had no intention of insinuating anything about you. That should have remained between me and my son. I apologize."

"I accept your apology," Florian said stiffly, though he glanced nervously over at Kade as he said it. But the other man had the beginnings of a small smile on his face, reassuring him.

Kallik sighed once more, seeming to gather his thoughts, before gesturing for Kade to come closer. They both stood in front of him as he wrung his hands together before speaking again.

"King Florian," he said, looking up at him. "Is it true, then, that you're a Changeling? The prophesied prince?"

"Yes," Florian said, nodding, at the same time Kade answered, "He is."

"I don't mean to be presumptuous, but..." Kallik started. "Can you shift, like us? Could you show me?"

"Oh. Sure," Florian said, surprised. He looked around the room—it seemed big enough for his wolf form—then closed his eyes and focused. His body tingled with magic, with the discomfort of

muscle and bone morphing and rearranging. When he opened his eyes again, he was lower to the ground, standing on all four legs, looking up at Kade and his father. Kallik's eyes were wide, his mouth slightly agape.

"Incredible," he murmured, reaching out to stroke the top of Florian's head. "And all black fur. So lovely. Wolf-God, I was there with Jerah when we spoke to the hag... I didn't think I would live to see it happen." He pulled his hands away to rub at his eyes, and Florian's ears pressed back flat against his skull. Even though the man was not a wolf, Florian could still smell the sadness coming off of him in waves.

"We're going to go speak to the hag, as well," Kade said. His tone was still rather stilted, clearly trying to keep things calm and professional. "Can you show us how to get there?"

"Well, I can point it out to you, but it was over twenty years ago now," Kallik sighed. "Bring me a map."

"You can change back now, Florian," Kade murmured, as he stepped away. With a sneeze of a laugh Florian padded along next to him for a few steps, before shifting back. He straightened up from the floor as Kade was pulling a rolled-up map out of his backpack.

"It was right about here," Kallik said when Kade presented him with the map, circling it with a pencil. "But it was heavily warded. There's a ritual you have to complete... A gift we had to present."

"Do you know what the ritual was?" Florian asked, frowning. Jerah hadn't said anything about a ritual—but then, he was sure Jerah had thought that he would be there with them when they went to go meet the hag. Maybe it was somewhere in his notes.

"Hmm. Something to pass through the ward. Something valuable... It was Jerah who had received the missive from the hag, so I'm not sure." Kallik closed his eyes, brows furrowed, as if intensely trying to remember. "I'll do my best to think of it before you have to go. How long will you be staying?"

Florian and Kade shared a look. They hadn't agreed on an exact timeline, only that they wanted to get their bearings in the wolf kingdom before heading to the second Arrow, which lay only about a day's travel into the Blight. Florian had no idea how long Kade was willing to spend with his family; from the few interactions he'd witnessed so far, they didn't exactly seem to get along.

"At least a week," Kade finally seemed to settle on. "Maybe a little longer. With everything that happened with Jerah... We don't want to rush."

"I understand," Kallik said. "In that case, I'll try and have an answer for you before you leave. There are guest rooms for you, of course." His eyes narrowed as he looked between them. "I planned for you to stay in separate rooms, but..."

"We'll share," Kade said flatly, turning around and putting the rolled-up map back into his backpack.

"Fine," Kallik sighed, waving them away, and Florian followed Kade back out into the quiet hallway. "We'll see you both at dinner."

"Let's drop off our stuff," Kade said, taking his hand. "And then I want to go see my cousin."

"Sure," Florian agreed, following him readily. Kade led him back out to the foyer and through the opposite door, which led to a wooden staircase. They went right past the second floor and up to the third, where Kade led him down another hallway with a series of doors—two doors were open, which Florian assumed were the guest rooms that had been prepared for them.

"Let's take this one. It's bigger," Kade said, stepping through the door at the very end of the hall. When they were both inside, Kade shut the door behind them; and before Florian could react, he had pulled Florian into his arms and kissed him.

"What—What's this about?" Florian laughed, breathless, when he finally pulled away.

"Thank you," Kade murmured, still holding Florian close. "No one's ever... stood up for me like that before."

Something about the words, and Kade's voice when he said them, made Florian's heart pang with a soft sympathy. For a moment he was almost glad he didn't have parents; maybe it was better to not have to deal with such fraught relationships.

"Of course I would stand up for you," Florian said, pushing himself up on his toes to kiss his cheek. "Well, it was partly for myself, too."

"You don't believe I would ever do something like that, right?" Kade asked, his tone suddenly urgent. "That I would... use you? Or the Winter Court?"

"No!" Florian exclaimed. The very thought seemed absurd. "Of course not. I meant what I said, Kade. I mean... It seemed like they didn't know you at all. Their assumptions were crazy."

"Okay. Good." Kade sighed, looking down at him. That same expression was in his eyes—full of adoration. "I..."

Florian's heart started to hammer.

"I... I appreciate it," Kade finally settled on, making his pulse slow just a bit. "I guess it's my fault. I don't really talk to them about anything. Maybe they really don't know me that well."

He didn't know what to say to that, so instead Florian pressed his face into Kade's chest, hugging him harder. It was cold, but Kade felt warm.

"Let's go," Kade said after a moment of holding each other quietly. "I do want to go see my cousin." Florian laughed and pulled back, looking up at him with a grin—Kade was smiling faintly, too.

"Lead the way," he said.

CHAPTER SIX

Together, Kade and Florian walked back outside and into the village. Kade led him along the main street a ways, until they came to a row of houses. He opened the gate to one in the middle, and they headed up the steps.

"Hello?" he called out, not bothering to knock as he opened the door, Florian hovering just behind him. Several voices answered, but the loudest and most excited was accompanied by the thundering of footsteps—a boy, maybe twelve or thirteen, barreled through the door, running straight up to Kade and tackling his legs.

"You're home!" the boy shouted, hugging Kade tightly and grinning up at him. One of his canine teeth was missing. "I thought Bowen was lying! You're really home!"

"I'm home," Kade agreed, smiling warmly down at the boy. "At least for a little while." He patted the boy's back with one hand, and with the other gestured toward Florian. "Look. This is the new fae king, Florian, this is my little brother, Yuka."

The boy stepped back from Kade, and forcing his grin down to a serious expression, he bowed stiffly to Florian. Now that he was still enough for Florian to look at him, the family resemblance was clear. His face still had the soft fullness of youth, and his hair was past his ears with a slight curl to it. Looking at him, Florian couldn't help but wonder if this was what Kade looked like as a child—if his hair was also wavy when it grew out. The boy's eyes glowed slightly like every Veilian's did, a burnished golden color a few shades deeper than Kade's eyes.

"Nice to meet you," Yuka said, then he glanced up at Kade. "Should I say something else?"

"It's okay," Florian laughed, interjecting before Kade could answer. "Nice to meet you too. You can just call me Florian."

"Who else is here, Yuka?" Kade asked, and the boy looked back up to him, the grin settling back on his face.

"It's me and Amka," he said, counting off names with his fingers. "Amka wanted to see the baby. *Again*. Tatuk and Stormy were here earlier, but I think they went home. Bowen came by just now, but

he left again already."

"Let him come inside, Yuka!" a male voice shouted from further within the house.

"Come on!" Yuka said, running further in. Kade glanced back at Florian, a slight smile still on his face, and gestured for him to follow.

They pulled their shoes off first thing when they entered, then Kade led Florian around a corner into a large sitting room where several people were gathered. Yuka was bouncing with excitement next to a man who looked a bit older than Kade, grinning over at him. Near the fireplace, a woman sat in a chair with a baby at her breast, and a teenage girl with her hair in a long braid draped over one shoulder sat next to her, peering curiously at Florian.

"There's the man himself!" the older man exclaimed, stepping closer to Kade, grabbing him in a hug, and clapping him on the back. "Good to see you."

"Thanks, Tan," Kade replied, hugging the man back. "And congratulations. My mom told me you guys had the baby."

"Ani had the baby. I didn't do much in comparison," the man said with a laugh, and his eyes flickered toward Florian. "And I take it this is the fae king?"

"I'm Florian," Florian said with a nod, before Kade could speak. "Nice to meet you."

"I'm Tan," the man said with warmth in his eyes as he shook Florian's hand. "It's an honor to have you in our home. This is my wife, Ani, and our daughter, Sesi."

"Hi," the woman, Ani, said from her chair with a wave.

"And I'm Amka," the other girl said, standing up. While the brothers seemed all but identical with only their age to distinguish one from the other, Amka's appearance was softer and her face was rounder—her eyes were an icy blue a few shades lighter than Bowen's and Kallik's, and as she smiled, it was the same grin as Meriwa's. "We missed you, Kade."

"Hmm. I'm sure you did," Kade said, a slight teasing tone in his voice, as Amka came to hug him as well.

Florian couldn't stop the smile that had spread on his face. He had never seen Kade act so warm before—*this* was his family, he thought.

"Kade!" Yuka blurted, leaping toward him. "While you were gone, I had my first shift!"

"You did?" Kade asked, surprised. Then a teasing grin flickered across his features. "No, I don't believe you. Too little still."

"I did!" the boy insisted, then glanced at Tan nervously. The taller man laughed, gesturing for them to continue.

"Go on, then," he said. Yuka's eyes screwed closed in concentration, and his body began to glow with a yellow-orange light. When the light dissipated, the wolf that stood in his place was small in stature compared to Kade and Bowen. But his coloration was similar to Kade's timber wolf though Yuka was a lighter color, with more white in his coat overall. The wolf stamped his feet excitedly, dropping into a play bow before Kade, who laughed more freely than Florian could ever recall.

"Wow," he said, reaching down to pet the wolf. "Good job, Yuka. I'm proud of you."

Yuka only remained a wolf for a moment, though; the wolf began to glow anew, and a moment later the boy was scrambling to his feet. Now that he looked again, Florian could start to see the beginnings of gangly limbs and a clumsy gait: his face boyish, but the rest of him right on the cusp of becoming a man. Amka looked a year or two older than Yuka, but Bowen had been about Florian's age—probably just a bit younger than Kade—so there was a considerable gap between the two sets of siblings.

"You're a Changeling, right?" Yuka asked, looking right at Florian and pulling him from his thoughts. "Can you shift, too?"

"Oh, uh, yeah," Florian stammered, nodding. "Kade showed me how."

"What else can you shift to?"

"Nothing yet," he admitted. "But I can look however I want."

"What?" Yuka asked, eyes wide. "That's cool! Can I see?"

"Don't be rude, Yuka," Amka chided from the other side of Kade. "You shouldn't ask personal questions like that to someone you just met. Especially a *king*."

"It's alright," Florian started, but Yuka had already looked toward her with a groan, rolling his eyes.

"Whatever, Amka," he sneered.

"Hey," Kade said, stepping between them. Despite his tone, a smile still lingered on his face. "Come on. I don't want to deal with you guys arguing right when I get here."

Yuka made a non-committal noise and ran out of the room, seemingly deciding that he'd rather be somewhere else, and the sound of the front door slamming shut soon followed.

"That boy keeps us on our toes," Tan sighed, shaking his head. The noise of the door seemed to have startled the baby, though, which started to fuss. Ani shushed and patted her until the slight whine, threatening to become a full cry, died down into soft baby noises.

"Here, Kade," she said, shifting the baby from one arm to the other and adjusting her shirt. "Did you want to hold her?"

"Oh," Kade said, hesitating. Next to him, Amka grinned and pushed him toward the mother and her baby. "Alright."

Ani stood and gingerly handed him the baby; though she was cautious, Kade moved to hold her as easily as if he had held a hundred babies before. When she was settled in his arms, Ani stretched and groaned, pressing a hand to the small of her back.

"Hold her for as long as you want," she laughed. "I could use the break."

She stood and walked toward her husband, and Kade sat down in the chair that she vacated, looking down at the baby in his arms. It struck Florian again how gentle he could be: for all his strength and stature, he always touched Florian with such care. For him to be cradling a baby against his chest—the contrast was almost sweet.

"Want to say hi?" Kade said, noticing Florian watching him. He stepped closer, peering down at the baby. Her eyes were big and a dark reddish-brown, looking up at him curiously.

"Hi," Florian said softly. He hadn't held a baby before, and was hoping Kade wouldn't ask him to —he was content to just look. "Have you held a lot of babies?"

Kade chuckled at the question. "I wouldn't say a lot. I was a teenager when Amka and Yuka were born so I held them all the time, though. A few more of my cousins have had babies now, too."

Florian glanced around the room. Tan and Ani were standing next to each other, talking. Amka had gone to peer out the door, probably for Yuka, who was nowhere in sight. It felt cozy—homey, almost, even though it wasn't his home. There was a sense of familial belonging between all of them, despite Kade's time away. He looked like he felt as comfortable as if he had always been here. Part of him wondered why Kade had ever wanted to leave: that made him feel guilty, though it felt silly even as he had the thought.

"Did you think this would be your life?" Florian asked softly, not quite looking at him. "Stay here and have a family?"

Kade paused for only a moment, then laughed again. "Of course not," he said, then seemed to notice Florian's discomfort. "Hey. Look at me."

He just barely managed to meet Kade's eyes. "If this was the life I wanted, I would have had it. It didn't have to be me to go take my father's place. Someone else would have gone if I didn't want to. They're my family, but this isn't what I wanted my own life to be like. Trust me."

Florian managed a small smile at that. "Okay. I trust you."

The baby, Sesi, reached her small hands up to smack Kade's face, jealous of his attention. He laughed and looked back down at her.

"What? Is this what you want?" he asked, rocking her slightly until a gummy smile split her face.

Florian sat next to him and watched, until it was time to go back to the main house for dinner together.

Dinner was strange. Much larger than any family dinner Florian ever had before, but far more cramped and personal than the feast at the Winter Court, it felt almost like being back in high school, sitting at a long cafeteria table surrounded by both friends and strangers.

Food was set out along the table for everyone to help themselves. At the head of the table, Kallik sat with Meriwa next to him. The rest of the family was clustered there: Bowen was directly next to Kallik, Kade next to him, and Florian next to Kade. Amka and Yuka sat across from him, the same side as their mother, and the rest of the table was taken up with other cousins and relatives, only a few of which Kade managed to introduce before the meal was served.

It was pleasant, in a way, but exhausting. Family dinners for Florian had always just been him and his uncle; now, there were nearly twenty people crowded around him, so many wanting his attention that he barely got a few bites of food before his meal had turned cold. Yuka especially kept calling out to him, asking all manner of questions about the Winter Court and the Earth. But he could hardly begrudge the boy his curiosity, so Florian answered as much as he was able.

Finally, Kade cut him off. "Yuka," he snapped, pointing with a fork to the boy's plate. "Stop talking and eat your food." The boy grumbled, but left Florian alone. He managed a grateful smile up at Kade, who patted his back with his other hand.

Eventually, people started to trickle out of the dining room. Kade seemed to sense Florian's discomfort and took him by the hand the moment others started leaving.

"If you'll excuse us," he said to Kallik. The older man still wouldn't meet Florian's eyes, but nodded at them.

"Go on, then," he said, waving with one hand, and Kade led him back out of the dining room. They walked in silence back up to their room. Florian collapsed onto the bed almost instantly, groaning.

"Yeah, it's a lot," Kade chuckled, coming to sit next to him. "Sorry."

"It's okay," Florian sighed, turning his head to look ruefully back up at him. "Families are... weird."

"Yeah," Kade agreed, but the soft smile remained on his face. "They are."

They sat in silence for a moment, interrupted only by the sound of Florian breathing against the blankets. After a moment, Kade placed a soft hand on his back—with how cold the room was, his hand felt as warm as the sun.

- "Our room has a big bathtub," Kade said. "Want to go soak for a bit?"
- "What? Of course!" Florian laughed, leaping to his feet. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

Their time in the wolf kingdom ended up being much more leisurely than Florian had first expected. Kade's parents seemed to be the only real points of contention—any time they were around, Florian could feel their eyes lingering on him—but luckily, they only really saw them around meal times, which were all large family affairs. Even breakfast usually had at least one set of cousins, aunts, and uncles gathered around the long table.

Within just a few days Florian met what seemed like the whole of the wolf clan; if not everyone, then at least all of Kade's immediate relatives. Where the Winter Court had felt somewhat reserved and isolated, here it seemed everyone knew everyone else, and they were all intimately involved in community life. He supposed that was the difference between being a guest and a king; at least, he hoped that was the case.

He also noticed many more children here than at the Winter Court. Even at the feast Jerah held for him, where nearly every citizen had been present, he could have counted the number of fae children that he'd seen on both hands. Here, children ran in the streets, peered at them curiously from windows, and followed them around as they walked--sometimes chattering at them and sometimes simply following idly. It seemed like half of Kade's cousins and other relatives had small children, too. Florian couldn't recall ever having been around so many babies in his life.

On the fourth day, though, Kallik asked them at breakfast to stay and talk with him afterward. When they joined him at the end of the meal, in another room that looked like a study, he collapsed heavily in a chair before turning to face them.

"Sorry," he panted, breathing hard despite the short walk. "Not as spry as I used to be."

"Are you okay?" Kade asked, brows furrowing as he stepped closer; but Kallik shook his head and waved him back.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," he said, and started rummaging around in a desk drawer. Florian worried his bottom lip between his teeth, glancing over at Kade; but the taller man was looking at his father in steady concentration. "Ah, here it is."

From the drawer he withdrew a few stacks of paper and set them on the table, then started flipping through them. A few he separated from the others and held in one hand.

"Old letters from Jerah," he explained without looking at them. Florian gave a start, craning his neck to try and get a better look. "Never got many, but a few. I was looking through them to see if he

had written anything about the ritual to find the hag... Here. This is one that mentions it." He pulled a sheet of paper from the small sheaf that he had made, holding it out. Kade was closer and grabbed it; but seeing Florian's nervous interest, he handed it over to him without reading. His hands trembled as he held it up.

Kallik -

My friend, I hope this letter finds you well. Congratulations again on the birth of your son, I eagerly look forward to meeting him. I'll be heading to the wolf kingdom sometime in the next few weeks, so likely not long after you receive this letter, if all things go according to plan. Inessa and I have scouted out the swamp where I believe this witch to live; it's the next closest place to the Winter Court not touched by the Blight, so I feel confident this must be it. Her home is well-hidden, requiring a ritual to even locate the door. A gift must be presented by all who wish to enter; unfortunately, it seems that it cannot be any ordinary trinket. If my understanding is correct, it must be an item of sentimental value. However this witch's old magic works, it seems to hold such value in high regard. We can discuss this more when I arrive, but perhaps start thinking of an item that might be suitable... I dread having to break the news to Torsten and Tetsuo, but I know they received my first missive, and I intend to have them join us, so I suppose it can't be helped. I can only hope that perhaps the witch will kindly return our gifts upon our departure since she requested our presence in the first place... One must have hope, after all.

I will see you soon.

Your friend,

Jerah

Florian looked over the letter once more, before handing it to Kade.

"Do you remember what you brought?" he asked, glancing back over at Kallik. The older man winced, but this time he met his eyes, the first time he'd done so since their first meeting. "For the ritual?"

"I do remember it," Kallik sighed, eyes flicking between Florian and Kade. "It was right after Kade was born, so I brought the little blanket we first wrapped him in."

Kade frowned, but his eyes remained on the letter, reading silently.

"Do you know what my dad brought?" Florian asked, softer this time.

"Hmm. A trinket Inessa had given him, I think. It was a long time ago, now."

Florian nodded, considering. What did he have that was sentimental? The picture of his parents Jerah had given him was the first thing that came to mind, but it made him sick to his stomach to even

entertain the thought of giving it away. No, that was more than sentimental now. Maybe the flower Kade had first given him, the midnight princess—he had carefully dried it and pressed it in a book before it could start to wither, where it remained in his new room at the Winter Court. That might work better, but he would still be sad to see it go.

"We'll think of something," Kade murmured, handing the letter back to him. "Let's just worry about the Arrow first."

"Yeah, okay," Florian agreed.

"Do you know anything about the Arrow near here?" Kade asked, turning back to his father. "It's only supposed to be about a day away. Do you know where it is?"

"I think so. Let me find my map..." Kallik leaned down to pull a rolled-up piece of paper from a lower drawer, then groaned with discomfort as he pulled himself back up into a sitting position. "Here. It's in this area."

With the map spread out on his desk, he pointed to a spot south of the wolf kingdom. But the area marked was blank, part of a huge expanse labeled only as "The Nova Blight." No other landmarks were noted inside the Nova Blight, other than the border of the wolf kingdom.

"I don't know the last time anyone was ever in that area," Kallik continued as Florian frowned, looking down at the map. "It's been a while since I've read one of the history books, but I think it was... bear shifters? No, maybe leopards? There was a clan of shifters somewhere around there. It might be somewhere in their village. But your guess is as good as mine."

Florian already knew that it was an old shifter colony from Jerah's notes, though they made no mention of what kind of shifter. Bears or leopards—he imagined that knowing wouldn't help them much either way. It was close enough to the wolf kingdom that Florian figured it would likely be the same kind of terrain: something like a tundra, but without all the snow and trees. He could only hope that they would wander close enough to the aura of the second Arrow that he would feel it—the way he had the first.

"I wish I could tell you more," Kallik sighed, pulling him from his thoughts. "I'd go with you if I could."

"Don't be ridiculous," Kade said, taking the map from him. "We'll be alright. I don't want you to worry."

"Well, I'm going to worry," Kallik muttered. They seemed to stare each other down for a moment, then finally Kade looked away with a huff. To Florian's surprise, Kallik laughed, and a slight smile spread across his features. The smile was small and subtle, like Kade's.

"If you don't mind, Florian," Kallik said, glancing over at him quickly. "I was hoping to talk to Kade alone for a moment."

"Oh," he said, blinking in surprise. "Sure. I'll wait outside."

He and Kade exchanged an uncertain look before Florian turned to go, closing the door behind him. It felt awkward to wait in the hall, so he made his way back out of the house into the cold morning air.

A thin layer of snow blanketed the low stone wall around the large wooden house, and he brushed a spot clear, leaning against it and watching the rest of the village wake and go about their day. A group of four or five wolves dashed through the town square together, small enough that Florian thought they were probably teenagers who had only just started to shift. As they ran by, he recognized Yuka and smiled at him—the boy glanced over at him, his ears pricking up, but he kept running with his friends.

Florian had idly started to make a small stack of snowballs on the top of the wall when Kade finally came striding out of the house, his expression blank.

"Everything okay?" Florian asked, raising a curious eyebrow. Kade let out a huff of a sigh, but wrapped his arms around Florian before answering. He blinked, surprised, but gingerly hugged Kade back.

"He's still hung up about... this. Us," Kade finally muttered, still not letting Florian go.

"Oh," Florian said softly, and he squeezed him a little tighter. "Well, whatever. Who cares?"

He felt more than heard Kade laugh bitterly. Then Kade pushed him back, just enough that their eyes could meet. The gleam of his tangerine eyes made him so much more handsome in the Veil, Florian thought.

"Listen," he said, brows furrowing. "You really don't think I'm... using you, right? For power or status or whatever. You don't think that?"

"What?" Florian asked, bewildered. "Of course not. I meant what I said back then with your parents. If you wanted my power, you could have taken it when you had the chance. If anything..."

He trailed off, unsure if he wanted to say it now, but Kade was looking at him so earnestly. "I mean, if anything, I sort of worried you maybe... I don't know. Felt bad for me, or just... Out of some kind of loyalty to my dad or something. I don't really think that, but that made more sense to me than—than you trying to take over the Winter Court or something."

Kade had started to frown as he spoke; but he still took a long moment before answering, his eyes downcast. His silence made Florian nervous, but he knew Kade wouldn't speak until he knew exactly what he wanted to say.

"I guess I understand that," he finally settled on, sighing. "But... I really was ready to go home, you know, that day. I would have gone if you hadn't asked me to stay. I admired Jerah, but how I feel for you... It's entirely separate."

"I know," Florian agreed, nodding, and he pushed himself back into Kade's arms. "I believe you. So no point in worrying about what they think. Okay?"

Kade laughed again, but wrapped his arms back around Florian. After a moment, he added nervously, "There was, um, something else he said."

Florian looked up at him curiously—it was rare for Kade to sound so obviously flustered, and now he was glancing away. "What?"

"Well," Kade started, looking as though he already regretted bringing it up. "You wouldn't know this, but, there's... That is, it's—I guess you would say taboo, for... Um, for shifters to... And he..."

It took Florian a moment to piece together what he was trying to say, but a wicked grin started spreading across his face as he realized.

"What are you saying?" he pressed, not truly believing Kade meant what he thought he meant. But the other man's face was burning red, a sight Florian had rarely seen on his stoic face.

"I guess he's worried that since you're—since you can shift, too, but aren't... part of the clan, that you might think that, um..." Kade continued resolutely, unable to meet Florian's gaze. "I mean—I would never, ever—do anything like that. I swear, Florian."

"Do anything like what?"

"Don't make me say it," Kade groaned.

"I don't understand," Florian said, trying to sound innocent; but Kade scowled down at him, and he couldn't stifle his grin.

"It's taboo. To... have sex while, um. Shifted," Kade forced out. "But I wouldn't do that anyway. I don't even know why he said it. But I just want to—so we're on the same page. I wouldn't do that."

"While shifted?" Florian repeated, his eyebrows raised as high as he could get them. He tried to sound scandalized, but he was on the verge of laughing. "I mean... That doesn't sound so bad to me."

"F-Florian!" Kade stammered, and Florian could feel his heart pounding against his chest. "That's

"I'm kidding," Florian laughed, shaking his head—then stopping and giving Kade a quizzical look. "I mean, unless...?"

"No," Kade said, shaking his head. "Really, Florian. Not interested."

"Okay, okay," Florian laughed. "I'm just teasing. Don't worry."

Kade sighed, and clearly eager to move on, he asked in a more serious tone, "When do you want to leave? To go get the Arrow?"

Florian's smile faded as he considered it. He had only been thinking of a nebulous *soon*, but he supposed that now they had all the information they were going to get from Kallik, there was nothing keeping them in the wolf kingdom. And he really was in charge now: the only schedule he was beholden to was the one that he set for them.

"Maybe in a few days," he said finally, burying his face against Kade's chest once more. "A week?"

He felt Kade breathe in. "A week from today?"

"Yeah."

"Okay."

A week seemed like enough time. Maybe by then, the thought wouldn't fill his stomach with aching dread.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Kade was different in the wolf kingdom. Not completely different, of course, but it struck Florian how more open he seemed around the other wolf shifters. Florian heard him speak more often than ever before. He was less standoffish, more warm—at first, Florian had thought it was a side of Kade that only he had seen, but he guessed it wasn't quite so rare after all. Maybe he had been wrong: Kade wasn't stoic or serious, just shy. It was somehow even more endearing.

He was starting to get a better understanding of the dynamic between Kade and his siblings as well. While Kade was a doting older brother to Amka and especially Yuka, catching up or playing games with them whenever they had free time, his connection to Bowen was harder to pin down. Bowen would flit in and out of their interactions—every time he did, Florian thought, it seemed he was either coming back from the woods, or about to go into them. No one else seemed perturbed by it, so he decided Bowen was simply more of an introvert than he seemed and didn't think too much on it.

They would visit cousins, or aunts and uncles, often as well. Florian usually sat quietly as Kade caught up with the local gossip and shared his own stories of the past year. He smiled and laughed often, and Florian thought that he seemed well-loved by everyone, which made his heart flutter with happiness. He had only known Kade so far as an outsider, a visitor to the Winter Court; but here he was one of many cousins, a beloved nephew, and a member of a close-knit community.

It felt like a real home, Florian thought, as he watched Kade showing Yuka and Amka how to use a practice sword their last evening before setting out. Maybe they could come back for a little while after they had the Arrow... That would be nice.

But all too soon, their break was over. The morning they were to set out into the Blight once more, Florian barely slept, and his stomach was a churning mess of nerves. Every time he closed his eyes, his mind wandered back to their last fatal trip into the Blight, the gruesome sound of his father being attacked, the blood, and his rattling, labored final breaths—

And if he lingered on it too much, he started feeling that strange distant sensation again: the way he had at his coronation, the moment his memories ended. The easy way his brain had seemed to simply

turn off frightened him, and he shook himself awake every time the feeling, or anything like it, started to creep along the edge of his temples.

Needless to say, he slept very little, which only made him feel more anxious about the journey. Kade seemed much less perturbed, packing up their things as casually as if they were heading out on a mundane day trip.

"Nervous?" he asked, looking up at Florian.

"Yeah," he muttered, rubbing the back of his neck. Kade straightened, eyeing him with an expression Florian couldn't quite place.

"Me too," he finally sighed, glancing away. "It'll be okay, though. I'll keep you safe. Promise."

Florian managed a smile. "I know."

Kade's family gathered at the front door to see them off. Florian had almost expected Bowen not to be with the rest, considering how fleeting his appearances were; but now he stood with the rest of their family, and to Florian's surprise he was the first to move forward and hug Kade, one arm wrapping around his shoulders.

"Be safe out there," Bowen said, and Kade nodded.

"Kade," Yuka exclaimed, as Bowen stepped away. "You've gotta be really careful, okay? And tell me about the monsters you see. You have to tell me if you find a really gross one."

"Yeah, I will," Kade laughed, grinning at him and leaning down to pull him into a hug. Amka hovered nervously next to Yuka, grabbing at Kade as soon as his arms were free again. "I'll be alright, Amka."

"Just be careful," she said, glancing over at Florian. Her hair was in a braid again, and she was smoothing her hands along the length of it over and over as Kade released her. "You too, Florian."

Florian managed a smile, though it didn't seem to ease her obvious anxiety.

"We will," he answered.

"All this nonsense," Meriwa muttered, fussing with the bag straps slung around Kade's shoulders. "You should stay home where you're safe." Kade managed a wry smile.

"Don't listen to her," Kallik said, glancing between him and Florian. "You're both doing us all a service. Safe travels to both of you."

"We should be back within three days or so," Kade said, patting his mother's shoulder, though he looked at Kallik as he said it. "You can worry about us then. But we'll be back soon."

With a few more goodbyes, Kade and Florian set out. Kade led them through the main street and out into the woods. Florian held the map, but Kade was the one who knew where the edge of the wolf

kingdom ended and the Nova Blight began. It was as cold as ever, and they were bundled in their heavy coats. It was strange to think that it was so much hotter in the Blight, and that their winter gear would have to be left behind.

When they were truly alone in the forest, Florian reached out with one hand to lace their fingers together. A soft smile spread across Kade's lips, and he squeezed Florian's hand reassuringly.

"Thanks for putting up with everyone for so long," he said, glancing down at Florian who laughed.

"You don't have to thank me," he said. "It was... nice. I liked it here." He paused, then added, "You seemed to like it too."

"Of course I like it. It's home."

"Yeah, but you were different. More relaxed."

Kade raised a quizzical eyebrow at him. "It's home," he repeated.

"I guess I just thought you were so quiet with everyone," Florian said, shrugging. "But I guess you're just shy."

A hint of color crept into Kade's cheeks. "I'm not shy," he protested. "I just... You know."

Florian laughed again, squeezing his hand. "It's cute. I liked seeing you with your family. Even your parents, I guess."

Kade made a noncommittal noise at that, glancing away. Florian looked up at him, considering, before he said as casually as he could manage, "It seemed like everyone had babies... I don't think I've held so many babies before in my life."

Kade snorted. "Yeah. My dad was obsessed with keeping the population up. I think he would have had even more kids if my mom hadn't been over it all after four of us. He always said..." He trailed off, glancing uncertainly down at Florian. "Well. He loved Jerah, but he had some... opinions about the Winter Court. He thought the fae were going to die out if they didn't start having more babies, so... He wanted to make sure our clan grew. He didn't want it to get smaller the way the Winter Court did."

Florian hesitated. It made sense, he supposed—even he had been unsettled at how small the population of the Winter Court was. The wolf kingdom seemed positively thriving in comparison.

"Do you... want to have kids someday?" he asked, looking down as he said it. The light layer of snow crunching beneath their feet was the only sound for a long moment, as Kade seemed to consider the question.

"No," Kade finally said, his voice soft. "At least not with the world the way it is now. The Veil is dying. It's... wrong, I think, to bring new people into a world like this. No one asks to be born, and it

just seems wrong to me, when we know what a difficult world we'd be bringing new people into. Either they're stuck in the wolf kingdom forever, or they go to Earth where they have to hide who they really are. I mean, look at Bowen. He just goes off to get high all day, every day, because there's nothing else to do, nowhere else to go."

"Is that what he does all day?" Florian asked, eyebrows raised in surprise. Whatever he had expected to hear, that hadn't been it. Kade laughed bitterly, nodding once.

"That's what he does all day," he echoed with a sigh, glancing back the way they had come. "I worry about him, but... Not much I can do, I guess. Besides this."

Florian nodded, looking down at his feet as they walked. Revelations about Bowen aside, it seemed they were largely on the same page about kids. It was a relief to hear, sad as his reasoning was.

"And what if we actually manage to pull all this off?" he pressed after a few moments of silence. "Get all the Arrows and save the Veil? Would you want kids then?"

"I guess I never thought of that," Kade said. "I don't know. I don't think so. I like being around kids, but... It's nice to be able to give them to someone else for the gross parts."

Florian laughed, turning his head to see Kade smile fondly down at him. "Yeah, I think so too."

"Is that okay?" Kade asked, though his smile remained.

"I don't think I'd want them either," Florian agreed. "I mean, the Earth has its own problems...

Neither place seems really great anymore. And I wouldn't want to... you know, have, like, biological kids." The very thought made his skin crawl. "So... not really in the cards for me, I guess, which is fine."

They walked on in quiet contemplation. Kade seemed to be mulling everything over; but with his smaller concerns addressed, and the conversation lulling, all Florian could think about was the Blight.

"I'm really nervous," he blurted, when the tension roiling in his stomach became unbearable. "All—all that bad stuff happened in the Blight last time. Everything was okay until we went in there. I guess I'm—I'm scared it'll be the same way again."

Kade stopped, and Florian stumbled to a halt next to him, their hands still linked.

"I understand," Kade said, peering down at him. "But it's just the two of us now. We'll look after each other. That'll make it easier than with three people. It's closer, so it won't be as difficult to get to. And..."

"And?" Florian prompted, looking up as Kade worried his bottom lip between his teeth, clearly considering what he was going to say.

"And we're not fighting now," he finally settled on. "So there's... none of that tension."

Florian grimaced. That was true. He could only hope things would stay that way. Something about the heat and the misery of it all had made him feel entirely unhinged the last time they were in the Blight. So much more was resting on his shoulders this time.

"We're almost there," Kade added, pointing ahead through the trees with his free hand. Florian could just make out a faint line of white light coming up along the horizon—the same as it had looked in the Winter Court—though here there were more trees in the way, blocking his view. He swallowed hard and nodded, keeping pace alongside Kade as they drew nearer.

The line of light grew taller as they approached, until the bright light filled the entire sky; but it was still kept at bay the same way it was in the Winter Court, as if some invisible wall marked the delineation between the two. Kade's steps slowed, then stopped as they came right up to the very edge of it. The snow ended in a perfect line, and they could see dry, hard dirt beyond the bright light.

"What keeps it from coming closer?" Florian asked, eyeing it suspiciously. He'd had the same thought the first time that they went into the Blight, but he hadn't thought to ask Jerah back then. If he had asked Tatiana, it had been during the week that he couldn't remember. Kade's lips pursed in thought, as he looked toward the light.

"I don't know," he confessed. "The wolf kingdom is pretty far from anything else. I think it was just far enough for the Blight not to reach. I don't think any part of the ocean to the north of us is Blighted. And we're not warded against it the way the Winter Court was, I don't think."

He started pulling off his coat as he said it, and reluctantly Florian followed his lead. The cold bit into him the moment the warm, thick layers were peeled away, and he was left shivering in just the light cotton undershirt that he wore beneath his coat.

"We can really just leave these?" he asked, watching Kade toss his coat to the ground. The taller man shrugged.

"They'll be here when we get back," he said. "Or someone will find them and take them back for us. Bowen's always wandering around here... I should have had him come with us. Next time."

Quietly, Florian hoped there wouldn't be a next time that they would have to enter the Blight from the wolf kingdom. From everything he had gleaned from his father's notes, no other Arrows were near the wolf kingdom; two were closer to the dragons far to the southeast, two more closer to the krakens

east of here; and the last was right near the heart of the Summer Court itself. It seemed unlikely they would return to the Winter Court unless it were for a more... permanent relocation.

The thought made his face warm, a stark contrast to the cold still making him shiver. It seemed silly to think of settling down with Kade in the wolf kingdom—after all, he was king of the Winter Court now—and he'd known Kade for barely three months. Whatever happened after all *this* was entirely up in the air, but it seemed most likely Florian would go back to the Winter Court. Wherever Kade went would be up to him, if they made it that far.

"Ready?" Kade asked, shaking him from his thoughts, and Florian gave a quick nod. With just the two of them, he would have to be the one to set the shroud. Since this Arrow was so close, there would be no need for the quickening spell, which was lucky since concentrating on both at the same time would be difficult, if not impossible.

"Darkness hides us. Darkness protects us," he murmured, magic swelling between his hands. "The Blight cannot touch us. The Blight cannot harm us." With his words, he pushed the shadow out to cover himself, then he reached out to Kade, cloaking both of them.

The shroud in place, he pulled his sun goggles down over his eyes and looked toward Kade, who nodded. Nervously, he reached his hand out once more, and with a slight smile Kade took it; after a beat of consideration, Florian stepped through into the Blight.

Its resemblance to the Blight closer to the Winter Court was uncanny, though he supposed most of the landscape would probably start to look pretty similar after two hundred years of the Nova Blight burning down on it. The terrain was rocky and dusty, with no hint of the cold and snow that they had just left; as his eyes adjusted, though, Florian thought the stone seemed darker, the distant horizon more craggy and broken up with hills and valleys.

"We're heading due south," Kade said, glancing down at him. "Keep the map up."

"Okay," Florian agreed, and he followed Kade's lead. The map was loosely folded in one hand with Kade's hand clasped in the other.

It was slow going, and just as boring and monotonous as the last trip into the Blight had been. Nervous as he was, the lack of tension between them made it feel a little more bearable, like Kade had said. They walked hand in hand for a long time.

Eventually, though, it became too difficult to look at the map with one hand, so gingerly Florian released Kade's fingers and let his own slide away. Kade gave him a sidelong glance, his eyes mostly hidden beneath the sun goggles, but he didn't protest. With his longer stride he stepped a bit ahead of

Florian to lead, his head turning back and forth every so often, as he scanned the area for danger. Florian stifled a grin as he looked up toward him. He could trust that Kade would keep him safe.

But this part of the world seemed remote enough that there were no signs of any kind of living thing that might threaten them. When they had been in the Blight last time, it seemed that they encountered some sort of strange Blighted creature nearly every day they traveled. Here, the landscape was still and silent, and Florian wondered if the creatures that had once lived here in what must have been a cold arctic biome had no chance of adapting to such heat.

How many creatures had gone extinct all at once? How many plants would never grow again? The thought unsettled him; even if they did eventually end the Blight on the world, what would come to take its place? Was there any hope some place like this could eventually recover? The lack of biodiversity seemed far too great; but he supposed that would be a problem for their future selves. He couldn't *not* try now.

He thought of the first Golden Arrow, safely back at the Winter Court. Eventually, he would have to bring the Arrow with him—all of them, if they got them all. He'd need some kind of carrying case for them. Maybe Tatiana could help him with it.

The thought of Tatiana panged him briefly with guilt. Meriwa's admonishment had weighed heavily on him since their first day in the wolf kingdom. Florian had tried not to dwell on it, since there was nothing he could do about it now; but part of him wondered if Tatiana truly wanted to be the one running the Winter Court, or if she secretly resented him for dropping everything in her lap—if maybe she had even resented Jerah for doing the same.

He could certainly see it being the case: how could it not irritate her that the men in her life continually left to have adventures, dangerous as they were, leaving her behind to house-sit a giant castle all by herself and keep the dying Winter Court running? Much as he balked at it, it was his responsibility now. He would have to talk with her more when they got back to the Winter Court.

And to think that two months ago his biggest problem had been running into Cameron too often, and being frustrated that his uncle didn't want him to move out. It felt like a lifetime ago, like it had been someone else entirely.

"You okay?" Kade asked after they had been walking for a while, noticing his silence.

"Yeah," Florian stammered, nodding. "Just... thinking about everything."

Kade hesitated, as if wanting to say something, but instead simply nodded and looked back out toward the distance.

"I understand," he said. "I'm... here if you want to talk about it."

Florian grinned. "I think that's one of the sweetest things you've said to me," he teased. Kade didn't respond, but the way his mouth pressed into a tight line betrayed how Florian's words flustered him.

They had walked for what felt like several hours, maybe most of the day—the lack of change in the light was disorienting enough that Florian was unsure exactly how long it had been. Last time it had taken him a few days to readjust his sense of time in the Blight, so he expected that he would have no idea what time it was until they got back from their hopefully shorter trip.

"Should we look for a place to set up camp?" he asked. Kade glanced back at him, then looked around, seeming to take stock of their surroundings.

"I'll keep an eye out," he said, but they kept walking.

When they did find a suitable spot—Florian was unsure what exactly made it suitable, but Kade picked it out, and he trusted the other man's judgment more than his own—setting up their little shelter was just as slow going. As they worked, he sorely missed having a third person to help.

"How often did my dad come to the wolf kingdom?" he asked as they worked. Kade looked over at him, his expression unreadable from the sun goggles still covering his eyes, but he seemed to think about it for a moment before answering.

"Maybe once a year or so," he said. "Sometimes more. I think he... Well, my dad liked seeing him, of course. But I think Jerah had a hard time seeing him so sick. He started coming less when my dad got worse."

"Oh," Florian said. "That's ... sad."

Kade shrugged, turning his attention back to the part of the tent that he was setting up.

Finally, when they were inside, Florian dropped the shroud. The relief and exhaustion hit him all at once, though he knew to expect it now. He panted for breath, doubling over—it ached like a muscle that he couldn't stretch.

"Sit down," Kade prompted him, and he all but fell to the ground. "Here." A water jug was placed in his hands, and gratefully he started to drink.

When his head had cleared a bit, he busied himself by pulling the map out again.

"We should be here," he said, pointing to where he thought—at least, where he hoped—they were. "And your dad said it was here." The spot Kallik had circled was just a few inches away on the map.

"If we're on the right track, we should get there early tomorrow," Kade said. "A few more hours, I think. I'm pretty sure we're going the right direction."

"I hope so," Florian agreed, leaning back with a sigh.

They set up their sleeping bags right next to each other. It was uncomfortably warm, but it would be that way regardless of how close they were; and Kade's presence was a small comfort that he had no intention of skimping out on. Kade laughed, as he pushed his sleeping bag closer.

"We're both way too sweaty and smelly for anything, so don't get any ideas," Florian teased. "It's for safety reasons only."

"Safety," Kade repeated with a wry grin. "Sure."

Florian was unsure how long it had been when he woke, but he felt well-rested enough. Next to him Kade was still asleep, laying on his side and facing Florian. Asleep and relaxed, his mouth was slightly parted, and his eyelids occasionally flickered with movement, his breathing deep and even.

He was handsome, Florian thought as he looked at him; his features were more wolfish in the Veil, almost noble. The thought was strangely embarrassing. Kade was so *completely* out of his league. Florian watched him for a long while, utterly unwilling to wake him when he looked so peaceful at rest. He could wait until he woke up on his own.

Eventually, Kade's eyebrows furrowed together, and his even breathing became less rhythmic—his eyes slid open gleaming yellow-orange, and he caught Florian's gaze on him. A sleepy smile spread across his face, and Florian grinned back so wide that his face ached.

"Good morning," he said softly. Kade only reached for him, drawing his face closer to kiss him. He felt like he might melt, but only partly because of the heat of the Blight.

"Good morning," Kade finally murmured in reply, still so close their noses were pressed together. "Ready to get up?"

He would much rather stay snuggled up next to Kade, but the longer he put off the start of their day, the more anxious he would be. So he nodded, and they started to get ready to go. With just the two of them it took a little longer to pack their things back up; but soon enough they were dressed, sun goggles on, and Florian muttered the spell to set the shroud. When they were both protected with shadow, they set about breaking down their tent and packing it away.

Hand-in-hand they set back out, Florian holding the map loosely in his opposite hand, but not entirely paying attention to it. Kade was much more focused, expression alert as he looked out into the Blight, searching for anything that might indicate that they were heading in the right direction.

Florian tried to focus on him, and not on the uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. Maybe this one would be different, less dangerous. They would be working together: that had to count for something,

didn't it? They didn't know what to expect, but could it be worse than the mines, the dogs? He thought of their spikes, the teeth, the blood—

"Florian," Kade was saying, snapping him out of his thoughts. "Are you alright?"

"Y-Yeah," he stammered, nodding quickly—though from how Kade was frowning, he suspected the other man had been trying to get his attention for a while. "Sorry. I was... I was thinking." He couldn't get a read on Kade's expression with the dark goggles in front of his eyes, but the other man's gaze lingered on him for a moment before he spoke again.

"Do you see that?" he asked, pointing up again. Florian looked, squinting in the bright light. In the distance, there was... something, some kind of shape that looked different from its surroundings, right at the very edge of visibility. It very well might be an unusually-shaped rock, but any landmark was welcome in the unending sameness of the Blight.

"I think so," Florian said, frowning. "What is it?"

"I'm not sure. But it might be what we're looking for," Kade said. Florian nodded, and they altered their course slightly to start heading toward it. Kade gave his hand a final squeeze and let him go, his hand moving to rest on the hilt of his sword. There had been no sign of anything alive other than them, but if this Arrow were like the first, the area around it might be something of a safe haven in the Blight to some extent, which Kade had clearly already considered. Nervously, Florian put his hand on the pommel of his own sword, scanning the horizon as they walked.

The closer they got, the more the shape came into view; it looked more and more like a pile of rocks from what Florian could tell. But there was an intentionality to it, so it didn't seem like a natural rock formation at all. He glanced at Kade, who was still looking ahead resolutely, but so far seemingly unconcerned.

"It just looks like a pile of rocks to me," Florian said, Kade's head tilting just a bit to listen. "But it looks like someone made it."

"I think so, too," he answered.

Soon, they were close enough to have a good look at it, and there was still no sign of anything else living in the area. It was indeed a pile of rocks, but it was set in a pyramid sort of shape, wide at the bottom and narrow near the top. Its highest point was just a bit taller than Florian. The stones were all around the same size. Something, or someone, had definitely made this—but who, or when, or why, were all a mystery.

"What do you think?" Florian asked, as Kade paced a slow circle around it.

"I'm not sure," he confessed. "It looks... old, but not that old. It's some kind of marker. Maybe..." He hesitated, frowning. "Could someone have been here before?"

Florian paused. It seemed unlikely, but the creatures that they had seen living in the Blight so far didn't seem to have the sort of intelligence or dexterity that would be required to make a stone marker like this.

"Look at this," Kade added, interrupting his thoughts; and Florian stepped around to the other side of the monument to look at where he was pointing.

But before he could see what Kade was showing him, a familiar tingling sensation in the air stopped him in his tracks—it felt like the heavy magic in the air that had appeared when they had gotten near the Arrow last time. The feeling sent his heart leaping up into his throat.

"Wait," he stammered, looking around anxiously. "I feel—I feel it. The magic in the air. We must be close." He glanced up at Kade. The taller man briefly looked surprised, but he nodded in acknowledgment, his eyes flickering around in search of any sign of the Arrow as well. But they seemed as alone as ever, so he pointed back at the stone monument, gesturing to a point near the bottom.

"That stone has something carved on it," he said.

Florian looked at where Kade was pointing, squinting down at the stone. There were certainly some kind of markings on the stone, runes or symbols carved into it that were just barely visible with how worn the surface was. Whatever they were, Florian couldn't read them.

The hairs on the back of his neck raised, sending an uncomfortable tingle down his spine. Something was watching them. He straightened quickly, looking behind them. Kade must have felt it too, turning at the same time.

At the end of the road, a tall figure was facing them. It stood on two legs, and silhouetted in the light, Florian couldn't make out any other details.

"What the fuck is that?" he whispered, freezing in place.

"I don't know," Kade replied, just as quiet.

The creature didn't move, standing motionless, watching them. The longer Florian looked, the more he could just barely make it out. It looked like it had short and slightly rounded ears near the top of its head, long limbs, legs that bent at a strange angle, and what looked like a tail curving just above the ground.

"It looks like a... a cat?" Florian whispered. Neither moved, waiting. The creature watched them from a distance—just barely perceptible, it started crouching lower to the ground.

"Get behind me," Kade hissed, pushing Florian back and drawing his sword with the other hand.

There was a flurry of movement as Florian stumbled back, nearly falling as his calves hit the stone monument. The creature leapt toward them and dashed along the ground on all fours, and Kade lunged toward it, swinging his sword up to meet it.

In the instant it leapt up to meet Kade's attack, Florian could see that it was cat-like: covered in black fur and with a feline face; but with hands instead of paws and long, sharp claws that extended from each of its fingers.

The creature grabbed at Kade's sword as he swung toward it, a screeching yowl escaping its mouth. Its claws scraped along the metal of the sword with a terrible hissing sound, and the blade came away tinged with red.

"Get away!" Kade growled, forcing it back. Its tail lashed around its legs as it stumbled back, hissing at him. Bright yellow eyes flashed between him toward Florian, all its sharp teeth bared. With another screech it lunged again, this time aiming not for Kade, but toward Florian. "Look out!"

With a startled cry, Florian swung his sword up to block its attack. The blade caught the creature in the mouth, its teeth clenching hard around the metal, the yellow eyes glaring at him. For a brief instant, he could study its face, the face of a panther. Its bloody claws came up, grasping like hands—then its yowl became a scream, as Kade came up behind it and plunged his sword into its back. Florian could hear the metal of the sword slipping against the bone of its spine with a dissonant scraping sound.

The creature's eyes widened, its movements stilled, and it collapsed.

"Fuck," Florian gasped, his heart pounding, as he kicked the body away from him. "Shit."

"Are you okay?" Kade asked, grabbing his free hand and hauling him to his feet. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm okay," Florian stammered. "But what the hell was that?"

"I have no idea," Kade said, and for a moment they were both silent as they looked down at the dead creature. It could have been a panther, if not for its strangely human-like front limbs and its ability to stand on its hind legs. Its claws gleamed in the light, sharp and cruel, even in death. They were lucky they had taken it out so quickly. Florian's sword trembled slightly in his hand.

"Well," he started, taking in a steadying breath. "Let's get away from here before more show up."

Kade glanced over at him, then gave one last long, uncertain look at the body of the creature, before nodding in agreement. Swords sheathed, they turned and started to walk in the direction from which the creature came.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Florian could feel the magic in the air growing stronger, until it practically thrummed against his skin. The remnants of a stone path were under their feet, leading them uphill toward that unmistakable sensation—it didn't take long for the crumbled remains of a village to start popping up around them, too. The first to appear were chunks of what had once been a stone wall along the path, most of it crumbling to dust now, but occasionally with a few feet still standing adjacent to the path.

Then small structures appeared among the hills: stone buildings that were barely more than huts. Even from a distance, they looked rudimentary, and scattered between them stood charred husks of other buildings—some made of wood that had burned away, the rest stone that still lingered.

"Stop," Kade hissed, grabbing Florian by the shoulder. "Look." He pointed, but Florian could already see. Walking between two buildings was another creature ambling on two legs, like the creature they had just slain. They were far enough that it didn't seem to notice them.

"What the hell is going on?" Florian whispered, as they shuffled toward one of the half-crumbled stone fences along the path and crouched behind it. "They have to be Blight monsters, right? How can they walk like that?"

"I don't know," Kade said, eyes narrowing as he looked toward the village. "I'm not sure what's going on. But it has to be in there."

"I think so," Florian sighed. "Can you feel it? The magic?"

"Sort of. Not really."

"It's definitely nearby."

"Then we have to keep going," Kade said, glancing back at him, and silently Florian nodded. "Follow me. Maybe if we're quiet we can get by without it noticing."

"There must be more," Florian protested, glancing back over the fence. Only the one was visible from here, but...

"We'll deal with it then," Kade affirmed, lightly touching his forearm. "Let's worry about this one first."

Florian hesitated, eyes flickering between the unknown and Kade's determined expression. "Okay," he relented, and with one last squeeze of his arm Kade crept forward, motioning for Florian to follow. They darted from one section of stone fence to the next, staying beneath the slight cover it gave them. After a moment the panther-like creature disappeared into one of the small stone huts; and with a quick nod, Kade broke into a rapid walk past the cluster of buildings. Florian hurried after him.

Once they had passed the cluster of buildings, they crested the hill where the last piece of stone fence stood crumbling, and saw that the path was clear the rest of the way down. From there, Florian could also see the rest of the village nestled at the bottom of the hill. A few more stone buildings were set up, and in the center was another stone monument that was similar to the one that they had seen on the way into the ruins. And there, gleaming in the light, the Golden Arrow was perched carefully at the very top of the structure.

"That's it," Florian gasped the moment it came into view. "Holy shit, it's right there."

"I see it," Kade said. Florian started to step forward, but Kade grabbed his wrist, stilling him. "Wait. There must be more. And if it's on that shrine thing..."

"They'll definitely see us," Florian agreed, stepping back and looking toward him. "Do you think we can sneak up to it? I don't see any of them outside."

"Worth a try," Kade said, his eyes still on the Arrow. "We should be ready to fight, though. Even if we can sneak up, something tells me they'll know the second we have it."

"Yeah," Florian sighed. Kade drew his sword, so Florian pulled his sword out, too. "You go. I'll follow."

Kade nodded, his eyes flickering between the shrine and the stone buildings surrounding it, watching for any sign of movement. But everything remained quiet and still, so cautiously he started making his way down the hill, Florian following closely. Only the crunching sound of their footsteps broke the silence around them, but nothing seemed to notice them as they slowly approached.

"Florian," Kade whispered, pausing against the wall of the first building they approached. "Let's just try and get out of here quickly. I'll shift and run to grab it. I think we're close enough that the shroud should hold."

Florian hesitated, eyeing the path downhill. It did seem just close enough that the shroud should still stretch. He could inch closer, and if Kade was fast enough, he could just grab the Arrow, run back to him, and he could teleport them back to the wolf kingdom right away. He didn't see any of the creatures, but there were sure to be more.

Kade was certainly faster than he was, and Florian was unsure if he could hold the shroud and shift at the same time. Though with the creatures walking around, it seemed possible that the Blight couldn't touch them here—but they had no way of knowing for sure, and it was too dangerous to try and test the theory. He would have to maintain the shroud. He could only hope that he'd be strong enough to cover Kade if any more of the strange panther-like creatures appeared.

"Okay," he said, looking up at Kade. "I'll try and get a bit closer too, just in case. So I can have your back if anything happens, too."

Kade hesitated, worrying his lower lip between his teeth as he shot one last look down toward the Arrow before finally nodding in agreement.

"Ready?" he asked, and Florian nodded, despite his heart hammering in his chest. Kade shifted, his body aglow with tangerine light until his familiar wolf form stood in front of Florian. The wolf's ears pressed flat to his skull as soon as he appeared, his nostrils flaring—he must have smelled something Florian couldn't. He looked up at Florian with an inscrutable expression—without being a wolf himself, Kade was nearly impossible to read.

"Still good?" Florian asked, the change in his demeanor making him nervous. Kade glanced down toward the Arrow for a moment, then looked back up at Florian and nodded. "Okay... Whenever you're ready, then." Kade nodded once more, then turned to run down the path.

Florian tightened his grip on his sword and took a few cautious steps behind him, hugging the stone buildings, as Kade galloped right down the center of the path.

The moment Kade was out in the open, though, a cacophony of screeching and hissing erupted from around them. Two panther creatures leapt out from their stone shelters toward Kade, and Florian could hear the sound of many more coming from within the other homes.

"Shit," Florian hissed, then held out his hand toward the first two creatures charging Kade and shouted, "You're blind!"

The creatures faltered and stumbled, lifting their strange clawed hands up to their eyes and yowling in rage—maybe in fear—but Florian could feel his tether to the shroud growing more strained, his magic split between so many targets. He winced. The sensation was not quite painful, but felt like stretching a muscle further than it was meant to go, and threatened to erupt into agony the moment it went too far. He couldn't hold it for long.

But Kade was fast, not even stopping to consider the creatures that had tailed him, nor the others that were now noticing him. He was a gray streak as he dashed for the shrine, leaping once he reached the foot of it and clearing the shrine effortlessly. When he landed on the other side, the Arrow was

between his teeth, and the noise around them had increased tenfold. It was as if every creature around them could sense that the Arrow had been moved, and they all came rushing from their homes to defend it.

Cursing, Florian let his tenuous hold on the blindness of the first two drop—no point in that when a dozen or more other monsters were about to join the fray. He couldn't waste time counting: he needed to focus on getting to Kade before they did, but they were faster and had a head start.

"Get away from him!" he exclaimed, swinging his sword to clear a path as he ran down the hill. His slashing made a few fall to the ground, but their focus was completely on Kade. He was surrounded, snarling with his hackles raised; but with the Arrow in his mouth, he could only swipe and slash at them as they drew nearer—claws out and fangs bared.

Then one lunged at him, then the rest, and his growling turned to yelps of pain.

"Kade!" Florian exclaimed, driving his sword into the back of the creature nearest to him, shoving his way through. Still they paid him no attention—whatever these creatures were, they knew the Arrow was important and powerful. Their claws came away red from where they slashed through Kade's fur.

Florian could see the golden flash of the Arrow as it fell from Kade's mouth. He snarled and barked as he bit at the creatures; his fangs sank into their outstretched hands, sending them hissing and recoiling. But for each one that shrank away, another took its place; until finally one snatched the Arrow up from the ground where it had fallen and tried to slink away from the others.

"Drop it!" Florian commanded, magic surging from him as he spoke the command at the panther creature that had it. It dropped the Arrow, and whirled on Florian with a screech. He dodged its swinging claws by an inch, dropping to the ground to grab the Arrow. He could feel the magic of it swell and surge in his hand, could feel the creature lunging toward him where he had crouched down

He whirled back around and drove the point of the Arrow toward the creature as it leapt toward him, all its teeth flashing in the light. The arrowhead plunged through its neck, blood pouring instantly down Florian's arm like a fountain. Golden light burst from the Arrow, engulfing the panther creature; and when it faded, the figure reaching toward Florian looked like a human—a shifter. A woman with tan skin, black hair, and the same glowing green eyes of the panther creature that had just leapt at him. He saw now the fear, shock, and pain on her face all in equal measure. Her hand came up, a normal human hand with no claws at all, reaching for the wound in her neck, fingers closing around his wrist

"W-What?!" Florian gasped, his heart leaping into his throat. The woman met his eyes, her lips moving wordlessly; but blood still gushed from the Arrow lodged in her neck, and she fell limp against him before she could speak.

They were shifters—all of them, they were *shifters*. Panic exploded through his chest. Somehow they had survived in the Blight: some strange half-shifted form that let them survive so near to the Arrow. Hadn't Kallik said that this had been a village of panther shifters? How had the Arrow changed her back?

But the rest of them seemed entirely unconcerned with the naked woman now dead at Florian's feet, her skin already beginning to redden in the Blight. The Arrow was still in his hand, which trembled with sudden fear.

"Kade!" he cried, panic overtaking his voice. "Kade, they're—they're shifters?"

He swung wildly with his sword, clutching the Arrow closer to him in fear of striking any of the other creatures with it. The palpable magic roiling off him reminded him of how he had so easily commanded all the dog creatures to lay down and die when they had retrieved the first—but if these creatures were shifters, how could he kill them?

"Get away from us!" His voice came out like a plea rather than a command, but still the magic took hold. Their teeth remained bared, and their claws out, but they slowly began to step away from him, the confusion plain even on their feline faces. Kade shoved through the crowd that had surrounded him, growling and snarling at them; but just as they had first utterly ignored Florian, they seemed not to see Kade now that he no longer held the Arrow.

Were they truly Blighted creatures if they were shifters? Why didn't they shift back—*could* they shift back? If Florian left with the Arrow now, would he be dooming them to a painful, rapid death, as the full brunt of the Blight bore down on them all at once? He felt like he might be sick. Was there any way to save them? Not taking the Arrow wasn't an option—but if taking it meant killing all of them...

Kade slunk up toward him, blood soaking his face and dripping from the scruff of his neck. He pressed close to Florian, staining his clothes with blood, an urgent, expectant look in his eyes. But Florian couldn't move—his eyes were locked on the dead shifter next to them, her skin starting to blister now. He had killed her. He might be killing all of them. His fingers were tingling around the Arrow, his breaths came in sharp, shallow bursts, and an uncomfortable numbness started to creep along his temples—

Kade whined, his ears pressing flat against his skull; and Florian saw fear and hurt and confusion all on his face. He bit back a sob, squeezing his eyes shut as he wrapped one arm around Kade's

form.

"We're back in the wolf kingdom," he choked out. There was a popping sensation in the back of his head; and when he opened his eyes again, he saw the snowy forest right near the edge of the Blight—their discarded winter coats, covered in a light dusting of snow, were no more than fifty feet away.

He felt Kade sigh with relief. He was going to be sick.

Florian shoved the wolf away and floundered to his feet, making it only a few steps to brace himself against one of the towering evergreen trees before doubling over and vomiting into the snow. Tears burned at his eyes and his skin prickled with heat despite the sudden drop in temperature. He had killed them—he had doomed them all to die.

"Florian," Kade gasped, stumbling up to him. He hadn't even realized that the other man had shifted back. His hand was warm on Florian's back, but he could feel how wet it was with blood. "Are you okay?"

"They were shifters," he repeated, shaking his head. He couldn't look at him. "They were—I killed her. She *shifted*. I thought—all those monsters—were they all shifters?"

"Florian, breathe." Kade's voice was distant. He could barely breathe, and his heart thundered painfully in his chest—disoriented, he stumbled backward as Kade grabbed his shoulders and eased him to the ground. "Just breathe. It's okay."

"I killed her," he sobbed—had he been crying? "She was—the Arrow—she was—"

"I know," Kade murmured, squeezing him. Florian forced his eyes shut and focused on Kade's strong arms around him. "It's okay. You're okay. You have to breathe."

It felt like an eternity before Florian could control his breathing, forcing himself to inhale deeply and fill his lungs. Even when his breathing slowed, his heart still hammered against his ribs. A coppery smell filled his nostrils; when he could see again, pulling away to look up at Kade, the other man's face and chest were still covered in blood.

"You're hurt," Florian croaked. His hands trembled as he reached out to touch him. "You're really hurt."

"I'm okay," Kade said, shaking his head. His brows were furrowed—whether out of pain, worry, fear, or something else, Florian couldn't tell. "I'm more worried about you."

Florian laughed—he sounded hysterical—he had no idea where it was coming from. "I'm freaking out," he said, squeezing his eyes shut again. "They were shifters, Kade. And we took the Arrow."

"Stop," Kade interrupted, grabbing Florian's hand where it pressed to his blood-soaked chest. "Florian, they were monsters. Maybe they were shifters once, but they were Blighted. We could both

see that. Whatever the Arrow did to... to that woman, it obviously wasn't that simple, or they wouldn't have been the way they were. They aren't shifters any more. They're Blight monsters."

"I killed her," Florian whispered, shaking his head. "She looked right at me. She was scared."

"You had to," Kade said. "They would have killed us first if you hadn't."

Distantly, Florian knew he was right, but it didn't make him feel any less guilty. Maybe he could have done something differently, saved them somehow... Wasn't that what he was supposed to be doing? Saving everyone?

The moment his mind drifted back to it, he felt acutely aware of the Arrow in his free hand. He held it up to look, hands still trembling. It was pristine, no hint of the blood that coated his arm anywhere on it. It had the same tiny inscription near the arrowhead—

No, it wasn't the same. He frowned, bringing it closer to his face.

I pierce the heart of summer, it read. The first one had said something else, hadn't it?

"Sacrifice," Florian whispered, remembering the first Arrow. *I pierce the heart of sacrifice*. The words had stuck bitterly when he first read them, after his father had...

"What?" Kade asked. Nervously, Florian looked up at him again. He didn't know what it meant, if it meant anything at all. Kade certainly wouldn't know either.

"Nothing," Florian said quickly. "I... I read it wrong. It says summer."

For a moment Kade was silent, looking down at him with an unreadable expression only made more inscrutable from the blood that coated his face. Florian looked away.

"Are you sure you're okay?" he asked. He felt Kade take a deep breath, sighing.

"I think so," he answered, finally releasing Florian from his arms and stumbling to his feet. "Looks worse than it is. Can you walk?"

Florian stumbled to his feet. He was shivering all over—partly from the cold, and partly from whatever painful mix of emotions still rattled around in his chest. "Yeah, I... I think so."

Kade took a few cautious steps before pressing a hand to his side with a groan. "That hurts. Fuck, it's going to be a long walk."

"Let me help," Florian said, scrambling toward him. With his free hand, he pulled up the hem of Kade's shirt, wincing as he revealed the worst wound. Four deep gashes snaked down from the bottom of his ribs to his hip bone, steadily leaking blood.

"Heal," Florian murmured, lightly touching the skin with his fingers and letting magic trickle from his words. But he felt it swell from the Arrow in his other hand, pouring out of him; and before his eyes, the wound began to knit together. It took only seconds for the open gashes to vanish, leaving

raised scabs where they had once been. His clothes were still soaked with blood, but the wound itself seemed to have fully closed.

"I think you got everything," Kade said, frowning as he gingerly touched his throat and shoulder, where smaller scratches and punctures had littered his skin. "That's... useful."

"I think it's the Arrow," Florian confessed, looking down at it once more. "I don't really understand how it works."

For a moment he thought of his father, wishing desperately he could ask Jerah what he thought—if he knew how its magic worked with his own—if he knew about the different inscriptions—if he thought those creatures really *were* shifters.

"Can you walk?" he asked abruptly, looking up at Kade again. If he dwelled on any of it too long, he thought he might be sick again—or worse, lose another week of time. What was wrong with him?

"I think so," Kade answered, but his first few steps away from Florian were wobbly and uncertain.

"Here," Florian said, darting next to him. He pulled one of Kade's arms around his shoulder, so the taller man could lean against him. It was slow going, but if he could focus on Kade, it was easier to ignore the guilt still gnawing against his stomach.

CHAPTER NINE

Bowen caught up to them before they arrived back in town, loping through the trees in his wolf form with a concerned expression on his face. He quickly shifted back and stumbled through the snow toward them.

"Wolf-God, you guys! What happened? I smelled blood, but... Are you alright?" he asked, reaching out toward Kade's other side to grab his arm.

"I'm okay," Kade said, shaking his head. "Florian patched me up. I'm not bleeding anymore."

"Is that...?" Bowen trailed off, his eyes lingering on the Arrow still clutched in Florian's free hand.

"That's it," Florian said, nodding. "C'mon. Can someone in town check on him?"

"Yeah, okay," Bowen agreed, and together they walked with Kade between them.

When they made it down the hill and onto the main road, the other wolf shifters immediately came to witness the scene. By the time they'd reached the town square, a small entourage had crowded around them, some trying to help, and others watching with morbid curiosity. One woman came up to Kade and started wiping the blood from his face with a cloth, keeping pace with them as she fussed over him.

A man came up to Florian and started dabbing his bloodied arm as well, looking him over.

"You're hurt?" he asked, glancing at the blood on the handkerchief. "This is your blood?"

"No, I—I don't think so," Florian stammered, and he felt Kade tense next to him.

"Get the hell away from him," Kade snapped, reaching his arm around Florian to shove the man away. "It's not even his blood. Have some respect."

The man shrunk away with a hastily muttered apology, and Florian felt his face burn with a strange mixture of anger and embarrassment. Jerah had told him that he'd sent him away for fear of people trying to steal his Changeling blood, yet he hadn't quite believed it. Now, it had happened without him even realizing—and hurt as he was, Kade was still the one to protect him. The thought left him unsettled.

"Thanks," he muttered, glancing suspiciously at the crowd still around them. Kade nodded silently, and the people around them seemed to shrink away a bit, after seeing what had happened. Florian cradled the Arrow closer to his chest as they walked. Luckily, no one seemed overly interested in it, but he supposed that could change in an instant.

"Come get cleaned up," Bowen sighed, opening the front door of their family home. Florian stumbled inside with Kade, and he could see that Meriwa was already descending the stairs.

"What's all this commotion about?" she said, only to let out a startled shout when she caught sight of Kade. "Wolf-God, look at you! What's happened?"

Before they could answer, she was ushering all three of them into the kitchen, as Florian tried to explain, and Bowen ran to bring her what looked like a first aid kit. The irritation was plain on Kade's face, but silently he allowed his mother to clean him off with wet hand towels and inspect each of the wounds that Florian had healed.

"Not bad, little king," she murmured, gingerly touching one of the scabbed-over wounds on Kade's side. "He should heal up just fine. Nothing serious." She straightened, then smacked Kade's shoulder. "Coming in here covered in blood like that! You're lucky your father wasn't down here to see. He would have had a heart attack."

Kade shot her a wry look. "I'm fine," he said. "Can we go now?"

"What, you're not going to let me make sure Florian's all right? Aren't you supposed to be protecting the fae king?" she replied. Kade sighed as he squeezed his wet, bloody shirt into a ball between his hands.

Florian offered quickly, "I'm okay. Just got scratched up a little bit. Kade got the worst of it."

"Fine, fine, I see how it is," she muttered. Behind Florian, Bowen stifled a laugh, and Meriwa rolled her eyes. "Go on, then, stop dirtying my kitchen."

Kade was silent as Florian followed him back up to their room. Almost at once, Kade stripped off the rest of his bloody clothes and went to shower. Florian tossed his own bloodied shirt into the same pile, waiting awkwardly outside the bathroom door for Kade to finish. He had the distinct sense that the other man wanted to be alone.

As he waited, he looked the Arrow over again. Florian had hoped that he had misread it before, but the same inscription met him as he turned it over in his hands. *I pierce the heart of summer*.

For a moment, he was filled with longing once again. Jerah would have known what it meant. He would have to go over his notes again—there had to be *something* there—but in that instant, he wished desperately that he could just turn to his father and show him the Arrow. Even if he didn't

have an answer, just his thoughts on the inscription might help him come up with a theory; or maybe he just wanted to hear Jerah's voice again.

After a few minutes Kade came back out, all traces of blood gone and only a towel wrapped around his waist.

"Oh," he said, pausing in surprise when he realized that Florian was still there. "I thought... Sorry. There's another bathroom across the hall."

"It's okay," Florian said quickly. He wasn't sure why he had lingered in their room. Part of him didn't want to be alone, he thought; and part of him didn't want to leave Kade alone either. "I, um... I don't really know what to do with this."

He held out the Arrow. Kade nodded, worrying his lower lip between his teeth.

"I should have thought of something first," he said, sighing. "I'll find a quiver to put it in. Just leave it on the table for now. You should rinse off. You'll feel better."

Florian nodded, gingerly setting it down. He still felt tense, like a spring was coiled tightly in the pit of his stomach, like there was something he needed to say first—but he didn't know what. So instead, he silently stepped past Kade into the bathroom, mechanically taking off his clothes and rinsing off in the shower, watching the water stream down him in red-tinged rivulets until it ran clear.

When he came back out, Kade was gone.

He laid out facedown on the bed so that when he closed his eyes, his vision was completely dark, trying to push all the images of the panther woman out of his mind—her frightened eyes, the blood gushing from her neck—though with little success.

"Florian," Kade's voice came from the doorway, snapping him out of his unpleasant thoughts. "Are you awake?"

"Yeah," he said, abruptly pushing himself up into a sitting position. Kade was in clean clothes, holding a leather quiver in one hand. Now that he had changed, he looked as perfectly calm as ever, a stark contrast to how shaken Florian still felt. "Thanks for... for finding that."

Kade set the quiver on the table next to the Arrow, but his eyes lingered on Florian with uncertainty. "Are you okay?" he asked, coming to sit next to him.

"I..." Florian started, only to trail off. His throat tightened and his eyes burned—how many times had he cried today? Biting back his tears, he waited until he could speak without feeling like he might start to sob. "I don't know."

He looked down at his hands, unable to meet Kade's eyes. For a moment they were both silent, then cautiously Kade reached out and touched one of his hands.

"Can I help at all?" he asked softly.

"I think—" Florian stammered, that same maddening feeling of wanting to say something, but not knowing what, coming over him again. "Can I—" He groaned, shaking his head. "Do you think we're doing the right thing?"

Kade's hand gave a tiny start, as if he were surprised by the words. He considered it for a long moment before speaking.

"Of course we are," he murmured. "Why wouldn't we be?"

"What if we just end up hurting more people?" Florian pressed, finally managing to glance up at his face. Kade's brows were furrowed, the concern obvious on his face; but the expression softened slightly when Florian looked at him. "Those... panther shifters. What if we could have turned them back somehow? What if taking the Arrow just killed them all? What if it's like this everywhere we have to go? And what if we can't even use them right?"

Kade nodded, looking down at their joined hands. "The only other option is not to do anything," he finally said. "And I think that's definitely wrong."

"What if we just keep making things even worse?" Florian said, shaking his head. "What if I just keep getting people killed?"

"Florian," Kade interrupted, squeezing his hand hard. "That's not your fault. They were attacking us. They would have killed us if they could have."

"I still—I still—" he said, his voice starting to break; and angrily he stood, pressing his hands to his eyes. He was so sick of crying. "I still *did* it. And my dad—all of them—what if those dogs were shifters once too?"

"They weren't," Kade retorted. "They were Blighted monsters."

"But how do we *know* that?" Florian pressed, turning to face him. The frustration must have been obvious on his face. Kade looked silently at him for a long moment before breathing out a heavy sigh.

"We don't," he finally relented. "But even if they were, we don't know how we could have helped them. All we can do is what we think is best. We *do* know how to help everyone else, by getting the Arrows and taking them to the Summer Court."

"Do we? Are we just going to fuck up the world even worse?"

"Maybe," Kade sighed, shaking his head. "Or maybe we'll save it. We have to try, Florian. Quitting now won't bring anyone back. The past stays where it is."

The words made all the tension coiled in Florian's torso finally break, and his shoulders sagged as his resolution broke.

"You're right," he muttered miserably, looking away. "I know. I hate that you're right."

His eyes lingered on the Arrow, still set on their bedside table, and the leather quiver next to it. The weight of everything felt unbearable, like he would be crushed underneath the responsibility no matter what he did. The Arrows, Queen Soleil, and the spirit attached to him that was still an utter mystery—he should have stayed home in Coral Shore when Jerah came that first time. None of it seemed worth all this struggle.

"Florian," Kade said, reaching for him. "I want to help. Tell me what you're thinking about."

"I don't know," he muttered, shaking his head. Trying to put it into words seemed impossible. "I feel... guilty, I guess."

He turned to look at Kade, who was still peering over at him with the same expression—stoic, calm, the eye of a storm. Florian stepped closer, and Kade opened his arms to hold him.

"You don't have to feel guilty," Kade murmured, his voice slightly muffled against Florian's shoulders. Still seated, Kade's face fit in the crook of his neck. "You were doing what you had to do. You were keeping us safe. You protected me."

"I guess so," Florian relented, feeling his tense muscles start to relax into Kade's sturdy form. More than anything, he just didn't want to have to think about any of it anymore.

"We don't know enough about those creatures to say for sure what else we could have done," Kade continued, pulling back a bit to look up at him. "We just don't. Maybe we can ask the witch. She might know. But for now, we did the best we could knowing what we know."

"I don't want to talk about it anymore," Florian groaned, looking away. Going to talk to the witch was its own issue. More than anything, he needed to ask her about the spirit that he and Jerah had theorized; but bringing that up to Kade seemed impossible right now. Maybe he could try tomorrow.

He felt Kade sigh, loosening his hold around Florian's waist, but he didn't step away.

"Okay," Kade said softly, reaching up to brush his hair out of his face. "We don't have to talk about it."

"Now what?" Florian asked. It was late in the afternoon now, around dinnertime, though he had no appetite.

"Well. I'm exhausted. So I'm going to sleep," Kade answered, managing a slight smile. "You can do whatever you want, though."

"I want to stay with you."

"Then come here."

Kade pulled him back, and together they settled into bed. Kade's arm still draped over him where he laid on his side. True to his word, Kade fell asleep almost instantly; and his breathing slowed to a deep, steady rhythm against Florian's back.

But Florian still felt restless. From where he was, he could see the Arrow on their bedside table. He looked at it for a long time, trying to push all his conflicted emotions down, deep enough that he couldn't feel them anymore. It was all a jumbled mess in his head—his father, the witch, the panther woman, the Arrows and their inscriptions, and the Summer Queen were vying for his attention all at once. He had never wanted any of it.

The sun had gone down, and their room had grown dark, by the time he felt exhausted enough to close his eyes.

CHAPTER TEN

The next day was idle in comparison. Florian knew that they would need to go back to the Winter Court with the Arrow they'd retrieved; and from there they would plan how to find the witch and get to her—but Kade seemed to sense his reluctance, and didn't mention any of it. Instead, they went about their morning the same as any other, spending their time leisurely in the wolf kingdom.

They stayed in bed for most of the morning, only leaving in the early afternoon, finding most of the family already out of the house. It almost felt like they were young and sneaking around: Kade seemed to play along, peeking around the corner to see if anyone was in the kitchen, before ushering Florian in. They quickly put together two plates piled high with food and took them back up to their room. He even managed a laugh when Kade closed the door behind him with his foot, balancing both full plates precariously as he did.

"How are you feeling now?" Kade asked after they'd eaten and snuck their dishes back down. They were sitting cross-legged on the floor with their backs up to the bed, and he was looking down at Florian with a carefully neutral expression.

Florian paused before answering. If he dwelled on his thoughts too long, he started to get that familiar unsettled feeling in his stomach—his breathing coming quicker, and his heart beating faster. But if he could focus on something else...

"I'm okay," he said, his voice smaller than he meant it. "I'm okay now. I mean, if I don't have to think about it too much. You know?"

"Yeah," Kade murmured, nodding. Cautiously, he wrapped one arm around Florian, as if afraid he might pull away. Instead, he leaned closer to Kade. "I understand."

"Thanks for all this," Florian said, gesturing around the room. "This helps."

Kade didn't answer, only leaned over to kiss his forehead, making him flush. Every time Kade was so gentle and careful with him, it somehow still took him by surprise.

"Maybe we could do more stuff to keep me distracted," he murmured, tilting his head to catch Kade's lips against his own. He felt the other man smirk against him, pulling him a little closer.

"I want to..." Kade started, then trailed off, pulling away a bit to look down at Florian. He looked flustered, almost embarrassed; and Florian blinked up at him in uncertain surprise. "I... Okay. Can I ask you something?"

Florian laughed, more nervous than anything else. "Uh, sure?"

"Well, I do want to, but I'm still sore from yesterday so I don't think I can... I mean. So instead, um —will you... fuck. Will you fuck me?" Kade stammered out, unable to meet his gaze. For a moment they were both silent, until finally Florian managed to shake himself into answering.

"Like actually fuck you?" he asked.

"Well, yeah," Kade answered, color rising in his face. "I mean, you know, you always, um. It looks like it, uh. Feels... good. So..."

"Okay," Florian said, nodding and standing quickly. It wasn't something he had given much thought before, but now that Kade had said it—had spoken it into existence—it quickly became an urgent desire. "Right now?"

Kade laughed, obviously nervous, but he stood alongside Florian. "Sure."

Florian pulled his pants down, making Kade laugh again, only to nervously look back over at him. "This is so weird," he said. "I don't know what it should look like? Like how big, do you think? Kinda small, probably? Right?"

Kade eyed him, clearly sensing his indecision, and agreed, "Yeah, maybe not too big to start."

"I'm already nervous," Florian groaned, but he squeezed his eyes shut and thought about Kade's dick: the size and shape of it, envisioning a smaller version of it, as magic pulsed along his skin. It was distinctly uncomfortable, as the skin between his legs stretched and morphed, and his stomach ached with what must have been his insides rearranging. But when he opened his eyes again, a soft cock hung between his legs; and he shifted uncomfortably with the utterly foreign weight of his balls. He adjusted his legs to stand a little further apart, sucking in a sharp breath at the strange movement.

"Wow," he murmured, looking down at himself. It didn't feel quite like a part of his body, but it wasn't unpleasant either.

"I want to do this first," Kade murmured, his voice suddenly heated, kneeling down in front of him.

"K-Kade!" Florian exclaimed, biting back a yelp as the other man took his soft cock into his mouth. Wet warmth surrounded him, immediately coaxing him to hardness—even that was novel and strange, the sensation tugging at his skin as he quickly grew erect. When Kade pulled his mouth away, letting his tongue drag along the underside of Florian's cock, it jutted out from the rest of his body—only to disappear back into Kade's mouth. "Oh, fuck."

His hands settled in Kade's hair—the pleasure of it felt the same, but the sensation was in such a different place in his body that it might not have been happening to him at all.

"I'm not going to be able to fuck you if you keep this up," he gasped. Despite his protest, his hips rocked of their own accord, pushing himself further in and out of Kade's mouth. Kade hummed in satisfaction against him, making him yelp as the vibration of it buzzed up his length. "Fuck, this feels good."

Kade pulled away from him at that, making him whimper at the sudden loss of warmth. "Still want to fuck me?"

"Uh, yes," Florian laughed. Kade grinned at him as he got to his feet, pulling his shirt off in one easy motion as he did.

"Come back to bed, then," he murmured.

They ended up with Kade on his back and Florian on top of him, peppering kisses along his throat as their hips rocked slowly together. His cock sliding against Kade's bigger, thicker member was a sensation unlike anything he'd felt before—it was strange how different it felt to his original anatomy, yet the pleasure that arced up his spine was the same.

But eventually, Kade pressed the little bottle of lube that they had brought with them into Florian's hands. "C'mon," he goaded. With a chuckle, Florian pushed himself up onto his knees between Kade's spread legs. His hands shook a little as he squeezed some lube onto his fingers, partly nerves and partly eager anticipation.

Kade reached down to spread his ass cheeks apart, revealing the slight pucker of his hole surrounded with a light dusting of dark hair. Gingerly, Florian touched him with his lubed fingers, making him suck in a sharp breath. Florian froze—startled—but Kade only laughed.

"Cold. That's all."

"S-Sorry," he stammered. "It'll warm up. Here, come to the edge of the bed."

He stood as Kade pushed himself across the bed, so his ass was right at the very edge and his much longer legs hung over. "Better?" Kade teased, laughing.

"So I can see you better," Florian agreed, grinning at the slight flush that crept up Kade's face at his words. From this vantage point he could look down at the full length of his partner's body, though his eyes lingered briefly on the wounds still along his ribs and side--closed, but still red and bruised.

His focus pulled him out of the moment. He looked away, shaking his head and refocusing on the task in front of him. He pressed his fingers against Kade's entrance again, exploring the taut muscle

until it warmed and relaxed against his touch, enough that he could slide a finger inside. Kade let out a long breath as Florian pressed into him, all the way to his knuckle, then drew it back out.

"It's good," he said, seeing the unspoken question on Florian's face as their eyes met. "I'll tell you if anything hurts. Go on."

"Okay," Florian nodded, moving his finger in and out of Kade, more exploratory than anything else. He was tight and warm around the digit; and although his cock was rock-hard in anticipation, it was hard to imagine how it might feel around him. Slowly, he pressed a second finger in alongside the first, watching as Kade closed his eyes and made a soft noise in the back of his throat. His mouth hung slightly open, his face still flushed with desire, his breathing deep and controlled, but with just a hint of arousal in how ragged his breath sounded at the very end of each exhalation.

Kade felt impossibly tight around him at first, slowly easing and relaxing around the intrusion—and when he added a third finger, Kade groaned, one hand squeezing at the base of his cock.

"It's good," he panted, before Florian could ask. "Don't make me wait."

Florian laughed breathlessly as his fingertips grazed along Kade's inner walls. He couldn't quite feel where his prostate must be, but his cock had more length than his fingers did—and, he thought as he stifled a grin, he could figure out how to make his cock the perfect length and shape to hit it every time. The thought made his cock twitch eagerly; and as he eased out his fingers, he pressed the head of it against Kade's asshole, lining himself up.

"Okay," he said. "Ready?"

Kade nodded, eyes still closed. Florian pushed himself inside. They both gasped at the slow, cautious movement. He was *so* tight, Florian thought, enough that he thought it must be hurting him, but the faint moan escaping Kade's lips sounded like absolute bliss.

"Oh, fuck," Florian groaned, pushing himself in to the hilt. He remembered how Kade had remained perfectly the first time they'd had sex; and now he entirely understood why. The tight, wet walls around his cock made him absolutely certain that if he moved even a fraction of an inch, he would instantly shoot his load. He remained completely still for a moment, panting and trying desperately to think of anything other than the overwhelming warmth surrounding his cock.

"Florian," Kade breathed, his voice almost a whimper. "Move. Please."

The words nearly broke his resolve to not immediately come. But he squeezed his eyes shut, taking in a deep and steadying breath, then nodded and slowly started to move his hips. The movement felt clumsy at first—then Kade stifled a moan with the back of his hand, the other hand still stroking his own cock, and instinct took over. Florian watched the way Kade's chest heaved as he gasped, the way

his eyelids fluttered, and how soft his lips looked as his mouth hung slightly open. All he could think of—all he wanted—was to keep Kade looking like *this*, to keep drawing out the little gasps and moans that escaped the back of his throat. He had never seen him look so vulnerable and exposed. The tight heat around his cock became almost secondary to Kade's utterly undone expression.

"God, Kade," Florian panted, running his hands from Kade's hips up his abs, carefully avoiding the healing wounds on his skin, then back down to grip at his thighs. "This is so hot."

A heated grin spread across Kade's features at that. "You like fucking me?" he goaded, and Florian nodded with a breathy laugh.

"Of course I do," he said.

"Mm," Kade agreed, his head falling back. "Me too."

Florian thought of making himself bigger—just a little, just enough to be sure to hit the exact right spot—and felt himself swell and lengthen, the hot channel around him growing tighter. Kade sucked in a sharp breath, looking back up at him.

"Did you—?" he asked, only to be cut off as Florian thrust into him again. "Oh, *fuck*—God, Florian, right there—"

Florian bit back a moan, focusing with all his might on *not* coming. The sudden feverish cries coming from Kade certainly weren't helping; but still he moved his hips the same way, relishing the way his eyebrows knit tightly together as his eyes squeezed closed, and the way his toes curled with each thrust, his broad chest heaving with ragged breaths.

"You feel so good," Florian panted, squeezing his thighs. "Fuck, Kade, this feels so good."

"Shit," Kade hissed, pressing his free hand to his mouth. "I'm—I'm—" His cry became wordless as he tensed around Florian, his cock twitching in his hand as he came, marking his abs and chest with long stripes of come.

That was more than Florian could bear. His hips moved of their own accord, giving only a few more frantic thrusts into Kade before he was coming too. He gasped as pleasure swelled upward from his groin, familiar and foreign in its placement all at once. Orgasming with a cock was similar enough to his original anatomy—the come shooting out of it was an entirely new sensation—and the way Kade pulsed and twitched around him only drew it out longer.

"Kade," he whimpered, eyelids fluttering. He couldn't form any other words.

When he could finally focus again, he was panting for breath along with Kade, who was still splayed out underneath him. The other man's hands were pressed loosely against his cock, as if

shielding it, and a glistening line of come traveled up his abs nearly to his neck. His head tipped back, his eyes closed, and his breath came out rapid and shallow.

"Are you okay?" Florian asked, suddenly nervous—but to his surprise, Kade laughed.

"I came really hard," he said, his voice rasping. "God. That was really intense."

Florian nodded weakly. Now that the adrenaline of the moment had faded, he could feel his legs quivering. Having always been on the receiving end, it had never occurred to him just how tiring it was to be the one doing the fucking; but the exertion of it all was certainly catching up to him now.

"Yeah," he breathed. "That was a lot."

"I mean. It was really good too," Kade interjected, opening his eyes just enough to look over at Florian through his eyelashes. "I don't know if I could handle this every single time, but... You know. It's on the table."

He smiled up at Florian as he said it: a shy, almost embarrassed sort of smile that made Florian's heart swell with affection. He leaned forward to try and kiss him, but couldn't quite reach—with a slight chuckle, Kade propped himself up so their lips met. The kiss was tired and slow, but still made Florian's cock twitch with weak interest, though he was certain he couldn't stay hard much longer even if he wanted to.

When they were cleaned up, Kade laid back down as Florian stood again at the foot of the bed, idly shifting his hips back and forth to feel the strange, foreign sensation of his cock swinging with the movement.

"Final verdict?" Kade teased, a tired, sated smile on his face. Florian laughed.

"It's weird," he said. "I don't think I like having balls. The rest of it is pretty good."

"I guess they are a liability," Kade chuckled. "You're lucky you can just decide not to have them."

"That's true." He hesitated. "And, um, you're sure you're okay? It doesn't hurt or anything?"

Kade laughed aloud at that, shaking his head. "I'm fine. It'll take a lot more than that for you to hurt me."

"Good," Florian said with a nod, and he crawled across the bed to curl up next to Kade. "Maybe we can, you know, switch off and stuff."

"Okay," Kade murmured, his voice a low rumble next to Florian's ear.

For a moment they laid quietly next to each other, then he asked softly, "Have you thought at all about when you want to go back to the Winter Court?"

Florian sighed, trying to ignore the cold feeling in his stomach that bubbled up at the words. While they didn't exactly have a strict itinerary to follow, there was still a lingering urgency that made him

uncomfortable. Much as he wanted to stay, he knew their time in the wolf kingdom could not go on much longer.

"Maybe a few more days," he said, his voice small. Kade was quiet, nodding silently.

"We can stay as long as you want," he murmured, but already he sounded drowsy and distant. Florian didn't reply. After a moment, Kade's breathing slowed into the deep, even rhythm of sleep.

The next morning was a little easier. Florian figured that was the best he could hope for, that if he could wake up each morning feeling just a little better, eventually he'd be back to normal. This time they actually went down to breakfast, joining the rest of Kade's family around the table just as Meriwa set out the last of the food.

"Oh! Look who's joining us," she quipped, though a relieved smile spread across her face as she spoke. At the head of the table, Kallik also looked visibly relieved to see them; and Florian realized with a slight shock of guilt that neither of them had gone to speak with him since they'd returned.

"I'm glad you're both feeling better," Kallik said. "I was worried. Bowen said you were hurt."

"I did also say he's okay now," Bowen interjected, and with a wry grin Kade nodded.

"I am okay now," he agreed. "Sorry we didn't check in with you sooner."

"Sorry," Florian echoed.

"No, no, don't apologize," Kallik said, waving his hand dismissively. "I understand. As long as you did what you set out to do, that's all that matters."

"We did," Kade said with a nod, sitting down at one of the two empty chairs that had been left for them.

For a moment everyone was quiet, looking between Kade and Florian, as if there were more they wanted to say. Yuka, who sat across from Florian, started to open his mouth to speak, but was interrupted as Kallik said, "Well, let's eat."

Meriwa started to pass around plates of food, and idle tableside chatter started up again. When Yuka finally did speak, it was to Kade, about how he and his friends had "scouted" through the forest while he and Florian were gone.

At the end of breakfast, Florian followed Kade back outside, and together they walked aimlessly along the length of the main road. A few other shifters stopped them occasionally to express their well-wishes, or their relief at seeing Kade, now whole and unharmed. When they reached the end of the road, where the last of the homes and buildings had tapered out, Kade continued to lead them into

the woods that surrounded the village. Florian hesitated for only a moment, glancing back at the snowy path, before following.

"I always feel better after a walk," Kade murmured, as Florian caught up to him. "Clears my head." "Are you feeling bad?" Florian asked, frowning up at him.

"I'm..." Kade started, then trailed off. His expression didn't change as Florian looked up at him, but his shoulders seemed to sag slightly. "I'm okay. It feels weird to be... doing this, all of this, without Jerah."

Florian's breathing quickened—definitely from the slight incline of their walk as they headed uphill, and not at the mention of his father.

"And I'm still worried about you," Kade said.

"I'm fine," Florian said quickly, though he couldn't meet Kade's eyes as he said it. Kade didn't reply for a long moment, and the only sound between them was the crunch of their footsteps atop the light layer of snow that seemed to be permanently dusted over every surface of the wolf kingdom.

"Florian," Kade murmured. His voice was soft, aggravatingly gentle, as if he had seen through every defense Florian had managed to put up. He looked away, his face burning with frustration.

"I'm *fine*," he repeated. Even without looking, he could feel how Kade's gaze lingered on him, the way his body tensed next to him.

He didn't respond, but they kept walking. The landscape around them was all the same, snow and trees; and after a little while, Florian's pounding heart relaxed to what felt like a normal pace. As they reached the peak of the first hill, Kade finally stopped, leaning against one of the thick evergreens that surrounded them to look up at the mountains ahead of them.

"There's a few trails through the mountains," Kade murmured, pointing. "You can get up to the top of these and see right where the Blight touches in the valley below, to the west. It's a weird view."

Florian nodded, following his gaze. The thought of making the ascent only to look down at the Blight itself seemed unsettling, almost bleak. But Kade didn't seem like he was about to start heading in that direction either, his gaze simply lingering on the mountain for a long while.

After a few minutes, when it didn't seem that Kade would be moving on anytime soon, Florian kicked some snow out of the way to make a tiny clear patch and sat down on the ground next to him.

"We should go back soon," he said, turning his head up to look at Kade. "Back to the Winter Court, I mean."

Kade looked down at him, a hint of tension crossing his brows. "Soon?"

"Yeah," Florian said. "I don't want Tatiana to be too worried about us, and... I mean, it's nice here, and I like it, but I think I would start feeling restless, I guess. We still have a lot to do, and a lot we don't know." He hesitated, unsure if he wanted to broach the topic just yet; but Kade nodded and spoke before he could continue.

"Whatever you want to do, Florian," he said. "I don't think it would hurt anything if we stayed a little longer. But it's your call."

Florian nodded, absently running his fingers through the snow. It was only ever a thin, light layer that melted away the moment it was on his fingers, leaving behind only a lingering cold sensation on his skin. He wondered if it ever snowed harder.

"Maybe tomorrow," he said. "Or the day after."

"The day after," Kade replied. "My dad will be mad if we leave in a hurry, I think."

"Okay," Florian agreed. "The day after tomorrow. I think I can just teleport us back the way I got us here."

Kade blinked down at him. "I still can't believe you can do that. I didn't think it was possible. No other fae can, at least not that I know of."

Florian shrugged. He didn't entirely understand it, either. "Seems like I have to have been there before for it to work, and I don't think many fae go anywhere in the Veil other than the Winter Court now. Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, I guess."

"A gift horse?" Kade repeated, the confusion obvious in his voice. Florian managed to laugh at that, grinning up at him.

"It's an Earth saying. Means not to scrutinize a gift too hard," he said.

"Do you usually give horses as gifts?" he asked, still sounding unsure.

"No, no," Florian laughed. "Well, maybe a long time ago. I guess it would have to be a really nice, expensive gift, when people still needed horses. It would be like getting a car today."

"Hmm," Kade hummed, unconvinced.

"Whatever," Florian chuckled. "You say weird things too. The whole time we've been here, half the people are like 'Wolf-God' this and 'Wolf-God' that."

"I don't say that," Kade said pointedly. "But I guess it could sound weird if you haven't heard it before."

"Is that what wolf shifters believe? In a Wolf-God?"

"It's a creation myth. Meant to explain how shifters came to be: there are animal gods that gave their power to small populations of fae, and that's how shifters were made," Kade said. "I don't know if anyone really believes it. It's just something people say. But no one says it in the Winter Court, so I dropped the habit pretty quickly."

This time it was Florian who only hummed in response. It occurred to him that he had no idea what the fae believed, if they even had a religion—though if wolf shifters had a creation myth, it would only make sense the fae would as well. He wondered what it was, and what Jerah might have thought of it all... He remembered at the funeral, before his memory got hazy, they had said something about his soul going back to the old magic—maybe that was what they believed. Pain swelled in his chest at the thought; he only let himself hold onto it for a moment before pushing it back down.

"So you don't think there really is a Wolf-God?" he asked. Kade snorted, making Florian glance up at him in surprise.

"Of course not," he said, shaking his head. "If there were any gods, they'd have done something about the Blight by now. They wouldn't just let their world die."

"Oh," Florian said. "Yeah, that... that makes sense."

For a moment they were both silent, then Kade crouched down, so they were eye level once more.

"Sorry," he said, his voice softer this time. "I don't mean to sound flippant or anything. People can believe whatever they want. I'm sure a lot of shifters really do believe in a Wolf-God. I just don't."

"That's fine," Florian said quickly. "I don't care. Most Earth religions aren't really that, uh, nice toward people like me. Like us. And Uncle August didn't seem to really believe in any religion either, so I just... don't really care about it."

"Don't most Earth religions not believe in magic anyway?" Kade asked, a hint of wry amusement in his voice.

"That's true," Florian laughed. "Of course Uncle August wouldn't have believed in any of it, then. He knew magic was real the whole time."

They moved on to lighter conversation, and by the end, Florian felt almost normal again. The cold was bracing, keeping him grounded. They were alone, and Kade seemed more open, his smiles and laughs coming more easily. Florian wondered what their relationship might be like if the pressure of saving the world weren't weighing on them so heavily. If it were anything like these sorts of quiet, stolen moments, he could only hope that they'd be done with it all sooner rather than later.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kallik took the news that they would be leaving in two days' time about as well as Kade had predicted. He was visibly grumpy at first, then insisted on hosting a big family dinner the night before to see them off.

"You're trying to save the world, after all," he said gruffly, his eyes flickering between Kade and Florian. "It's the least we can do for you both."

So the next day, what felt like half the wolf kingdom crowded into their dining room and spilled out into the rest of the family home. A few cousins, aunts, and uncles had shown up early to help cook, and still more turned up with their own dishes to offer; so by the time dinner was set to actually start, the long main table was overflowing with food, and a few smaller tables had been set up along the sides of the dining room to hold more of it. Extra seating was set up in the living room, even into the hallway that led to the kitchen, to make room for all the shifters that came to see them off.

Florian recognized a few of the visitors by sight now, though he didn't know all of their names; he knew many of Kade's cousins and other immediate family members, but there were clearly many more families that he hadn't met. Yet most of them seemed to recognize him easily—he supposed that was unavoidable, being the one outsider in such an insular community. But Kade was a steady presence next to him throughout the evening, soothing his nerves and stepping in easily every time the conversation moved toward them. It only served as another reminder of how different he seemed here. While he still wasn't one to initiate conversation, Kade responded readily to every greeting and question, and he was a welcome voice in any conversation.

"You've graced us with your presence, King Florian," Kallik said, loud enough everyone could hear, as the meal was drawing to a close. "We can only hope to host you again."

Florian bowed his head slightly and kept his eyes on Kallik, though he could feel everyone's gaze swinging to him. Beneath the table, Kade squeezed his thigh.

"I'm happy to be here," Florian said, a smile creeping across his face. "It's been great. I'd love to come back again."

Kallik nodded, serious and stern, and next to him Meriwa nodded as well, though a sly smile had crossed her features.

"I raise my glass to you, King of the Winter Court," Kallik said, lifting his glass. He had only water, but around him the other wolf shifters lifted their drinks in turn, some wine, some ale, some water, and some warm cider—a popular drink here, Florian had found, considering the cold climate. Politely, Florian raised his glass as well, lowering it to his lips as the shifters did the same.

All things considered, it had been a good reprieve from the Winter Court. Getting to know Kade's family had been its own kind of stress, but was nothing compared to the trip into the Blight. Aside from their grim purpose, it had felt almost like a vacation.

By the time the last few families were getting ready to leave, Florian was exhausted, so he and Kade snuck away before they would be missed. Neither had started packing just yet, but they hadn't brought much with them in the first place. It made the room that they shared still feel comfortable and lived-in, even on their last night. When they returned to the Winter Court, Florian knew that all his belongings there, miniscule as they were, would have been moved into what once had been his father's quarters, the biggest in the castle. It would feel far less like home than their little guest room in the wolf kingdom did now.

The thought of what they would need to do in the Winter Court—and after that—had been weighing on him for much of the evening. There was no easy, obvious way to bring up the two main reasons that Florian even wanted to speak with the hag, but to leave Kade in the dark seemed thoughtless at best, cruel at worst.

"Kade," he said quickly, before he could think better of it, or they got fully settled for bed. "There's, um, some things we should talk about before we go back to the Winter Court."

Kade glanced over at him from where he stood in front of their wardrobe with one hand in a drawer, his expression turning quizzical. "Sure," he said, gesturing for Florian to continue.

"It's about the stuff with the witch. The hag," he stammered. "There was some, uh, stuff that my dad and I had wanted to talk to her about, too, that I haven't really gotten the chance to explain to you yet."

"Oh," Kade said, the confusion still lingering on his face. "What is it?"

"There's two things," Florian continued, reaching for the Arrow that still sat on their table within the quiver. "Well, this one I guess I noticed on my own. My dad said that the Arrows are all supposed to say the same thing on them, but they have different inscriptions, and I don't know what that means."

"They're different? What do they say?"

"Well, this one says what Jerah said they would say," Florian said, pulling it out. "See? It says *I* pierce the heart of summer. But the first one we got says sacrifice instead of summer."

For a moment Kade was silent, looking down at the Arrow in Florian's hand, a blank expression on his face; whatever he was thinking, Florian could only guess. "And the others might say different things, too?" he finally asked, brows knitting together. Florian could only shrug.

"I don't know. Maybe," he said. "I think if anyone would know, or have at least a good guess, it would be this... hag."

"Okay," Kade said, nodding slowly. "That makes sense. It would be good to know for sure." He paused, watching as Florian carefully set the Arrow back into its case. "What's the second thing?"

Florian took his time putting the Arrow back into the quiver and gingerly setting it back on the table —still uncertain of how to say it, if he even wanted to say it at all.

"When we were still in the Winter Court," he finally started, doing his best to ignore the sense of nervous dread that radiated from his stomach as he spoke. "With the lessons with my dad. There was this one time he was telling me about the Summer Queen, Soleil, and I... I don't really know how to explain it. It was like I saw her, and like I—I knew something about her that I couldn't have possibly known. So after some guessing and testing, Jerah and I thought that maybe there's some... old Summer fae spirit that's, like, connected to me somehow. And maybe the hag can help figure out who, or why, or if that's even it at all."

For a long moment Kade was silent, his face once again going blank as he seemed to process and consider the information.

"That's the only time I felt anything," Florian rambled nervously, looking away from Kade. "And I don't really know what it means—Jerah said it's not that uncommon for a fae spirit to get, like, attached to something, and maybe it has something to do with this prophecy thing from the witch anyway, so..."

"And you're sure that's what it was?" Kade interrupted, finally speaking.

"Well, no," Florian said. "But that's what my dad thought, and it made sense, so..."

"Okay," Kade said. He gave a sigh and leaned against the bed, as he seemed to mull it over once more. "That's a lot, Florian. I mean, that seems..."

"Sorry I didn't tell you," Florian muttered. "I guess I just didn't know how to bring it up."

"No, I mean... That's heavy," Kade said. "That's a lot to be worrying about by yourself. I wish you would have told me sooner, I guess."

Florian's eyes burned with tears the moment he processed the words. "Yeah," he agreed, his voice wavering.

"Come here," Kade murmured, giving him a hug when he stepped closer. "I just want to help you, Florian. You know that. You don't have to do any of this alone."

"I know," he said, nodding against Kade's chest. While he did know it, there was a strange sense of relief when he heard Kade say it out loud. Everything had weighed so heavily on him; why hadn't he let Kade lighten the load even just a little bit?

"What we're trying to do is important. To everyone," Kade continued, still pressing Florian to him. "But I care about you. As a person. I want to help you. We're in this together, you know?"

Silently, Florian nodded again, his vision swimming. He was so sick of crying, yet the relief of Kade holding him so tightly—of telling him again that they were in it together, even though he'd heard it before—was so sweet that his throat burned with the effort of holding back his tears.

"And, I... I get we're maybe not really at the point I can say not to keep things from me," Kade said, and Florian could all but hear the wry smile in his voice as he spoke. "But I want you to know I won't keep secrets from you. And... I would appreciate it if you told me things too. So we can tackle it together."

"Okay," he agreed. "I didn't mean for it to be a secret, really. I just didn't know when to bring it up. Or how to say it."

"I know."

"Are you mad?"

Kade laughed. "I'm not mad. I've told you before. I'm just worried about you."

"I know," Florian murmured, pulling away just enough to look up at him. Kade didn't *look* mad; his brows were still pressed together in concern, but otherwise he looked just as calm as he sounded. Florian wasn't sure why he had expected him to be upset. Besides their only real scuffle after their first trip into the Blight, Kade had never so much as raised his voice toward him. Why had he been so worried that he'd be angry?

"I'm okay," Florian continued, pulling away to sit next to Kade at the edge of the bed. "I know you're worried about me. But I'm alright."

Kade only nodded, running his fingernails in a slow, soothing motion up and down the back of Florian's hand where it was pressed to the bed.

"Okay," he said, nodding. "I don't know if I totally understand all this. Will you walk me through exactly what happened?"

So Florian recounted the first time that it had happened: the flash of grief that had filled him when Jerah had explained the existence of Soleil's secretly human partner and his sudden death. He described seeing her, so quickly he could barely recall exactly how she looked in that moment, when Jerah had purposely tried to trigger any other memory or thought about her.

"That's basically it," he said, shrugging. "And that's the conclusion he came to. I don't know enough about all of this to be able to say if I think he's right or wrong, but I think it makes sense."

"Right," Kade agreed slowly. He was looking pensively down at the floor now, biting his lower lip between his teeth. "Well, it makes sense to go to the witch and ask. I just wish..." He trailed off, frowning before starting up again. "I would prefer it if we didn't have to go talk to this woman at all. Old magic is dangerous, and I'd rather not get involved. But I don't have any better ideas."

"Me neither," Florian said, shrugging. "It's what my dad thought we should do, so..."

"And I trust him. I trust you," Kade said, patting his shoulder. "We'll figure it out."

"You can really just... say it? And you'll be there?" Yuka asked suspiciously, as Florian and Kade were saying their goodbyes to the family the next morning.

"Well, yeah," Florian laughed.

"You can watch if you want," Kade teased. "If you don't believe him."

"I want to watch," the boy exclaimed.

"Sounds like a neat trick," Bowen remarked, standing behind Yuka with a faint grin. "Maybe you could learn how to do that, Yuka."

"No, only fae can do magic like that," Amka protested, frowning up at her older brother. "Don't tell him things that aren't true." Yuka scowled at her silently.

"Well, maybe we can take you next time," Florian said quickly, lifting a placating hand. "It's kind of uncomfortable, though. It sort of feels like someone smacking you in the back of the head and pushing you at the same time. You might not like it."

"Oh, stop distracting them," Meriwa said, touching Yuka's shoulder with half a comforting pat, and half a reprimanding swat. "And stop teasing your brother, Bowen."

"We'll see you next time, then," Kallik said, managing to get to his feet and placing a hand on Kade's back. "Maybe a longer visit next time?"

"Sure," Florian agreed, managing a slight smile. "When we won't be in as much of a hurry."

Kade nodded silently next to him, but shifted his weight to wrap his arm around Kallik in a hug.

"We'll keep you updated," he murmured, then released him. "Ready, Florian?"

"I'm ready," Florian said, glancing around at Kade's family once more. "Thanks again for letting me stay with you."

To his surprise, it was Meriwa who answered him. "No need to thank us. We're happy to have you, really. You'll always be welcome here."

"Oh," Florian said, feeling himself flush. While Meriwa had warmed up to him a bit in their time there, he hadn't expected such friendly words from her. "Um, thank you."

Eventually, they managed to extricate themselves from the ongoing goodbyes and side chatter; and when they finally found themselves alone in the courtyard of the family home, Florian grabbed Kade's wrist. He could feel the thrum of his pulse for a moment, until he slid his fingers down to lace their fingers together. It was still early enough that the road was empty.

"Ready?" Florian asked, looking up at Kade. The taller man nodded, looking around one last time. Maybe he was feeling wistful, or maybe he was just looking to see if anyone was watching them. His face was blank and hard to read; although Florian was starting to recognize his small expressions better, Kade could still keep his face perfectly unreadable whenever he wanted.

But when he looked back down at Florian, the corners of his mouth curved just a little into a tiny smile, and Florian smiled back up at him in return. He clasped Kade's bigger hand in both of his, focused his magic, and murmured, "We're back in the Winter Court."

There was that strange popping sensation, becoming more familiar now, then they were back in the Moon Garden. The brightness of the snow and daylight around them was abruptly replaced with the soft, perpetual twilight of the Winter Court. Florian sighed and released Kade's hand so he could nervously run his fingers through his hair. This would be the first time that he'd been in the Winter Court since his coronation—at least that he could remember—and he had little idea of what to expect.

"Guess we'd better head inside," he said wryly, glancing up at Kade. The other man reached for his hand again with that same slight smile, and together they walked through the garden and toward the castle.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Florian didn't think the Winter Court would ever really feel like home. Not for lack of trying, of course. Every fae that he saw was perfectly pleasant to him, and his aunt Tatiana was clearly glad to see him; but even as he walked through the halls at her side, Kade trailing behind at a polite distance, he felt much more like a guest than a resident.

"Well, you've had a much more eventful few weeks than we have," Tatiana was telling him with a wry laugh. "It's been business as usual here, to be honest."

"That's good," Florian said, nodding. "I'm glad that, you know, nothing has been too... weird, I guess. Power vacuums and all that."

"It helps that everyone knows who you are, now," she said softly, putting a hand on his shoulder. "It's good that Jerah introduced you to everyone when he did. Things could have been a lot more tumultuous if he hadn't."

He nodded, unsure of how to reply. Tatiana turned her head to look back at Kade.

"And how was everyone back at home, Kade?" she asked.

"Good," he said, eyes flickering between her and Florian. "My little brother had his first shift. And my dad is doing alright. Hanging in there."

"That's good news," she said, giving Florian a smile. "What did your mother think of Florian? I know she can be a little, hmm... abrasive."

Florian laughed and shook his head. "Yeah, she was kind of scary at first. But I think she liked me by the end."

"I think so too," Kade agreed, a hint of a smile on his lips. "Everyone did."

"Well, I'll leave you to settle and unpack," Tatiana said, as they arrived in the walkway that led to what had once been Jerah's quarters. She paused, lingering near the stairs as they went on ahead. "Florian, we can meet later this afternoon if you'd like, and let's plan to have dinner together?"

"Sure," he agreed with a nod.

Then they were alone in front of the double doors, and with a deep breath Florian reached for the handle and opened the door.

Most of Jerah's personal belongings had been cleared away. The layout of the room was the same, but the sheets on the bed had been changed to a plain, stark white set, and the wardrobe was mostly empty, save for the few outfits that Florian had acquired during his short time in the Winter Court. There were still the same plants in the windowsill, but most of Jerah's trinkets and decorations had been taken out. It didn't really look like Jerah's room anymore, but it certainly didn't look or feel like it belonged to Florian, either.

With a sigh he tossed his backpack down onto the ground, Kade following suit and setting down his belongings. He pulled the quiver that contained the Golden Arrow off his back with more care, setting it gingerly on the table; the first Arrow was not in here, but Florian knew that Tatiana had set it on the familiar display stand in what had once been Jerah's private study. He would have to ask if there were more like it, so the second one could be kept just as carefully.

"Still want to share a bed?" Florian asked, glancing up at Kade, who shot him an uncertain look.

"If you're okay with it," he replied.

"Okay, but I thought of something gross you should consider first."

Kade frowned, confused. "What?"

Florian pointed at the bed. "I was probably conceived there."

"Florian," Kade groaned, wrinkling his nose. But Florian laughed, shaking his head.

"Well, maybe not," he said between chuckles. "The sheets at least are different. I hope the mattress has been replaced since then, too. Sorry. I just thought of it and figured if I had to have that in my brain, so did you."

"Great," Kade said wryly, but he smiled as he said it. "I'll still share a bed with you if you want."

"Scandalous," Florian murmured, stepping closer to Kade. "What are we going to tell everyone?"

"That you're the king, and you can do whatever you want," Kade replied, his voice just as low.

Florian hesitated. "Do you think Tatiana knows?"

"Probably," Kade said, shrugging. "She's pretty... perceptive, more than she seems at first. She didn't say anything about taking my things to my room or anything. I'm sure she knows."

"Hmm. I guess you're probably right," Florian said. "That's... weird, I think."

Kade let out a bark of a laugh. "Not any weirder than my parents. It's fine. Just means we don't have to bring it up."

"I guess that's true." Florian looked around the room once more. "To be honest, I don't want to stay very long. I don't really like being here, still. I'll unpack just enough to do laundry and stuff, but let's not stay more than a few days."

Kade hesitated, looking him over. "We don't even know how to get to the hag, though."

"Well, I'll go over my dad's notes again. And we do have it marked on the map, at least," Florian said. But from the way Kade looked at him, he knew that he wasn't convinced.

"We don't need to stay for long," Kade relented after a few beats of uncertain silence. "But we shouldn't rush anything either, Florian. I don't want you to hurt yourself or anything."

"I'll be fine," Florian said quickly, frowning. Everyone seemed to think he was so fragile. "Really. I just want to get this done. The sooner we can get answers, the sooner we can tackle everything else, you know?"

"I understand," Kade agreed, nodding slowly. "I just... I don't know. This is a lot you're trying to handle all at once. It's okay to go a little slower."

Florian shook his head. "I'm not saying it's not. I'm just saying this is the timeline I want to go with."

"Alright, alright," Kade relented, holding up a placating hand—Florian's tone had become more agitated than he'd meant. "I'll follow your lead. You know I will. I just want you to know my concerns. But it's up to you."

"Thank you," Florian said, his voice smaller now. "I know. You keep telling me you're worried about me. But I'm okay. I'll tell you if I'm not."

Kade looked at him with an expression that he couldn't quite read, but Florian got the distinct impression that Kade didn't entirely believe him.

"Anyway," he murmured, looking away. "We should start unpacking, I guess."

"Wait," Kade said, grabbing his shoulder before he could reach over to grab his backpack. "Lay down."

"What? Why?" he asked, frowning. A slight flush crept up Kade's face—Florian was starting to recognize that, too, and felt himself blush in return.

"I want to—to suck your cock again," Kade stammered, glancing away. "I've been thinking about it since... since the other day."

"Oh," Florian replied, blinking. That had been the last thing on his mind, but it had certainly been nice. "Are—Are you sure?"

Kade grinned at him. "Of course I'm sure."

"Okay," he stammered, then went to unbutton his jeans. Walking around with a floppy dick was weird, so he hadn't kept it around after he had fucked Kade with it. But he thought of it now, felt it swell between his legs—and as he pulled his pants down, there was a slight euphoric rush of seeing the bulge in his underwear.

"God, you're so fucking hot," Kade muttered, pushing him onto his back. "I just want you all the time."

Heat flooded him at that, and Kade's fingers, hooking around the waistband of his underwear and yanking them down, made him gasp. This time he was already hard, his cock aching to be touched. He stifled a moan with the back of his hand as Kade wrapped his fingers around him.

"Oh, fuck," he yelped as Kade's mouth surrounded him, hot and wet. Every instinct in him wanted to buck his hips up into Kade's mouth—to shove the length of himself as deep as Kade could take him until he felt the back of his throat. Kade could take it—he knew he could—but part of him thought that if he was too rough, too aggressive, that he might never want to suck his cock again, and *that* would be a tragedy.

Kade hummed softly around him, sending faint vibrations tingling up his spine. Florian ran his hands through his short hair, fingers curling against his scalp. Kade looked up at him with tangerine eyes full of heat. He made a soft, encouraging noise in the back of his throat, his head still as his tongue teased the head of his cock; and cautiously, Florian pushed his hips slowly into his mouth.

Heat and suction enveloped him as he pressed all the way to the back of Kade's throat, his head falling back and his eyes squeezing shut. His hips moved of their own accord, sliding slowly almost all the way out of Kade's mouth, before pushing back in. His hands trailed from the back of Kade's head along his ears to his jaw, feeling where his cheeks were hollowed. Whatever he lacked in experience, he more than made up for in enthusiasm.

For not having been horny at all only a few minutes ago, he was unbearably close already. Kade's mouth was warm and tight around him; and even on his back, there was a particular sense of power that he felt from Kade sucking him off—fully dressed and with no indication that he expected anything in return. It was almost addicting, keeping Florian torn between the intense desire to finish in his mouth, and wanting to keep Kade's head bobbing on his cock for hours.

"Kade," he panted, watching his cock disappear in and out of his mouth. "Fuck—I'm really close

Kade's eyes flickered up to his again. He had meant it as a warning, but Kade seemed to have taken it as a challenge, sucking him harder as his tongue swirled against the head of his cock. With a cry,

Florian felt himself come. The orgasm tore through him, making his muscles tense and quiver, barely able to hold his eyes open, so he could watch as Kade swallowed down his release. His fingers dug into the back of Kade's neck, and distantly he worried if he had hurt him; but the vast majority of his focus was consumed with the pleasure, burning like fire, along the length of his cock.

After, his hands fell weakly to his waist, and he panted with exertion, only to yelp as Kade released him from his mouth.

"Fuck," he gasped, and watched through half-lidded eyes as Kade smirked down at him, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Fuck, Kade."

Kade shifted so they were laying next to each other, gathering Florian up into his arms with no resistance. Their lips pressed together, and Florian moaned at the taste of himself on Kade's lips.

"Do you—should I—?" he stammered out, barely able to string his words together, much less form sentences. He felt Kade grin against him, a huff of breath against his lips as the other man stifled a laugh.

"I'm alright for now," he said, pulling away to look down at Florian with an entirely self-satisfied expression. "I like the thought of sending you off to your business after this. But when you get back..."

Florian nodded, still dizzy and relaxed. He was utterly spent and probably would not have been able to do much more than just lay there—though the thought of Kade fucking his mouth had a certain appeal—so the promise of more later was all at once comforting and arousing.

"I guess I should start unpacking then," Florian managed, after taking a moment to catch his breath. Kade chuckled again from where his face pressed to Florian's shoulder. Everything felt a little more normal at the sound of Kade's soft laugh; strange and unfamiliar as everything was, Kade's presence was grounding.

"I can unpack for us," Kade teased, bringing him back to reality. "You shouldn't keep Tatiana waiting."

"It hasn't been that long, has it?" Florian protested, only to groan as he glanced up at the clock. He had a bit of time still, but not as much as he thought. "Well, shit."

"Go on," Kade grinned, sitting up and pulling Florian with him. "Maybe clean up a little first. Try not to look like you just got a blowjob, you know?"

"And whose fault is that?" Florian countered, but couldn't stop himself from laughing as he said it. He stumbled to his shaky feet and looked around for his long-since discarded underwear.

He ended up being only a few minutes late, though at first glance he didn't see Tatiana in the library.

"Is that you, Florian?" her voice called out from behind one of the bookshelves, somewhere further into the room.

"I'm here," he answered, and the woman stepped out to meet him. "Sorry I'm late."

"I didn't even notice," she said, waving her hand as she sat down at one of the tables. Florian sat across from her. "Not much has happened, so I don't think this will need to take too long. But I made sure everything from the funeral and the coronation ceremony was paid, so all the invoices are taken care of."

Florian nodded uncomfortably. "Anything you need me to take care of?"

Tatiana shook her head. "Not exactly. Though I think it would help morale if you held some kind of dinner party while you were still here. Everyone in town is fairly used to the king being gone for stretches of time, but I think they'd like to start getting to know you better, too. Nothing major, we could invite just the heads of the main families."

He managed to stifle the groan that the words elicited in him before it could escape his throat. She wasn't wrong, of course; but he was antsy to leave the Winter Court, and this would only be another delay.

"Okay," he relented, leaning back in his chair with a sigh. "Tomorrow, maybe?"

"We can do that," Tatiana agreed, scribbling down a note on a stack of papers in front of her. "I know you don't mean to stay long, but I think it would help assuage everyone. There's no unrest, or at least not anything concerning, but I think a bit of return to normalcy will help quite a bit."

"I understand," he said.

"And... I wanted to ask you something maybe a bit more personal," she said slowly. Florian glanced at her with apprehension, but the moment their eyes met he was absolutely certain that she was going to ask about him and Kade. "I was wondering if you—"

"Ugh, yes," he groaned, pressing his hands to his face. "God, everyone keeps asking us. Is it that obvious?"

Tatiana blinked owlishly at him for a moment, then a slow, hesitant smile spread across her face. "Well, ah, I was going to ask if you'd been sleeping alright. You look tired."

Instantly, Florian's face was burning hot with embarrassment. "Oh," he muttered, looking down at his feet. "Um, I mean—well, a little, but not really. But it's okay. I'm okay."

He couldn't bring himself to look back up at Tatiana; but thankfully when she spoke again, her voice sounded nearly as awkward as he felt. "I'll have one of the spectral servants bring you some tea before bed. It's been helping me sleep at night. Goodness knows you need it more than I do."

He could only nod, eyes still locked on his feet. Whatever she might have thought about him and Kade, he had certainly given it away now.

"Did, um... Did you mean you and Kade?" she asked lightly, and miserably he nodded again. "I see. Well, I had considered the possibility, but..."

There was a beat of silence, then to Florian's surprise, something like a giggle broke the tension between them.

"You know, when Kade first moved here," Tatiana began, and when Florian managed to look up at her, she had a hand pressed to her face in a vain attempt to cover a smile. "Jerah used to tell me he hoped Kade would find someone here, hoping one of the fae in the village might catch his eye, because a marriage between us and the wolf kingdom would only help things. So I can only imagine he'd approve."

Florian shifted uncomfortably, but still managed to smile nervously in return. Jerah had teased him more than once about his and Kade's dynamic; he was sure Tatiana was right. Maybe he had even suspected more between them than he had let on. "I mean—I wouldn't say anything is that serious—but, you know. We get along pretty well, so..." He shrugged and looked away. "I don't know if you had his old room set up, but, um, he's probably just going to stay with me in my new room."

An amused grin crossed her face. "That's fine."

"Is, um, is that all?"

Tatiana pursed her lips slightly, considering. "I did want to ask if you had an idea of how long you'd be staying, what your plans are for now. I understand you still want to go see this witch?"

"Yes," Florian said, nodding in relief now that the conversation had moved on. "I was thinking we could stay a few days. Enough to rest a bit and figure out how to get there, and then head out." He paused—it occurred to him that he hadn't asked Tatiana if she knew anything about the hag, or about why Jerah had wanted to go see her in the first place. "Do you... know anything about her? The hag? We're not entirely sure how to find her."

"Hmm." She paused, considering the question. She and Jerah did not look especially alike, but some of their expressions were unsettlingly similar—the thoughtful expression on her face reminded Florian very much of his father. "I've never been to see her. But I know Jerah visited her at least once. Kallik didn't have any information for you? He's the one who went there with Jerah."

"He remembered a little bit, but..." Florian shrugged. Tatiana gave him a knowing nod. "We have an idea of what to do once we track it down. We just don't really know how exactly to get there. Jerah had a map that was marked, but it's not super exact. And getting lost is the last thing I'd want."

"Of course," Tatiana agreed, pressing a hand to her chin thoughtfully. "I think Jerah might have brought something back from his visit with the hag? It was so long ago, I barely remember. But I think there was some kind of trinket... maybe a bracelet? I'll have to sort through some of his things to see if I can find it. Maybe that would help."

"I think anything would help at this point," Florian agreed, nodding. "Whatever it is, if you can find it, I'd appreciate it."

"I'll do my best," she said, nodding. "I guess it's good all his things are packed together. Should make it easy to find."

A beat of uncomfortable silence passed between them, both clearly absorbed in their thoughts. Much as she seemed to be holding everything together, Jerah's death must have been difficult for her. They had been close, and as far as Florian was aware, they were each other's only family other than himself. Before he could dwell on it too long, though, Tatiana took in a deep breath and stood abruptly.

"I'd better get to it, then," she said briskly. She managed a soft smile down at Florian. "I'm glad you're back. I'll see you at dinner."

"See you," Florian echoed, and he watched her go. In the weeks since Jerah's death and his own coronation, she had been more withdrawn in some ways, but more openly affectionate with him in others. It was strange, but also entirely understandable. From what he could tell, Tatiana didn't exactly seem like an overly warm person, but she did seem to care about him—and not just as the Winter King or the center of a prophecy, but as her nephew, her last living relative, her family.

Distantly, he wondered how she and Jerah had grown to be so different, and what his grandparents must have been like. He wondered if he had other family somewhere, maybe relatives of his mother—August had never mentioned grandparents on his side. For all Florian knew, whether on Earth or the Veil, Tatiana and August were truly his only family left.

The next day, a few fae from the village joined Florian, Kade, and Tatiana for dinner. It was a much smaller affair than the feast Jerah had thrown the night before they'd left on their first excursion into the Veil; but it still felt strange to have new people in the dining hall. The fae that joined them were the heads of some of the older families in the village, whose lineages within the Winter Court could be traced back to well before the Nova Blight took hold of the Veil.

"Anthurium, Camiss, Imryll, and Lavender," Tatiana introduced, gesturing to each of the four visiting fae in turn—two men and two women—each with that familiar, ageless sort of look about

them, and dark hair and eyes similar to those of Tatiana and himself. "It's my pleasure to introduce you to King Florian. We welcome you."

"King Florian," said Anthurium, stepping forward—the man was a bit stouter than the others with a well-kept dark beard. Florian recognized him: the man had made a point to say hello to him during the feast Jerah had held before they'd left, and he'd been front and center amongst the gathered crowd of fae during Jerah's funeral. "Good to see you again. I'm glad to see you've returned safely from your travels. Taking after your father, I see!"

Florian managed to smile, and the three other fae laughed politely. "It's good to see you too. Please, everyone, sit down."

Conversation was polite, if stilted. The family dinners they'd been having with Kade's relatives had helped Florian figure out how to act in these kinds of larger meals, at least, so he went through the motions. He listened as each of the guests introduced themselves to him and they got to know each other.

He had learned that most of the residents of the Winter Court were artisans; because of the Winter Court's small and isolated economy, bartering was of much more value than money. Most fae passed their time making and crafting things, growing food, or maintaining livestock. The older families, while technically having a greater wealth than other families and townsfolk, didn't own much more land or do anything very different from their fellow fae. At the very least that made them easier to talk to than Florian had expected, and by the end of the meal he was even enjoying himself a bit.

Kade was as standoffish as ever, mostly silent with only a few interjected comments here and there. But occasionally their feet would touch under the table, and Florian would smile indulgently at him to see the slight flush that rose in his face, invisible to everyone but him.

"I see you couldn't get rid of Jerah's ward," Imryll, the older of the two women, remarked as appetizers were set out. She smiled openly as she said it, though, and Florian could see a tiny smirk on Kade's face in answer. "Kade, I'm surprised your father didn't haul you back to the wolf kingdom the moment he heard the news."

"Kallik's far too devoted to Jerah and all of the Winter Court to do such a thing," the other man, Camiss, interjected. It seemed that the strong union between the wolf kingdom and the Winter Court, between Jerah and Kallik, was well-known.

"That's true," Tatiana agreed, and Kade nodded. "We're happy to host Kade as long as he'd like to remain. His service to the Winter Court is indispensable."

"Indispensable," Florian repeated, meeting Kade's eyes. That same tiny blush rose in Kade's face, and he glanced away, but a self-satisfied smile remained lingering on his features for a long while afterward.

Tatiana effortlessly took the lead for most of the conversations, adding comments or questions at just the right time to keep the momentum going. Florian knew she was good at running things in his absence, but to see firsthand how effortlessly she seemed to socialize, and how friendly they all were to her, made him fully understand why his father had seemed so glad to keep her around.

Lavender, the younger of the two fae women, was quiet for most of the meal. But she and Tatiana seemed to have a particularly friendly rapport; and after a glass of wine she was a little more outspoken, though she mainly addressed Tatiana, rather than Florian or the others. A few times Florian noticed her looking at Tatiana with an expression that was... affectionate and familiar, in a way, but mostly unreadable; and Florian realized that he knew very little of his aunt's personal life outside of the work she did for him and the Court.

He remembered Meriwa's words to him at their first meeting, how he had left Tatiana to do all his work for him, and a tiny pang of guilt pulsed through his chest. He would really have to put in the time to get to know her better, and eventually lighten her workload with his own efforts. Once everything had settled down a bit more, though, he was sure he'd have nothing but time.

Once dessert had been served, and the last round of drinks were had, Florian couldn't exactly say that he was glad about their decision to host the dinner, but he did understand Tatiana's reasons and the need to meet his people. At the beginning of the meal, the four other fae seemed stiff and unsure of him, but by the end, they smiled and chatted with him as if they had always known of him. Somehow he'd managed to win them over, it seemed; and judging from the soft smile that lingered on Tatiana's face, she too approved of how the evening had gone.

Finally, the evening drew to a close, Kade rose to escort their guests out of the castle, and only Florian and Tatiana remained seated at the table. She smiled softly at him from across the table, and he smiled hesitantly back.

"I think that went alright," he said, shrugging, and she stifled a slight chuckle behind one hand.

"I think so too," she said. "You did very well. Camiss in particular has been... rather vocal in his uncertainty about the exchange of power. Tonight should have helped assuage some of that." She reached across the table, hand outstretched in a decidedly maternal gesture. It took a moment for Florian to process, but after a moment, he hesitantly reached out and placed his hand in hers.

"I know this has been a big adjustment for you," she said softly, squeezing his hand. "But you've done very well, Florian. Jerah would be proud. I know I am."

Florian blushed at the affirming words, but forced himself to meet her eyes. They were a soft periwinkle blue, quite dissimilar to his and Jerah's.

"Thank you," he said, swallowing hard. "I, um... I really appreciate your help in all this too. I couldn't do it without you. Really."

Tatiana's smile had gradually widened as he spoke, and she gave his hand another hard squeeze.

"I appreciate that," she replied, before releasing his hand to reach instead for her glass of wine, pressing the last sip to her lips. "I love being here, Florian, and I enjoy what I do, but it's always nice to be appreciated." For a moment she was silent, her eyes becoming slightly misty, distant and unfocused, as she looked at a point on the far wall. "I know we're still learning about each other, but you're my nephew. Jerah's son. I love you, and I want to help you however I can."

Florian felt himself blushing, but nodded earnestly. It was the most affectionate thing he could recall Tatiana ever saying to him before.

"And I..." She trailed off, shaking her head. "Well... I know there's only so much I can do for you, Florian, and in the end you have to go out and face your fate, and see it through. Just... Please be careful. I can handle the Winter Court and keep things running here, but I don't think I could handle losing you and Jerah both."

The warm affection that had first risen in his chest at her words turned tight and cold, not for what she said, but for what was to come and the dread that accompanied it. He nodded again, but could tell from the way she looked over at him that his sudden change in countenance had not gone unnoticed.

"I—" he started, his voice cracking. He cleared his throat. "I know. I'll do my best."

"I know you will," she said softly; and when he looked up at her again, he knew that she somehow understood how she had added to the weight of it all pressing down on him. Her next words were kind, as if trying to ease his burden. "And Kade's with you. I know how capable he is. It won't be easy, Florian, but I believe in you. We all do."

He knew it was meant to be reassuring, but it didn't make him feel much better. Luckily, Kade returned at that moment, striding through the far door into the dining hall with a sigh.

"Sorry that took so long," he said, coming to sit down next to Florian. "They're all... chatty."

Tatiana laughed. "They are. Sorry you had to be the scapegoat this time, Kade."

Kade waved his hand dismissively—but his eyes were on Florian, his brows furrowing just enough that Florian could tell that he was concerned. "It's fine. Everything okay here?"

"Yes," Florian said with a firm nod, before Tatiana could speak. "We were just... Well, we were talking about my dad."

Kade's eyes softened, and he placed a hand on Florian's back, running a slow, soothing motion up and down his spine. But he was silent, and after a moment, Florian sucked in a steadying breath and stood to his feet.

"Thank you again for setting all this up," he said to Tatiana, gesturing at the long table. "I think I'm going to go to bed."

She nodded. "Goodnight."

"I'll go with you," Kade added quickly, standing as well; and together they walked out of the dining hall and back up to his room. At least there, he felt a little less vulnerable.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

There was still the problem of how exactly they would get to the hag. Florian had spent most of the past day poring over his father's notes, rereading everything Jerah had written about the hag on the slim chance that he'd missed something. He skimmed all his other notes as well, looking for any other mention of where she was, or how to reach her, hoping for any other information that they might need.

But it wasn't looking promising, and as the days passed it seemed more and more likely that they would just have to go in blind. All they really had was the mark on the map, Kallik's half-remembered offering, and Tatiana's promise to look for more information.

"I feel like I've read the same page seven times already," Florian groaned, rubbing both hands over his face. He and Kade were sequestered up in the study, Kade sitting at one of the small tables with papers spread out in front of him, and Florian curled up in one of the plush chairs with a stack of notes on the end table beside him. Kade glanced over at him with a similarly exasperated look on his face, though a hint of a small, amused smile twitched at the corners of his mouth.

"Take a break, then," he said simply, and Florian shook his head.

"I feel like I've read *all* of this seven times," he said, gesturing at the stack of papers. While Jerah's handwriting was relatively tidy, at that moment he thought that he would be glad to never have to read anything in the same small, slanted script again. He didn't think that he had ever read so much in his life.

He glanced back over at Kade miserably, watching as the other man's countenance changed from teasing and tired to more serious, almost concerned.

"You really don't think there's anything else?" Kade prompted, and Florian grimaced. He didn't think so, but to say they should give up wasn't entirely appealing, either.

"I don't know," he settled on, shaking his head. "I guess there could be. But I don't want to waste time on it either."

Kade sighed, leaning back in his chair and looking over the pile of papers in front of him.

"You're probably right," he said. "Let me just keep looking for today. If we can't find anything by the end of the day, then we'll leave it. It's not like we're leaving tomorrow or anything. Does that sound okay?"

He supposed Kade was right. Even if they stopped right then, it would still take at least a day or two till they were ready to leave, enough time to pack and sketch out a path on the map they had. While he was sick of looking at the papers, if Kade wanted to keep going, he certainly wouldn't stop him.

"You don't need to ask me for permission," Florian said, shaking his head. "That's fine. I'm done with this for now, but if you want to keep looking, go ahead."

"What will you do now?" Kade asked. The question made him pause, lips pressed together as he considered it.

"Hmm," he said. "I'll see if Tatiana found anything. And maybe..." He frowned, remembering how Kallik had told them that they'd need to bring an offering, something sentimental. "And maybe figure out what I'll offer the hag when we get there."

Kade winced, as if only now remembering that detail. "Good idea. I guess I should think about that too."

"I guess I'll see you at dinner, then?" Florian asked, a tiny thrill of nervousness rising in his chest as he said it. He and Kade had been all but inseparable since... Well, even before they left for Earth. They had barely been apart from the moment they had decided to stay together. It seemed silly to be nervous about leaving him now, when they would see each other in a few hours; but it really would be the longest that they'd been apart since before his coronation, since before his father had died. It didn't make sense for it to feel significant, but it was unsettling all the same.

"Yeah," Kade said with an easy nod, seeming not to share his distress and looking back down at the paper before him. "I'll see you then."

Florian hesitated, then stepped closer to Kade instead of heading for the door. The other man glanced back up in surprise, and Florian leaned down to kiss him when he did. He felt Kade smile against his lips, and it eased some of the tension in his chest.

"I had to give you a goodbye kiss first," he said softly when they pulled away, and this time Kade laughed.

"You're cute," he said, shaking his head as he glanced back down at the table with a shy, flustered grin. Florian smiled in return, standing up straight with a sense of relief, or something like it. Lately,

he had too often only been able to feel anxious, or nervous, or okay at best. It was nice to have something soft and light between them now.

"Go on," Kade urged him, still grinning. "The more you distract me the less I can look through."

Florian laughed, but took a step back. "Okay. I'll see you later."

He left the library feeling lighter than he had in weeks.

But finding Tatiana proved to be a harder task than he first thought, and he had looped the castle twice before finally arriving in the kitchens, where she was talking with one of the workers. From what Florian could overhear, it seemed as though they were discussing what ingredients were on-hand, and what they were expecting to receive the next week.

"Oh, Florian," Tatiana said, as she noticed him poking his head through the door. "What are you looking for?"

"You," Florian answered, stepping inside. The worker, a fae woman who looked about the same age as him—though it was hard to tell with fae—gave a respectful nod as he approached, then took a step back. "Um, I was wondering if you had found anything from Jerah, from, um, what we talked about with getting to the witch."

Tatiana blinked. "Oh! I nearly forgot. Yes, actually, I did find something. Here, come with me." She turned to the woman. "I'll be back in just a moment, Letty." The woman nodded, her eyes lingering on Florian, but Tatiana was already turning to go, so he followed.

Tatiana led him upstairs to her room. He stopped at the doorway, uncertain if he should follow her, realizing he'd never seen her room before. It was on the same floor as his own, but far on the opposite end of the foyer. She glanced back at him from where he lingered in the doorframe and laughed.

"You can come in," she said, waving her hand, and awkwardly Florian stepped inside. Her room had much more personality than he was expecting; where Jerah's room had been plain and practical, hers was clearly lived in and well-loved. The room was full of plants with several shelves set up around the room to hold them all, and some hanging on walls and from the ceiling. Books and other trinkets were scattered between the plants as well, and even the sheets on her bed had a delicate pink floral pattern.

"Here," Tatiana said, and his attention focused back on her. She had reached for a jewelry tray on a dresser near her bed, and from within she lifted up a pendant. It was on a silver chain, and at the end a dark, rough-cut stone dangled. It looked almost black, but when the light from Tatiana's open

window caught it, a hint of dark purple flashed from its gleaming surface. "Jerah said the hag gave each of them these. It shrouded them against the Blight for a time. I don't think it still works, though."

She held it out for Florian to take. He grabbed it by the stone, letting the chain fall against his hand as he took it. Looking it over, it seemed quite plain. But as he focused on it, he could faintly sense the thrum of dormant magic beneath its surface, like a distant heartbeat. It didn't seem like enough for it to actually function, but he thought maybe it could be recharged somehow—if the pendant truly could shroud its wearer, then it would certainly come in handy, but it wasn't exactly what he had hoped she would find.

"Could be worth using to track down the location," Tatiana offered as he studied it in silence. "Sometimes finding someplace is easier if you have something from there. So it could help if you're going to try magical tracking."

Florian blinked, unaware that was even a possibility; but he supposed with fae magic anything was theoretically possible, if he could phrase it correctly. Maybe it would be helpful, but it wasn't the kind of help that he had been looking for.

"I'll take anything that I can get at this point," Florian said, pocketing the necklace and hoping his disappointment wasn't too apparent on his face. "Thank you, Tatiana."

"You're welcome," she said. "If I find anything else, or think of something before you leave, I'll let you know."

Florian was so glad to see Kade at dinner that he didn't think to ask if he had found anything until long afterward, when they had gone back up to their room. Kade was just emerging from the bath, hair still damp and a towel around his hips.

"So did you find anything after all?" Florian asked, as he sat up from where he had been lounging in bed. The slight grimace that crossed his face was all the answer Florian needed.

"No," Kade sighed, opening his wardrobe and letting his towel fall to the ground. He had never had any qualms of being naked around Florian even in entirely non-sexual contexts—it was unsettlingly intimate, but he wouldn't complain either. "I skimmed through as much as I could, but I think you're right. We found everything he had to say about the hag, and he didn't say anything about the best way to get there, or what he saw on the way. Seems like he was so frustrated at having to get all the shifter kings together that the actual journey was easy enough to forget about in comparison."

"Tatiana gave me this," Florian said, lifting up the pendant from where he had set it on their bedside table so Kade could see it. "She said my dad got it from the hag when he went there. I guess it's supposed to have its own shroud on it, so they could go home through the Blight. But the magic's worn out."

"May I?" Kade asked. He had a pair of shorts in one hand, and with the other he reached for the pendant. Florian handed it to him, watching as the taller man turned the stone over in his hand, and seeing it glint that dark, almost-black purple in the faint twilight that shone in through the window. After a moment Kade passed it back to him.

"Doesn't seem like much," he sighed, meeting Florian's eyes. "I guess we should start planning how we're going to do this. Or..." He hesitated, glancing away. "I don't think you'll like this idea. But we can just skip going to the hag and head for the dragon kingdom to find the next Arrow."

Florian blinked. The idea of not going to the hag at all had honestly not occurred to him. It had been something that Jerah seemed so certain was necessary, but without him, getting there was going to be much harder. They *could* just move on to the next Arrow marked on the map instead; after all, there was no guarantee that the hag knew anything at all about what they wanted to ask her, or if the answers would actually be helpful to them, even if she did know.

But... If the hag had answers, he wanted to know, even if it wouldn't directly help them. Florian thought of the brief flash he'd seen of the Summer Queen, Soleil, and he wanted more than anything to *know*—to know whose memory was in his head, what connection he had to her. He knew that when his curiosity burned the way it did now, it wouldn't stop until he had the answer.

"No, I still want to go," Florian replied, and Kade nodded, a slight smile twitching at the corner of his lips.

"I thought you'd say that," he sighed, and sat down on the bed next to Florian. "If that's what you want, that's what we'll do. But it's just going to be more dangerous. We won't have any idea of what to look for, or what to expect along the way."

"That's okay," Florian said, suddenly feeling full of resolve. "We know enough to figure it out. We can do it."

Kade laughed indulgently. "If you say so."

Over the next few days they prepared to set out into the Blight once more, making as much of a plan as they could with what little knowledge they had. While the hag's home was marked on the map, the circle that marked it encompassed an area that would take days to fully scout. Worse, the map itself was from before the Blight, so they had little idea of what to expect in the wilderness, or how

different the landscape might be from what the map described. There was no guarantee that the road marked on the map would still exist in the Blight.

It would be slow going, as it would just be the two of them once again, and Florian was unsure if he would be able to maintain the shroud and speed up their pace as well. Between the two the shroud was, of course, far more important, so they would likely just have to walk. But if Florian couldn't speed them up, this journey would be the longest that they'd ever been in the Blight all at once.

"Well, at least we've got something of an eject button," Florian sighed, as they were determining how much food they would need to bring. On foot, it would take nearly three weeks to arrive.

"A what?" Kade asked, looking at him blankly. Florian laughed.

"Like an emergency exit," he said. "In case we run out of food. It would suck having to do it over again, but I could always just poof us back here if shit starts going sideways."

"Sideways?" Kade asked, frowning.

"I mean if it goes bad."

"Sideways is bad?"

"Er, no—I guess it's just a phrase. You know what I mean."

Kade laughed, shaking his head. "You say such funny things."

They planned to set out in two days, giving them enough time to pack everything they would need, as well as enjoy a little more rest and relaxation before heading out once more. Florian slept in as late as he could and ate whatever he felt like having, knowing that the next several weeks would be quite unpleasant in comparison.

The day before they would be heading out, Kade asked him,

"Want to spar?"

And so they ended up down in the Moon Garden once again. It was a little unsettling to be back there, where they had once arrived with Jerah's body—Florian kept his gaze away from the spot where they had knelt with him, and Kade seemed to want to avoid that part of the courtyard as well. They stayed near its perimeter, where it met the stone path that led out and into the rest of the gardens.

The practice sword in Florian's hands was familiar—it had really only been a few weeks since they'd last been here sparring, barely over a month. It felt like much longer.

"Ready?" Kade asked, stretching his arms in front of his chest. Florian held his practice sword in front of him in a defensive stance and nodded. When Kade swung at him, it was with far less force than he expected. They exchanged blows almost idly at first, each swinging slow enough that the other could easily knock the strike away, pacing around the courtyard as they did.

"This is hardly practice," Florian teased. Something glinted in Kade's eyes at the goading remark, a slight hint of the competitive spirit that he had only occasionally seen from Kade.

"I'm going easy on you," Kade answered, and his next swing had more force behind it.

Their practice slowly escalated until Florian realized how hard and fast they were swinging at each other, and now he was barely managing to keep Kade from hitting him—an accomplishment that made him grin when it registered, but was distracting enough that his next upswing was too slow. Finally, Kade's practice sword smacked into his bicep.

"Gotcha," he teased, and Florian laughed, idly rubbing the spot where the sword had hit. It stung a little, but he was getting more and more used to it now.

They sparred for a little longer, finally stopping to take a break when they were both sweaty and breathing hard.

"You know," Florian panted, sitting cross-legged on the stone floor. "I had hoped to spend most of this time *relaxing*."

"This is relaxing," Kade shrugged. Florian laughed, shaking his head, but not bothering to respond. They both sat there catching their breath for a long while, until finally Kade said, "I was thinking about those panther creatures from before."

Florian's heart all but plummeted; he had been able to mostly stop thinking about the Blighted shifters, but the mention of them brought up all the guilt and discomfort that he had regarding their whole terrible trip all over again.

"What about them?" he asked, trying to keep his tone as light and casual as possible.

"Well," Kade said, and he scrubbed a hand through his hair. "I was thinking about how when you shifted into your wolf form, you had to touch me first. And you touched those panther shifters, so... I wonder if you could shift into a panther now, too."

Florian bit his lip, considering. The thought had crossed his mind before: both with the panther shifter and the strange mountain lion-like beasts that they had encountered on their first trip into the Blight. He had thought it might be possible, but hadn't tried.

"Maybe," he said, shrugging. "But does it matter? I'll just use my wolf form if I need to."

"Sure," Kade replied. "I just thought it might be good to know if you could do it at all."

"You think I should try it?"

"I just think it would be good to know for sure."

"Hmm," Florian let the noncommittal sound escape him. Maybe it would be good to know, but... "I think I'd... rather not know."

Kade blinked, looking at him with an uncertain expression. For a moment they were both silent, then slowly Kade nodded. "Okay. I understand."

"Maybe some other time," Florian added quickly, looking away. "Just... not yet. I don't know. I'm still trying not to... not to think about all that."

"Sorry I brought it up, then," Kade answered softly.

"It's okay," Florian said. "Really. It's fine."

They were both quiet for a moment longer, and Florian wondered what had brought on the conversation. He glanced at Kade, but the other man was looking up toward the sky, clearly thinking it over as well.

"Sometimes I think it would be nice to be able to shift to something else," Kade said abruptly, still looking up at the sky. "To be able to fly like the dragon shifters do, or breathe underwater like the krakens... Being a wolf seems boring in comparison sometimes, you know?"

Florian blinked, surprised at the admission. It wasn't so strange, he thought, but the idea hadn't occurred to him that shifters might be jealous of each other.

"I mean, I could probably make us fly or breathe water," Florian blurted, and Kade let out a breathy huff of a laugh. "I'm serious! I think I could. It's all fae magic, right? Why wouldn't it work?"

"You could," Kade agreed, his thoughtful expression now replaced with an indulgent smile. "But it would be like holding the shroud. The more people you're keeping with you, the harder it would be. And it wouldn't be a constant thing. But it's fine. That's not what I was trying to say."

"I know."

"I guess I just think what you can do is really amazing," Kade said. Florian blushed crimson, looking away. "To be able to shift into all those other things... You're amazing, Florian."

"It's not anything I can do on my own," Florian protested, laughing nervously. "It was just... random, pretty much."

"Still. It's something you can do no one else can," Kade said, shrugging.

Florian couldn't argue with that, so they sat in silence for a moment longer. He snuck a few glances over at Kade, but the other man was still looking up. From this part of the garden they had a clear view of the sky, hints of starlight dappling through a few clouds set against the colors of twilight. Kade's expression was tired, almost, as he looked up at the stars, and Florian wondered what else he could be thinking.

He considered, with a slight pang of guilt, that he had been so preoccupied—what with his own thoughts and feelings about everything that had happened—he hadn't really considered how Kade

might have been affected, even though they had been together through it all.

"Um," Florian stammered, and Kade glanced back over at him. "Are you... okay?"

"What do you mean?" Kade asked, frowning.

"I mean, like... We could stay a little longer if you wanted," Florian said, still unsure of what exactly he was trying to ask. "I guess I've kind of only been thinking about myself. But I want to make sure you're okay too... before we head out again."

"Oh." Kade grinned at him, seeming amused at the consideration. "I'm alright, Florian. If I needed more time I would tell you. So don't worry about me."

Florian nodded. Part of him wondered if Kade really would tell him if he was struggling—but the other man had always been straightforward with him before; and from what he could tell, he had always been honest. Florian, on the other hand, was more likely to hide his feelings, and the realization left a slight bitterness in the back of his throat. Kade had been so patient and gentle with him—had always been kind, even when Florian was not. Aside from their one explosive fight, of course; but all things considered, he couldn't really hold it against Kade. He had to be better, Florian thought, because Kade deserved an equal. If nothing else, he at least owed *that* to Kade.

"What are you thinking about?" Kade asked softly, bringing him back to reality. Florian shook his head, managing a slight smile.

"How great you are," he said, relishing in the color that rose in Kade's face as he said it.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The next morning they were ready to go into the Blight once again. Their route was carefully marked on the map, and they had enough supplies to last three weeks, though Florian dearly hoped that they would not be there quite so long. The backpack full of their supplies was especially heavy on his back, but Kade's backpack was even heavier, so he couldn't complain.

Tatiana had come to see them off again. This time she did not have the same forced casual expression that she had worn previously, when it had been the three of them heading out into the Blight instead of two. Now her brows were furrowed, the concern obvious on her face.

"We'll be careful," Florian said quickly, as she took his hands into her own but before she had the chance to speak. "I promise."

She managed a slight smile. "I know you will."

But the pained expression remained on her face. Now more than ever, Florian was acutely aware that if anything were to happen to either of them, neither were likely to return. If they were hurt, or worse, Tatiana would have no idea; she would only be able to speculate, until it was far too late to do anything about it. What more could he say? He was sure that nothing he could tell her would help her worry less—certainly there was nothing that would quell the anxiety in the pit of his own stomach.

"I'll keep him safe," Kade added, placing a hand on Florian's shoulder, but his eyes were on Tatiana as he spoke. "We'll do our best to be back soon."

"I know. Don't be out there too long," Tatiana said, her tone almost teasing. Her hands were tight around Florian's. He forced himself to smile wider than she was smiling.

"We'll be back soon," he said, sounding surprisingly chipper even to himself. "Maybe she already knows I'm coming and will make it easy for us."

"I hope so," Tatiana agreed, nodding.

When their goodbyes were over, Florian and Kade trudged through the field outside the castle that led to the boundary between the Winter Court and the Nova Blight. Both were silent; this time Kade walked a bit ahead, and Florian a few steps behind. It didn't seem to take as long as Florian

remembered to reach the point where that now-familiar white line appeared on the horizon, the first hint of the blinding light of the Blight ahead.

Florian kept his eyes on it as the white streak slowly started to take over more and more of the sky. When Kade stopped to pull his sun goggles over his eyes—when the white light had consumed all the color in the sky, and they could clearly see the demarcation in the dirt ahead where the Blight began—Florian hesitated with his own goggles hovering just over his face.

"You alright?" Kade asked, glancing back at him. The dark lenses of the goggles blocked out his eyes, but Florian could still feel his gaze linger on him. He took a deep breath and nodded.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm a little nervous. But I'm okay."

He pulled the sun goggles over his eyes and pressed his hands together to murmur the incantation of the shroud. The slight shadow from where his palms touched quivered and spread over the rest of his hands, trailing up his arms and down the length of his body, and he pushed the sensation of it toward Kade. The shadow trembled in the space between them, before it jumped toward Kade's shadow, creeping up the length of him until they were both enveloped.

"Here," Kade said, holding out his hand. Florian stifled a grin as he took it, and they stepped into the Blight.

The sudden sweltering heat that instantly prickled at his skin was an unwelcome jolt, just as miserable as Florian remembered. They walked hand-in-hand for a little while, but soon the heat became unbearable. Florian became acutely aware of how sweaty his hand felt, and he pulled away. Kade glanced back at him, but didn't seem to relish the shared heat either.

For the first day of travel, much of the landscape seemed somewhat familiar. They traced the same path that they had followed his first time in the Blight with Jerah, but they would start heading more northward after a day or so. It felt a bit different, walking through it at a normal speed, but Florian still recognized some of their surroundings even though it all sort of blended together in its monotony.

The second day was much of the same. That morning Florian carefully tried to set the quickening spell after they were shrouded; it held for a little while, helping them travel faster as they veered northward, but maintaining both soon proved to be a strain that he couldn't keep up.

"I have to drop the quickening," Florian groaned through gritted teeth. He had held it as long as he could, doing his best to not complain; but his head was pounding, and the unbearable heat didn't help. Kade glanced back at him, and the concern was apparent on his face.

"Okay, drop it," he said, and with a sigh of relief Florian let the thread of magic that was speeding them up dissolve from his grasp. There was a slight lurching sensation as the world seemed to slow around them for just an instant, then Florian stumbled forward a few steps at his normal pace. It was disappointing that he couldn't help them move any faster, but without the shroud they wouldn't be able to travel at all—at least they'd gotten a few good hours out of it.

That night, after they'd set up their shelter against the Blight, Florian pulled the pendant Tatiana had given him out from his backpack and looked it over again. It still didn't feel like any active magic was coming from it, even as the cool stone grew warm in his hands from the ambient temperature and his own body heat. There was that tiny thrum of latent power, which he could only sense if he really focused, but he had no idea how to activate it.

"Work," he hissed at it, but it didn't feel any different afterward.

"It's old, Florian. I don't think it has anything left in it," Kade remarked, eyeing him with a combination of curiosity and amusement.

"Maybe," Florian sighed, turning it over in his hand again. "I can sort of feel a little bit coming from it. But I must be missing something."

"We can ask her when we get there," Kade said, and Florian nodded.

The days went by in a hot, dusty blur. Florian's legs ached from walking, and his head hurt from holding the shroud all day, every day. Any changes that occurred in the landscape around him were subtle and small, so it felt as though they spent days walking only to end up in the exact same place from where they'd started. The occasional petrified tree or particularly large rock were the only landmarks that gave any indication that they'd traveled any distance.

Even Blighted creatures were sparse: they were stalked once by boar-like creatures that looked the same as the ones that they'd seen the first time in the Blight. The beasts followed them for several hours before one finally charged them. Kade made quick work of them—Florian helped—but otherwise their journey was unbearably monotonous.

Every few days Florian felt like he could muster the strength to speed them up for a few hours, holding the quickening spell until his vision blurred with the effort and he had to let it drop. He felt drained for the rest of the day, but being able to reach their destination even a tiny bit sooner was worth the effort. The longer they were in the Blight, the more he hated it.

The only good thing was that Kade was with him. Most of their journey was made in companionable silence. There were days where the quiet seemed less comforting, though, and they would talk, telling stories to each other and sometimes even singing. Neither were particularly skilled at holding a tune, but even the semblance of music sometimes helped the time go faster.

Kade spent a day telling him what he knew of the creation myth of the Veil: how the patron gods of each shifter clan had turned away from the Earth and toward its mirror, taking their magic with them so that it could no longer exist on the Earth. Each god offered a piece of what they had taken from the Earth to aid in the creation of the Veil, so called because they had drawn a curtain between the two worlds—hence the name of the places where the worlds would cross and travel between them made possible.

He explained that the patron gods lent their powers to the inhabitants of their chosen lands, giving them the ability to shift so that each group could remember their origins, even as they worked together with others. Some shifter clans turned away from, or even forgot, their communal origins, instead turning inward to remain with their own kind; but the Wolf-God taught his people well, so the wolf clan remembered and had no qualms with the others. Though they valued their community, their pack, above all else, outsiders would always be welcome. There was always room for the pack to grow. He was sure, Kade explained, that the myth had changed over time, and each clan likely had their own version; but that was how it was taught in the wolf kingdom.

"And what about the fae? How were they made?" Florian asked at the end of the story. Kade was silent for a moment, thinking.

"Fae were associated with the seasons," Kade replied. "I guess their patron gods were the same."

They were more than halfway through their supplies when the environment around them finally started to change enough to notice. Something in the air felt less dry, somehow—not quite humid, but less dusty and arid. At first it felt a little bit like there was latent magic in the air, snapping Florian to attention, but Kade seemed to feel it too. It had to be something else.

The almost-humidity lingered in the air for the rest of the day and into the next, before anything else in the landscape changed. Halfway through the next day Kade slowed to a stop, Florian stepping up to his side with a curious glance.

"What's wrong?" he asked. Through the sun goggles he couldn't quite see his expression, but Kade pointed out to the horizon.

"I think I see something," he said, and Florian looked out to where he was pointing. "I can't really tell... Does that look like anything to you?"

Florian squinted, straining to see at the very edges of his vision. With the intense light it was hard to see anything so far out, but there was what could be a hint of a dark shadow on the very edge of the horizon. It was too hard to tell for sure.

"Maybe," Florian said, looking back up at Kade. "I can't really tell. What do you think?"

"Hmm," Kade sighed, his eyes still locked on the same point far in the distance. "I'll keep an eye on it. We're headed that direction."

They trudged on, and after a little while the faint hint of a shadow on the horizon solidified into a dark shape. It almost looked like a hill; but as they drew closer, and more details became visible, the shape of it was too uneven and irregular to be a single hill. Something was making it darker than the color of the rest of the soil.

At some point Kade stopped again, shaking his head.

"It's green," he said, the disbelief obvious in his voice. "Do you see that? It's green."

It hadn't looked green to Florian—just the same dark indiscernible color—but as soon as Kade said it, the darkness did start to appear greenish in hue.

"How?" Florian asked incredulously. Whatever it was, they still couldn't tell.

"I have no idea," Kade said. His hand fell away from where he'd been keeping it loosely on the hilt of his sword.

"Well, let's check it out," Florian said, continuing forward. He could feel Kade hesitate, not following right away; but after a moment his quick footsteps crunched through the dirt and sand behind him, and soon the taller man had taken the lead once more.

The shape far in the distance slowly became more and more defined as they walked. After nearly an hour had passed, the dark green of it was now readily apparent, and they were close enough to see that it was the remains of a landscape that had been utterly consumed by leaves, clinging ivy thick as blankets.

"How can something like this be alive in the Blight?" Kade muttered, shaking his head as they looked at the expanse ahead of them. What must have once been trees, completely blanketed in leaves, occasionally jutted up through the thick growth. Piles of the leaves, ranging from the size of bushes to small hills, rose up through the landscape as well. It was utterly unlike anything that they had seen in the Blight before.

"I don't know. It doesn't seem like it should be possible," Florian mused. They were standing a good fifty feet from the first stretch of ivy, where the first few tendrils of vine and leaf stretched out along the dry earth, like roots searching for moisture. "It has to be magic, right? It couldn't be alive without magic."

"Someone must have warded all this," Kade said. The blanket of green stretched in both directions and up ahead, as far as either of them could see. "I don't know how else this could happen."

"We have to go in, right?"

Kade bit his lip, considering. Florian was curious more than anything; it didn't seem dangerous, but whatever allowed such an overgrowth of plant life this deep into the Blight must have involved some powerful magic. Kade was clearly less enthused, but Florian took a slow step toward the ivy anyway.

"Be careful," Kade called out from behind him.

"I will."

Florian stepped up to the very edge of where the sprawling tendrils reached, kneeling down so he was mere inches from the ends of the vines. From here he could simply reach out to touch the plant. He wasn't exactly a botanist, but it didn't look very different from the decorative ivy he had seen climbing walls around town, or the wild ivy that crept up the length of trees. But there had to be something different about it, something that allowed it to live and grow even in the harsh light of the Nova Blight.

Hopefully it wasn't poisonous, he thought, as he reached a hand out to gingerly touch one of the small leaves near the very end of the vine.

When he touched it, two things happened all at once: he felt a tiny burst of magic from the leaf, like a rapid heartbeat thrumming wildly against his fingertip; and instantly, the leaf that he touched crumbled into ash, taking the pulse of magic with it as its pieces fell to the ground.

"It's a shroud," Florian blurted, looking back at Kade in surprise. The magic had felt exactly the same as his own shroud, though there must have been something different about it that allowed it to manifest in this way.

"The hag's," Kade murmured, eyeing the expanse of ivy with a darker expression, almost suspicious. "Her domain is much... larger than I expected."

"No kidding," Florian laughed, straightening up to survey it. There didn't appear to be any obvious entrance underneath the ivy, but perhaps the further in they went, the more they could find. The green blanket seemed to have a slightly uphill incline to it, though it was hard to tell considering how it rolled with trees and mounds. "I guess we'll keep going?"

"I'm sure she'll know we're coming," Kade sighed, stepping closer to Florian and looking down at the vine that he had touched. Only the leaf had crumbled to ash, but now that he was looking, he noticed that the vine had seemed to recoil—only slightly, but it was an inch or two back from where it had been before. "Something this powerful... I'm sure it has more than one layer of protection."

"Good," Florian said firmly. He could sense Kade's uncertainty, but so far nothing had convinced him that seeing the hag would be anything but a positive. The other man's suspicion was warranted, he supposed, but Kade could be the one to worry. More than anything, Florian wanted answers. "I'll go first if you're scared."

Kade scowled down at him, but Florian only grinned up in response, and after a beat of silence a good-natured laugh escaped the back of Kade's throat.

"You know I'm not scared," he sighed, moving to take the lead once more. "Just practical. Unlike *someone*."

Florian snorted with laughter, but followed Kade without any further fuss. Where they stepped onto the vines, the leaves underfoot darkened and crumbled, leaving behind a perfect image of their footprints in the foliage. Each step sent the same familiar burst of magic tingling against Florian's skin, quickly fizzling out as the leaves beneath withered away. Other than the slight sinking feeling and audible crunch, the blanket of vines seemed easily traversable, so they continued with cautious steps.

As the surface started to incline slightly, though, there was more give to the vines underfoot, and it seemed to create an even layer beneath them. The vines were tightly knit together, but seemed to have lifted off enough from whatever was underneath that their footing became less sure and more wobbly.

"I bet her swamp is underneath somewhere," Florian said, his arms held out to help him balance, as they cautiously climbed the hillside. "We just have to figure out how to get in."

"Easier said than done," Kade sighed.

The vines underfoot didn't grow any more stable as they made their way uphill, then downhill, the terrain remaining uneven and strange. The shapes beneath the ivy were at times recognizable as trees or clusters of rocks, and at other times were just strange, mostly shapeless lumps that could have been anything. It did seem to be getting steadily higher up, though, as even the points where it began to decline would eventually go back up at an incline even higher than the one that they had ascended previously. They were ants crawling along a lumpy blanket: the thought would have made Florian laugh if he weren't so out of breath.

But they didn't spot any sign of an entrance beneath. They had been clambering over the foliage for hours, but Florian hadn't seen anything that looked like it might grant them entry. It was getting close to the time that they would normally set up their camp, but trying to put their little structure together on such uneven terrain was likely going to be useless. Kade hadn't said anything, but Florian could sense his growing tension in the way his brows knit together, the stiffness of his movements, and the way he constantly looked back and forth for any sign of a reprieve in the distance.

"Do you think we could just cut through and drop down?" Florian finally asked.

"Something tells me probably not," Kade sighed, looking back at him. "If it were that easy to get through, I don't think it would be a very good defense."

"We could at least give it a try," Florian said, shrugging. Kade was probably right, but if it really were so simple and they didn't try, then they would feel like fools afterward. Kade hesitated, looking first at Florian, then down at the thick carpet of vines beneath them. They had slid down into something of a little valley between two hills, and the plants beneath them felt wobbly, like there was nothing supporting them underneath. If they were going to try cutting through, this would probably be a good place.

"If you want to," Kade said, and when Florian reached for his own sword, Kade shook his head. "At least let me."

Florian opened his mouth to protest, but stopped himself. If Kade was so concerned about it, maybe it would be best to let him handle it. So instead of insisting that he could do it himself, Florian nodded and stepped back, gesturing for Kade to go ahead. Kade drew his sword, eyeing the vines beneath them suspiciously. After a moment, he reared back and plunged the sword down. The blade cleaved through the plants easily and was buried to the hilt.

"See?" Florian laughed, only to stop as the plants beneath them quivered with movement. He could feel a swell of magic in the air, the grin falling off his face instantly. "Shit," he cursed, drawing his own sword—Kade had sensed it too, and pulled his own sword back, lifting it in a defensive stance.

From where Kade had cut into it, several thick vines—no, thick ropes made of several vines twisted together—shot out from whatever was beneath and grabbed him, one encircling the arm that held his sword, one wrapping around his waist, and a third strangling his startled cry around his throat.

"Kade!" Florian exclaimed, moving to swing at the thick ropes, but Kade's free hand shot up with fingers outspread.

"Stop!" he managed to choke out. Florian hesitated, unsure—but the moment was all he had, as the vines pulled down hard; and with a startled shout, Kade was pulled beneath the surface. The movement stilled almost instantly, and Florian ran in a panic up to the spot where he had vanished. The small hole he had cut with his sword was marked by the black, crisped edges of the dead plants; but even as he looked, smaller vines were twisting up to take their place.

"No, no, no," Florian panted, pulling back the creeping vines. How had they pulled Kade through? The hole looked tiny—the vines themselves must have moved and closed back over quicker than he could track with his eyes. Desperately, he pushed his hand through the hole in the vines. It went

through, but he could feel more vines trailing along his skin, trying to push him back out and close the gap that he had created.

"Let me through," he growled, letting magic surge from his mouth as he said it. He hadn't truly expected it to work—after all, there was no one there to hear his command and act upon it. Jerah had drilled into his head over and over again that fae magic had to have a target, someone or something to hear and understand the command, something to bear witness to the magic of their words.

But somehow, as if they had their own consciousness, he felt the thin vines still and fall away; and before he could process the strangeness of it, the blanket of vines opened up underneath him, and he plunged into darkness.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Kade!" Florian screamed on instinct, as the sensation of falling overtook him. It was dark—too dark to see where he was, or what he was falling through. But the awful lurching feeling lasted only a moment, and pain burst through his back as something hard collided with his spine, his head snapping back loosely. He yelped in pain, but he reached out with both hands for something, anything to keep himself steady, the cry becoming a nervous keen at the sensation of teetering on the edge of something. His sword slipped from his grip as scrabbled for any kind of solid purchase, and he heard it clatter and clang against something as it fell, until with a final, decisive thud it was silent.

His breath came in short ragged bursts, his heart hammering painfully in his chest, but he tried to keep his focus on the hard, stable surface beneath him. It felt woody and not quite pliant under his hands—it took only a moment to process that one hand was curled around a tree branch, and the other was pressed against its trunk. Was it still the trunk, this high up? How high up even were they? Or was it only him here? He didn't hear Kade. He didn't hear anything, except the pounding of blood rushing in his ears.

"Light," he stammered, cautiously pulling one hand away to hold it in front of him. A little globule of soft light appeared in his palm. One of his fingernails had been ripped down past the quick, and all his fingertips were bloody; the sight made them immediately sting with pain, and he winced, but it was the least of his worries at the moment. Now that he could see, Florian could still make out the canopy of ivy above, blocking out the rest of the light, and there were a few other trees around him. It must have been quite tall, because he couldn't see the ground in the dim light that the single globule gave off. With a groan, he shifted his weight slowly until he could sit up on the thick branch on which he'd fallen—as he moved, he realized that he'd been caught between a few branches clustered close together, which had broken his fall without breaking his back in the process, though his neck was certainly sore now.

Once he was seated, he could see better. He extended out his hand that held the light to try and see better, but he still couldn't see the ground. Then—there was a glint of something below: his fallen

sword.

Relief and fear flooded him in equal measure: relief at knowing his mother's sword wasn't lost forever, and fear when he realized how high up he was. It was hard to tell, but Florian figured that he was nearly fifty feet off the ground, maybe more. But if he could see the ground, he could get himself there—if that *was* the ground. He desperately hoped it was the ground.

"I'm there," he whispered, his eyes trained on the slight glint of light off the surface of his sword far below. The air popped around him. In an instant his feet were on wet but firm earth, and his arms swung wildly at his sides to keep his balance at the sudden change.

"Kade!" he shouted, his relief short-lived. He reached down to grab his sword, dirt clinging to the blade and hilt. "Kade! Can you hear me?"

For a moment there was only silence. Then, distantly, he heard an answering shout—"I hear you!" Florian let out a heavy breath, his shoulders sagging with relief at the sound of his partner's voice.

"I'm okay!" Kade's distant voice continued, and carefully Florian turned to orient himself in the direction it was coming from. "Where are you?"

"I'm following your voice!" Florian shouted, taking a few staggering steps. As his vision started to adjust, the surroundings looked less like a forest and more like a jungle: the earth beneath his feet not quite muddy, but still wet and squishy. "Where are you?"

There was a beat of silence, longer than Florian expected, and his nerves started to mount once again—but then he heard a long, low howl, the sound of Kade's wolf form calling out to him. The sound was clearer and louder than his voice had been, a beacon for him to follow. Florian smiled in relief and set off toward the sound of the howl.

It was slow going, tramping through mud and veering between densely packed trees; but eventually he caught sight of Kade's yellow-orange eyes gleaming in the darkness, and he quickened his pace.

"I see you!" he called, but the wolf's eyes had already caught sight of him. A soft glow spread from the eyes and surrounded the wolf's body, and in the span of just a few steps it was once again Kade, standing there and stumbling toward him.

"Thank god you're okay," Kade breathed, gathering Florian into his arms with no heed for the mud and leaves stuck to him. "Did they grab you too?"

"No, I..." Florian stammered, all at once flustered at the outpouring of affection and somewhat embarrassed at the way he'd followed. "I, um, I fell through."

"You fell?!" Kade snapped, pushing Florian back to look at him more closely. "Are you alright? How are you not hurt?"

"I did hurt my back," he said, pain throbbing up his spine as he thought of it. "And my hand got kinda fucked up. But I'm okay, all things considered. I landed in a tree and then I popped down to the ground. Actually, now that I think of it..." He looked down at his bloodied hand, lightly touching his fingertips.

"Heal," he said softly, and watched as the skin knit back together. His torn fingernail, though, didn't grow back—he pressed the fingertip into his palm and winced at the blossom of pain, but at least the bleeding had stopped. "Ouch. I hope that doesn't fall off."

He looked up to see Kade watching him with his lips pressed together tight in concern. "You're not hurt?" he prompted, shaking Kade from whatever he was thinking.

"No," he replied, his eyes still lingering on Florian's scraped hand. "The vines pulled me all the way down. I thought they were going to choke me, but... They squeezed until I dropped my sword, but when I did they grabbed it and started... I don't know. They slid away almost like snakes. I tried to follow, but... I wasn't fast enough, and it was dark."

"Oh," Florian said, his heart sinking. "Well... Here, you can use my sword in the meantime. It's better if you have it."

Kade eyed the sword that Florian pulled from his belt. His hesitance was obvious, but so was his understanding that he could still use it far more effectively than Florian could. After a moment, he reached out and reverently took it.

"I'll be careful with it, I promise," he said softly, slipping it into his own sheath. "I know it's your mother's. I'll give it back as soon as I find mine."

"It's okay," Florian said, shaking his head. "I know you will."

He started to look around, but it seemed that the only light they had was the little globule in his hand. He looked down at it and willed it grow and glow brighter, only to stop, thinking it could pull his magic from the shroud—

"The shroud!" he exclaimed, realizing in a panic that the thread of magic that was the shroud was gone. Kade blinked, then nodded. "It's gone."

"I thought so," Kade said, and glanced up. "The vines must be a shroud, like you thought."

Florian nodded, brows knit together in worry. He hadn't even realized that he'd dropped it, or when. It was lucky they were in a place that had its own shroud—if they hadn't, things would have been much worse.

"Look," Kade said, shaking him from his thoughts. "I think I see something up ahead... Is that...?" He frowned, taking a step away from Florian.

Florian held up the ball of light, feeding it more magic until it was the size of a basketball and illuminated their surroundings. When he looked in the other man's direction, he too could see what Kade must have spotted—a single lamp post. It was a curved metal bar with a lantern hanging off the end. A tiny flame flickered within, just enough to light the area immediately around it; considering how faint it was, Florian marveled at how Kade had been able to spot it at all.

Kade looked back at him, bewildered. "Do you think it's the witch?"

"Who else?" Florian said, shrugging. "I mean, might as well. Where else would we go?"

Kade nodded, and they headed toward the lamp post.

The post was made of a black, matte metal that almost disappeared into the darkness around them. The lantern hanging on the end was of a similar make, with simple rectangular glass panels that allowed the light from the single candle within to flicker and shine outward. As they approached, Florian could see one last detail that was too small to make out at a distance: a tiny arrowhead, protruding from the post where the lantern hung from it, as if it were pointing.

"Maybe it's a guide," Florian said, looking in that direction.

"Or a trap," Kade said, and Florian sighed. That was certainly a possibility as well, but they didn't exactly have any other leads to follow. Gingerly, he reached out to touch the lamp post, wondering if he might feel that soft thrum of magic from it. But when he touched it, it was only the feeling of cool metal against his skin.

"I don't think it's magical, at least," he said, glancing back up at Kade. "Maybe it could be a trap, but I don't know what else we can do right now. Let's see if there's anything that way."

Kade glanced suspiciously in the direction the lamp post was pointing, but even with the extra light in Florian's hands, nothing but more trees and muddy ground was visible.

"Okay," he relented, stepping forward. "Let me go first, at least."

Florian stifled a laugh, hiding a grin behind his hand, though Kade was already ahead of him. If anything dangerous *was* up ahead, Kade being a few steps in front of him was hardly going to make a difference; but if it made him feel better, Florian wouldn't resist. It was sweet, in a way.

They trudged through the damp earth in the same general direction, only occasionally having to veer off course to go around a tree or a particularly muddy spot. But it didn't take very long for a faint light to become visible in the darkness ahead, just far enough that the light from the first lamp post had begun to fade from their sight. Florian knew before they were close enough to really see it: another lamp post of the exact same size and design, with another arrowhead on the post pointing ahead.

"See? It's a guide," Florian said, gesturing toward it.

"Maybe," was all Kade said; but his expression softened as he looked back at Florian, and he didn't protest as they moved to walk in that direction, which was a little more to the right than their original trajectory.

There ended up being many similar-looking posts, sending them in a convoluted pattern all throughout the dense jungle. The longer they walked, though, the muddier the ground beneath them became, and the fewer trees surrounded them. It was well past the time that they would normally make camp now; while his head didn't hurt the way it often did after holding the shroud all day, exhaustion was pulling at the edges of Florian's vision, and his back was sore as hell.

"Let's camp," he finally said, grabbing Kade's wrist. "I don't think we're going to make it today. And the ground is just getting more wet. Let's find a dry spot and sleep."

Kade looked hesitantly back in the direction from which they had come, then in the direction that the last lamp post was pointing. He drew his sword and scraped an arrow into the damp earth, pointing in the same direction; the soil was dark with moisture, but wasn't quite muddy enough to settle back together.

"So we don't get lost," he sighed, looking back at Florian, who nodded gratefully.

There was no real need for the shelter, but finding a suitably dry spot to set down their bedrolls proved tricky. They found a relatively dry patch of dirt, but it still seemed that waking up on damp blankets was probably going to be unavoidable.

"You're sure you're not hurt or anything?" Florian mumbled, already half-asleep by the time they'd eaten and laid down. He and Kade were huddled close together, each trying to stay away from the muddier parts of the ground.

"I'm sure," Kade replied, sounding just as sleepy in the darkness. "How's your back?"

"Not so bad now," he answered. It only hurt when he thought about it or twisted the wrong way. Vaguely, he thought that he heard Kade say something else, soft and quiet, but he was already drifting away into sleep.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Waking in total darkness was almost frightening after so long of being in the Blight. They both ended up sleeping for what felt like far longer than usual, though Florian was sure his inner sense of time was nowhere near accurate anymore. At the very least, he felt well-rested after their exhausting trip the day before. His back was sore and stiff as he sat up, worse than he remembered it being the night before; but by the time they'd eaten and packed away their bedrolls, it wasn't as bad.

"I'm ready," he said, ignoring Kade's look of concern as he stiffly put on his backpack.

"How's your back?" Kade asked, and Florian huffed. Part of him sort of liked how Kade doted on him, but another part of him bristled at his worry, as if Kade thought he was a fragile child. He could take care of himself, after all. But he thought of how worried he'd been for Kade when he was hurt—he couldn't hold it against the other man for being concerned.

"It's okay," he said. "I don't know if I can heal it. Do you think it would be worth it to try? It only hurts a bit."

Kade shrugged. "You would know better than me. I don't see why magic wouldn't work."

Florian shifted so he could put his hands on the small of his back—the movement made his sore muscles ache all over again, but he closed his eyes and took in a steadying breath, before murmuring, "Heal."

He could feel the tingle of magic leaving his hands and sparkling up his back, giving him goosebumps. When the sensation passed, though, nothing felt all that different; he lowered his hands and experimentally twisted back and forth. There was some lingering stiffness and discomfort, but it didn't hurt as much as it had previously.

"I guess it did work," Florian said, grinning up at Kade. Kade answered with a small smile, and they set out. The mark that he had made in the dirt with his sword—no, Florian's sword—still remained just past where they had camped, though the damp earth had started to fill in a little. But it still clearly marked the direction they needed to go, so they followed.

Before much longer, another lamp post came into view, and they resumed the pattern that they had fallen into the day before: checking each lamp post for their next direction and walking that way in darkness for what Florian guessed was around ten minutes or so. Then another lamp would come into view, and they would repeat the process.

The lamps sent them every which way, so their path felt meandering and aimless. And although the soil beneath their feet was damp and soft, so far there had been no sign of rain or any body of water anywhere. It was all strange, Florian thought, and it left him unsettled.

"Where do you think the water's coming from?" Florian asked, glancing up at Kade. "There's no rain, but I don't see a pond or anything."

Kade frowned, but didn't answer, instead shrugging and glancing around as if he might spot some rainfall.

He had been mulling it over for the span of two or three lamp posts, when it seemed that maybe he had spoken too soon. A lamp post up ahead, only just now coming into view, was set on a mound of earth surrounded by a few feet of water like a small moat.

"There's the water," he laughed, and Kade huffed with a stifled chuckle. "So weird that's all we've seen so far, though."

They came up to the edge of the water. The lamp post was maybe ten feet from them, and from their perspective, it pointed directly to the left. The water was dark—and, Florian noticed, it didn't quite reflect the light of the lamp post, nor the little ball of light in his hand in the way that he expected. It seemed almost dull somehow.

"Weird," he muttered, crouching down to take a closer look.

"What is?" Kade asked from behind him. Florian opened his mouth to respond, but the surface of the water had started to tremble and quiver. Before he could react, a stream of liquid shot out at him —no, not liquid, but not solid either—it grabbed him by the wrist and pulled down hard. He yelped, startled, but the noise was quickly muffled as the stream dragged him beneath the surface.

His own light was snuffed out, and only the dim light of the lamp post above illuminated anything. He couldn't quite make out what had grabbed him—it was strong, and the moment he was submerged, it felt as though he were being squeezed from all sides, as if the water itself was a creature.

The water was a creature, he realized—it had been so dull, the liquid thick—he was jostled as the water creature shifted and moved, pulling itself from the earth as if it was standing.

"Drop!" he tried to command, but the word came out as an unintelligible garble of air bubbles from his mouth. Florian could feel his magic skitter off the creature uselessly.

His free hand flew to his side, but was met with nothing—he had given his sword to Kade. Vaguely through the watery surface that enveloped him, he could see Kade and hear him shouting, distantly. Florian started to kick his legs, trying to swim out of the watery creature; but something grabbed at him the moment he did, pinning his ankles together.

He groaned, bubbles of air pouring from his nose. He couldn't breathe, couldn't escape, couldn't fight—with his one free hand he reached desperately toward Kade's blurry figure, which swung at the creature with his mother's sword. Pressure bore down on him as it tried to pin his arm back to his side; but stubbornly he kept his hand outstretched as much as he could, though his elbow buckled and his muscles quivered with the effort. But dealing with Kade seemed to occupy the creature enough so that it could not exert full control over Florian's body.

Already his vision was starting to go fuzzy at the edges, pressure building up painfully in his lungs. It took everything within him to fight against the urge to breathe in. He couldn't think, he couldn't focus—was this really how he was going to die? Drowning inside a water monster?

With as much strength as he could muster, Florian thrashed his torso back and forth, trying to gain any traction to push his free hand further out the creature. The effort burned his lungs, and he sucked in a sharp breath without having meant to—but it was thick liquid that filled his chest, making him choke and gag, unable to cough. Pain erupted from his lungs, shooting through his throat and nose. His vision was going dark—

Something touched his hand, something warm, and his fingers closed around it like a vice. He pulled himself toward it, could feel it pulling him too, and the pressure surrounding him increased tenfold, like it would crush every one of his bones as he was dragged through.

Then he could just barely hear something metallic, a slicing sound, and all the pressure around him dissipated at once. He fell to the ground in a splash. His seizing lungs were finally able to expel the liquid that he'd breathed in, and he coughed up thick, dark water onto the mud beneath him—and sucked in a sweet, cold, life-giving breath.

"I have you," Kade's voice was coming from above him. Florian could feel Kade wresting his heavy, waterlogged backpack off of him—when the weight was removed, it felt like his lungs could expand a little better. "Get it all out. I have you."

With a groan Florian pushed himself to roll onto his back, vaguely aware of Kade kneeling over him. He was lightheaded, his breath still coming in shuddering gasps, and the world spinning around him. One of Kade's hands was in his, squeezing. He managed to weakly squeeze back, holding on as if it were the only thing that anchored him to the world that spun in dizzy spirals around him.

He didn't know how long he lay there before his breathing started to slow, and he managed to push himself up into a sitting position.

"Slow," Kade said, one of his hands coming to rest reassuringly on Florian's back. "Don't force it."

A long, low whimper made its way from Florian's chest as he breathed.

"What the fuck was that?" he asked, his voice raspy and painful. Everything from his lungs through his throat into his mouth, nose, and eyes, all stung like a whip.

"I'm not sure," Kade sighed, rubbing Florian's back. "Some kind of elemental creature. When you got pulled in, it... Stood up, somehow? I've never seen anything like it. It had... limbs, I guess. Something in it glowed when it moved, and when I stabbed it, that's when it fell apart."

"Those are things that exist?" Florian croaked, shaking his head.

"I guess so," Kade replied.

"If I had known that," Florian said, managing to grin weakly up at Kade, "I would have been more careful."

Kade's worried expression softened, and gently he patted Florian's back a few times. "Be careful anyway."

Florian nodded, and after a few minutes of catching his breath, the world stopped spinning so quickly, and Kade helped him stagger to his feet. The lamp post looked totally undisturbed, its dim light unchanged; but the circle of water around it was gone, leaving behind only dark, damp earth slightly indented in a circle around it.

"Dry," he groaned, touching his backpack with one hand; and with a glimmering burst of magic, all the moisture was shunted out of the cloth and fell to the ground at his feet with a splash. Gratefully, he shouldered the dry backpack—lugging around wet equipment would have made this all the more miserable.

"Think you can still walk?" Kade asked him, holding Florian by the arm as he regained his balance. He nodded, frowning—his legs felt like jelly beneath him, but he could walk it off.

"Yeah," he said, and slowly Kade let go of him, as if testing whether he could truly support his own weight. Florian's knees wobbled, but he stayed standing. "Let's just go slow."

"Sure," Kade replied, a small smile on his face. He seemed to sense Florian's unwillingness to rest
—Florian thought that he might protest, but the words never came. "No rush."

Slowly, they made their way through the swamp once more, following the path set out by the lamps. After a few minutes of walking, Florian felt more sure-footed as he had hoped he would, but he didn't

try to speed up much at all—the last thing he needed was to rush headlong into some other kind of danger now that he was already tired and sore. More than anything he hoped that they would find the witch soon, then they could rest.

After about fifteen minutes of walking quietly, the next lamp post came into view. Kade lightly touched Florian's shoulder and said softly in his ear, "I think there's one around that lamp too."

Florian squinted, not quite able to tell, but distantly he thought that he saw the same dull glint around the lamp post. Drawing closer only confirmed their suspicion. This time they stayed a good distance away from it, observing the direction it pointed and giving it a wide berth as they headed that way.

The next several lamp posts were all the same: surrounded by small moats of dull water that must have all been similar watery monsters. But if they didn't get close, the creatures didn't seem to notice them at all, so they continued on their meandering way without any more conflict.

They walked for what felt like hours with no change, the landscape around them remaining largely the same with no further hints as to what to expect, other than the many identical lamp posts. Florian was starting to worry that maybe it was all some sort of ruse after all, when a faint glimmer of light in the distance seemed brighter than the lamps they had previously seen.

"What is that?" he muttered, frowning as he caught sight of it in the distance. Kade had spotted it too, flashes of light obscured by the many trees, but it was clearly something much larger than a single lamp post.

"I don't know," Kade said quietly, lifting his hand to the hilt of his sword. "Be careful."

Florian nodded, and they trudged through the muddy earth toward it. The ground beneath them had gotten even wetter as the day wore on, and now no remnants of the jungle biome remained. Now, they were well and truly walking through a swamp.

As they pushed through the last of the dense trees, the scene became more clear ahead. Something of a path opened up, one lamp post on either side. Hovering in the air—right in the middle of the path—was a softly glowing sigil: a circle filled with intricate swirls and symbols made of a purple-tinged light. Florian stopped short when he saw it, startled and uncertain.

"What the hell is that?" he said. Kade stopped a few steps ahead of him, looking at it more closely, though still keeping a distance of about ten feet.

"A ward," he said, sounding utterly unfazed. "We must be close now."

"A ward? Is that what they normally look like?" Florian repeated, the confusion obvious in his voice.

"I think so. I've only seen one before. They're pretty uncommon, now," Kade remarked, glancing back at him. "They're... a magical defense, I suppose. The wolf kingdom has one. They're made with old magic. They last a while, but need to be topped up every so often, so... Not many are left. There's just one on the northern border to keep sea monsters from coming ashore."

"Sea monsters?" Florian said, flabbergasted. He gave his head a strong shake: *that* was hardly the most important topic at hand. "I mean—okay, so it's a protective thing. The witch must have put it here, right?"

"Yes," Kade said, glancing back at it. The symbol was unmoving, a glowing sentinel motionless in the air. "The question is, how do we pass it?"

Florian took a cautious step closer to Kade and considered it closely, but he didn't recognize any of the symbols within the ward. Jerah hadn't said anything about something like this, but maybe Tatiana had mentioned wards in the long list of things that she'd gone over with him after his coronation—he could vaguely remember sitting across from her, perhaps in the library or one of the studies, but the details were lost to him.

"Don't touch it," Kade warned, holding his hand out to keep Florian from getting any closer. "There's no telling what it might do to intruders."

Florian nodded, letting his hand hover in the air where it was. It didn't feel magical, which was all the more strange—most powerful magic had a particular feeling in the air around it. It was strongest with the Arrows, which made the air feel almost syrupy with latent magic, but even lesser magic had a similar static tingle to it, if he got close enough. This sigil that hovered only five feet from where they stood, though it looked like it should be exuding magical force, gave off no such sensation. There was no hint as to what it was meant to keep out, nor what might allow them to pass.

"Do you think we have to give it an offering here?" Florian said, turning back to look at Kade. "Like your dad said?"

"Hmm," Kade murmured, his eyes still trained on the sigil. "Maybe. He didn't say they gave it directly to her or anything."

"Worth a try," Florian sighed, and he gingerly let his backpack slide off his shoulders and set it at his feet.

Carefully tucked into one of the small pockets of his backpack was the flower Kade had first given him, the midnight princess. Florian had wrapped it delicately in parchment paper, but it was still looking a little worse for wear after nearly two weeks of travel—not to mention the water that had just gotten into his things—but overall, it still remained in one piece. As he unwrapped it, he saw

what was surely a flash of sadness across Kade's face in his peripheral vision; but when he glanced up at the other man, his expression was that same careful, neutral face that he pulled whenever he was hiding what he felt. Not that Florian could blame him: the thought of giving the flower away sent a little pang of sadness through his chest, too. It would be worth it, though, or at least so he hoped.

"Think I should just touch it?" Florian asked, eyeing the ward.

"No," Kade said quickly.

"Then what?"

"I'm not sure. But don't touch it."

Florian huffed, looking with uncertainty between the dried flower in his hand and the glowing ward ahead of him. He took a slow, experimental step toward it; Kade tensed next to him, but didn't stop him this time. When he was right in front of the floating sigil, he bent down and set the flower on the ground in front of it, then stepped back.

They waited, but nothing happened.

"I'm going to touch it with the flower," Florian said. Kade grimaced.

"Let me try first," he said, reaching into his own backpack. He pulled out a little wooden figurine, though Florian couldn't quite make out what exactly it was since his hand covered it so fully.

"What is it?" he asked curiously, and Kade sighed.

"Yuka made it for me," he said, turning the wooden figure over in his hand. Florian could now tell it was a four-legged creature with pointed ears and a long, shaggy tail—a wolf, he was sure. "He gave it to me before we left."

Florian nodded, eyes lingering on the figurine. Kade had seemed fondest of Yuka out of all the family members that they'd met in their short visit to the wolf kingdom; it only made sense it was the most sentimental thing he could bring. Though, he realized with some guilt, he had never thought to give Kade any sort of gift or token of affection, like the flower that he'd given Florian. He'd have to find some excuse to give him a present--when they got home.

He pushed the thought away, though, as he watched Kade cautiously step up to the ward, holding the figurine as far out from his body as he could. With a nervous intake of breath, he touched the nose of the wooden wolf to the sigil, all his muscles tense, as if he were ready to spring away at the first sign of anything dangerous.

But nothing happened. Gingerly, Kade took a step forward, and the wooden figure passed through, though Kade himself stopped just before his fingertips connected with the glowing sigil. He glanced back at Florian, who nodded encouragingly, then pushed his hand through.

The sigil had remained perfectly still as the figurine passed through it, but when Kade's skin made contact, the surface of the ward rippled, like the once-still surface of a pond broken by rain drops. But despite the reaction to his fingertips, Kade's hand passed through the magical barrier as if it weren't there at all. Slowly, he continued with the rest of his arm, then stepped all the way through in one quick motion.

"That seemed to work," he said dryly from the other side of the ward. Now that he was through, it had gone still once more. Florian grinned, but stopped short as the little wooden wolf was suddenly wrenched from Kade's hand. "Hey!"

They watched as it sailed through the air as if pulled along by an invisible cord, then it struck the trunk of a thick, squat tree a little ways off and disappeared. For a moment they both stared at the tree, half in disbelief, then Kade looked back at Florian and shrugged, sighing.

"Your turn," he said, and Florian nodded. Carefully, he held the dried flower out in front of him and pressed it toward the sigil. It passed through with no resistance, and since he had seen Kade walk through so easily, he stepped forward with confidence until he was on the other side of the ward.

Florian could feel his skin prickle with the magic of the ward the moment he was through: whatever it did, its presence was masked from the outside—only making it a more effective defense, he supposed.

Florian felt the flower being tugged from his grip, and he let it go. It followed the same arc through the air and disappeared against the trunk of the same tree.

"I guess that's where we're headed?" Florian said, glancing up at Kade, who nodded in reply.

They trudged through the dirt, though it seemed a little less muddy here—and as they drew closer to the tree, there was even some semblance of a stone path leading up to it. If this wasn't it, Florian thought, it was a very convincing decoy.

The tree was very thick, but no more than maybe twenty feet tall at its highest point. Stones encircled it all around, sunk into the dirt like a cobblestone path. Kade looked down at the spot where their items had vanished, but Florian kept following the path all the way around the tree—on the other side, a knot in the gnarled wood had a tall, purple-capped mushroom growing right in the center of it. He looked over at Kade, who was still trying to see where exactly their offerings had disappeared; but when Florian looked again at the mushroom, he saw instead a door handle. He blinked, startled, and called out,

"Kade, come look at this."

Quickly the other man straightened and walked up to Florian—he pointed at the door handle. "That was just a mushroom."

"Hmm," Kade said, eyeing it with obvious suspicion.

"Seems like an invitation, don't you think?"

"Maybe."

"I mean, I'm sure she knows we're here. She just took our things."

"Probably."

"Should we... knock?"

"I don't see a door."

Florian stifled a laugh. "Should I just open it, then?"

Despite his furrowed brows, Kade nodded. "I think so."

That was probably as certain as they were going to get, so Florian reached for the handle and twisted. It moved just like a regular door knob, and somehow a door appeared in the tree trunk. There was no flash of magic, as if it were summoned, but it simply winked into existence like it had always been there. Florian tugged, and it swung open without resistance, but the doorway was pitch black. No light seemed to penetrate beyond its threshold.

"Hello?" Florian called uncertainly into the darkness.

He jumped as a rasping, female voice answered him.

"Oh, you've finally arrived. Come in, come in. I'll put the kettle on."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

They shared a look, then with an almost imperceptible nod from Kade, Florian looked back into the doorway and stepped through.

Though the interior had been completely inscrutable from the outside, the moment Florian passed through the threshold, light seemed to burst from nowhere to illuminate the space. It was far bigger than it looked from the outside, though still cozy in size. It looked like a sitting room with a low table in the center, two wooden chairs on the side nearest him, and a large, plush armchair on the other. All of the walls were covered in shelves, and each shelf was full to bursting with books and trinkets of a dizzying assortment. The only part of the wall not covered in shelves was home to a fireplace crackling with warmth; but even there, the mantle was covered with all sorts of plants and some jewelry, as well as a tapestry hanging on the wall above.

"What do you see?"

He heard Kade's voice distantly behind him, as if he were underwater. Whatever prevented them from seeing inside must have blocked out the noise, too, though looking back Florian could see Kade clearly.

"A little cottage," Florian replied, almost laughing. Though he had only heard this creature described as a hag or a witch, her home didn't seem to reflect the intimidating air of the words; if anything, it was kitschy and maximalist, almost cute.

Kade seemed to steel himself, then resolutely stepped through behind Florian. If he was surprised at the appearance of the home, it didn't show on his face—only his eyes flickered around the room, as if taking note of everything he could, but he stayed stock still next to Florian.

"Please, sit," the same raspy female voice came. It sounded like it was coming from the armchair, but when Florian looked, he couldn't quite focus on it—it was as if his eyes were being pushed away. He had felt the same when Jerah had shown him invisibility.

The witch was hiding from them. But, after all, they were strangers in her home—he supposed that he could understand wanting to watch them first.

"Sure," Florian said, and he sat down in one of the wooden chairs. Kade lingered, standing behind him, but Florian gestured for him to sit as well. His expression was more suspicious than ever, but slowly he too lowered himself onto the chair.

"I hoped you'd find your way here. It's so nice to have visitors," the voice came once more; and this time when Florian looked, she was sitting in the armchair as if she had been there the whole time. She was tall, Florian thought as his eyes traveled upward to meet her face, easily seven feet at the least. Her skin had a pallid gray undertone to it, as pale as if it had never seen the sun. Her hair was dark and greasy, hanging like a thick curtain down one side of her face. She had a large nose and a stern brow, but... she wasn't ugly in the way that he had expected, being a hag and all. She just looked a bit otherworldly, but so did a lot of things in the Veil; and she didn't look particularly scarier than anything else that he'd seen so far. His heart had been pounding at first, but it was starting to slow a little bit now. He was utterly out of his element, but at least she wasn't something out of a horror movie.

Her smile widened as she met his gaze—her lips stretched just a little further than seemed natural, and her large eyes were a deep gleaming purple, which he hadn't seen before. He felt Kade tense next to him, but kept his attention on the hag.

"Thank you for having us," he said.

"I've been expecting you for a long time, Changeling Prince," she said; and with a wave of her hand, a tea kettle and three cups swooped down above the fireplace and settled onto the table between them. "In fact, I think the last time I had visitors was when your father and the shifter kings visited me."

"Well," Florian said slowly, his smile faltering. "Um, my name is Florian, and I'm technically a king. Jerah passed away about... two months ago, now."

"Is that so?" the witch said, her eyebrows raising slightly. "My condolences."

"Thank you. Um, that's kind of why we came," Florian continued. "We had... questions, I guess, and we weren't sure who else might have answers, other than Jerah."

"Forgive me," she said abruptly, her head swinging to look at Kade. "I don't think I've met your... friend, here."

Florian looked at Kade, who was expressionless under the witch's gaze. His back stiffened, chin tilting up before he spoke.

"I'm Kade, son of Kallik," he said slowly. "Heir to the wolf kingdom."

"Thank you, son of Kallik," she said, bowing her head slightly—whether in greeting or respect, Florian was unsure. "I remember your father well. He was quite dedicated to Jerah, if I recall correctly. I see some things don't change across the generations."

Florian stifled a laugh; though he supposed there were some similarities, Kallik and Jerah probably had not been *quite* as close as he and Kade were.

"I believe this is yours," she continued, and with a flick of her wrist, Kade's sword appeared in her hand. A sharp intake of breath was the only sign of Kade's surprise at its sudden appearance; and when she set it down on the table and gestured for him to take it, he grabbed it by the hilt. First he drew Florian's sword from its sheath, handing it back to him, then resheathed his own sword with a look of obvious relief.

"Thank you," he said, his voice low. His eyes remained on the sword as he said it.

"Of course," she replied. "I have little use of it. Just a simple trick to... disarm any potentially violent visitors. I'm sure you can understand."

The witch looked back at Florian, and her eyes flickered to his backpack. "And... I sense you have something of mine."

"Something of...? Oh," Florian said, blinking in confusion before he remembered that he *did* have something that belonged to her. He pulled his backpack forward and fished out the pendant. "Do you mean this?"

"Yes. I gave this to your father, the Winter King, when he visited," she said, reaching for it. Her arms were *long*, far longer than they should have been even for her height—she didn't even need to lean forward in her chair to reach out and take it from where Florian held it up. "You had hoped to use it to get here, perhaps?"

"I thought maybe we could. But I couldn't figure out how to recharge it," Florian admitted.

"Well, thank you for keeping it safe all these years," she said; and after looking down at the gleaming purple stone, she pocketed it. Florian started to protest, but closed his mouth before the words could escape. He could sense Kade's lingering nervousness, and he had no idea what might or might not offend her; they needed to stay in her good graces if she were to help them at all. If she wanted her necklace back, fine—not that he could use it, anyway.

"So what is this question you have, which no one else can answer?" the witch asked, her head swinging back to look over at Florian. Even though the armchair was big, she still didn't quite fit, hunching over a bit to peer down at them. As she spoke, she unfolded her arms from within the long,

dark cloak in which she had placed the pendant—like her arms, her fingers were long and spindly, as she reached for the tea kettle and poured them each a cup.

"I had a few things, actually," Florian said, though now that he was here his mind was suddenly blank. "I mean... You said you wanted me to come to you, right? What can you tell me about the prophecy about me?"

"Prophecy?" the hag repeated, her head tilting. Her expression was largely unchanging. "What do you mean?"

"The... the prophecy," Florian stuttered, frowning. "That you told my dad. About how the Changeling Prince would save the world or whatever."

For a moment the witch was silent, then she leaned back in her chair with a laugh, shaking her head.

"Jerah, that poor little fool," she sighed. "Of course he thought it was a prophecy. Is that what he told you?"

"Yes," Florian said slowly. His mind had gone blank—what was she implying? "Is that... Is that not what you told him?"

"I gave him what I thought was very important information," she said, shrugging nonchalantly. "It was a... prediction, I suppose, of a reality I had seen that might come to pass. One I *hoped* would come to pass, because it was better than the rest. But a prophecy? No, I wouldn't call it that. Much could have happened that would have prevented what I saw."

For a long moment, Florian was silent. He could feel Kade's eyes on him, certainly just as confused as he was—but he couldn't look away from the witch's face. If Jerah had been wrong about this, was there more that he was wrong about?

"I don't understand," he finally stammered. "What you... saw? A prediction?"

"There are patterns to the old magic," she said, waving her hand through the air. "And with the right knowledge, you can peer ahead into the future of the pattern—of course, because the future is always contingent on what happens in the present, there are countless possibilities that stem from each moment. But this future I saw was one that I saw stemming from multiple points, and it seemed to have the most favorable outcome relative to some of the other futures I'd seen. So I gave Jerah the information he would need to give that future the best chance of happening. I suppose it could be considered a prophecy, but if he had walked away that day and forgot everything I told him, perhaps we'd be living in a very different present."

"So what does that mean? For me?" Florian asked. Distantly he felt the soft weight of Kade's hand on his leg, but he couldn't bring himself to look at the other man. His chest felt like a sinkhole. "So what was the point of all this?"

"The point?" she asked, tilting her head—the angle just a touch too far, too unnatural. "I'm not sure I follow. Your presence here tells me you took everything Jerah told you quite seriously. Can I assume you're attempting to gather the Golden Arrows?"

"Yes," he replied.

"So why would your plans change or stop now?"

"Because..." he started, only to trail off. "I don't know. I thought that because of this prophecy, it meant..."

"It meant you were guaranteed success?" she asked. "It meant only you could do this?"

"I guess so," he said, shrugging miserably as he leaned back in his chair.

"I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, then," she said, gesturing to the cup of tea in front of him. "Drink. It'll make you feel better."

The unsettling numb feeling at his temples was starting to creep in. Automatically he reached out and took the cup, bringing it to his lips. The tea was warm, but not too hot, and slightly herbal with a minty finish. It did make him feel a little better.

"There are no guarantees for the future," the hag continued, lifting her cup to her own lips and taking a small, delicate sip. "There are many paths before you, and some lead to success, but others do not. If you fail, perhaps someone else will take up the task again someday, or perhaps that failure will be so spectacular there will be no one left to try again. But you *do* have a special power, and that is why you have a better shot than anyone else alive right now. At least that I can see, and I've seen quite a bit."

"Florian," Kade said softly, his hand on Florian's leg squeezing. Finally, he managed to meet Kade's eyes. "This doesn't change anything. We're already on this path. We're going to see it through."

"He's right," the hag said. "You've already begun the process. All that's left is to see it through."

Florian's chest roiled with emotion, but somehow the rest of him felt numb. The thought that it didn't *have* to be him, that he could have continued his peaceful life in Coral Shore, that maybe his father never even really needed to send him away in the first place—every last thought stung with grief.

But there was no time to process the implications of all that now. He took in a shuddering breath and looked up at the hag once again.

"What's your name?" he blurted—he had meant to ask about the Arrows next, but it occurred to him that he had no idea what her name was, and somehow he suspected that she wouldn't appreciate being called hag or witch to her face. To his surprise, a wide grin slowly spread across her face.

"I can't tell you how long it's been since someone has asked me that," she chuckled. "In our... profession, much of our original identity is lost in order to study the old magic more closely, use it more effectively. But I remember my mother called me Elodie. You may use that, too."

"Elodie," Florian repeated. "I... I mean, Kade's right. We're already here, so..." He sighed and glanced back over at Kade. The other man's face was as serious as ever, but he gave Florian an encouraging nod all the same. His tea on the table was still untouched. "There were other things I wanted to ask you, too."

"Of course," she answered, gesturing once again for him to continue.

"I was hoping you might know more about the Arrows," he said, turning to look at her again. "We've gotten two so far."

"That's an accomplishment," she said, her eyebrows raising. "Well done. I do know a bit about the seven Golden Arrows of Soleil, though there is very little information to be gleaned about them from afar. I know of their existence, that they're meant to be some kind of solution to the Blight, and that they are extremely powerful, full of magic. What do you want to know?"

"The two we have are inscribed differently," Florian explained. "The first one we got, it says *I* pierce the heart of sacrifice. But the second one says *I pierce the heart of summer*. And we don't really know what it means."

"Curious," she mused, her eyes flickering between them—she had paid very little attention to Kade after returning his sword, but knowing he had helped retrieve the Arrows seemed to pique her interest in him. "I can't say I know anything for sure in that regard. Whatever knowledge you have of the Arrows, I can promise you my understanding is no more in-depth. All the information about these relics that you have access to is all I can access as well. But I would imagine that if they convey different messages, they are meant to be used in different ways. And they are meant to be used within the Summer Court, so that one, at least, seems self-explanatory."

"Do the other ones say different things, too?"

"I don't know."

Sighing, Florian leaned back in his chair again. So far, their meeting had not gone at all how he had expected or hoped.

"You're disappointed," Elodie remarked. It was a statement, not a question, which rankled him.

"I don't know what to feel right now," he muttered, shaking his head. "It's... frustrating. Sorry."

To his surprise, she chuckled again, shaking her head. "I forgot how strongly you fae feel about things. But it seems to me—and pardon me if I'm overstepping—but it seems to me, none of this information is going to change your plans. So what is there to be frustrated over?"

Florian felt Kade tense next to him and saw a hint of a frown cross his face. Kade seemed to have taken offense on his behalf, though Florian supposed that Elodie was right, in a way. While it made the context for everything starkly different, on a practical level it didn't seem like anything was going to change—maybe, he thought, that was the disappointing part.

"I guess we'll figure out more once we get more Arrows," he sighed, taking another sip of his tea. The cup was small, and only a little bit of the liquid remained; but when he set the cup down, Elodie swiped her hand once again, and the kettle floated over to his cup and refilled it.

"Was that all you wanted to know?"

"No," Florian said—though with how little she seemed to know, he wasn't feeling confident that she could tell him anything about the spirit that Jerah had suspected was tethered to him. "There's more. Um... Before my dad died, he thought—we thought that there was maybe some kind of fae spirit or something, I guess, that was attached to me somehow. He didn't know much about it but thought maybe you might know something or be able to help me figure it out."

Though she had been watching Florian attentively through the whole conversation, her demeanor visibly changed to one of keen interest as he spoke.

"You want to know for sure if something has been bound to you?" she asked, her head tilting as she spoke. "Or you want to know the identity of this being, if it's actually there?"

"Well, both, ideally," Florian said, managing to smile nervously.

"How curious," Elodie murmured, looking him over more closely. "Tell me more about this. What made Jerah think this might be the case?"

"When I first came to the Winter Court, he was teaching me about... well, everything about the Veil, I guess. And when he was telling me about the Summer Queen, Soleil, I... knew things about her that I wouldn't have possibly been able to know. I felt things I couldn't really explain," Florian went on. "And then a second time, when we were trying to get the same thing to happen, I think I saw her. Just for a second. But I could imagine exactly what she looked like somehow."

"So you think some summer fae spirit has left you with some memories, lingering emotions of their experience with the Queen," the hag murmured, lifting a hand to her face to tap against her chin thoughtfully. "I could certainly see this happening. And... forgive me, I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage." She looked at Florian again. "Were you not raised in the Winter Court? It seems I know less about you than I had thought."

"Oh," Florian said, blinking—everyone else in the Veil had seemed to pick up on his off-world upbringing so easily that it hadn't occurred to him to mention it to her. "No, um, when he knew I was a Changeling, he sent me to Earth to live with my uncle. I was really young. I don't really remember it, or being in the Veil at all."

"Interesting, interesting," she murmured, tapping her chin with her too-long fingers again. "That was a possibility I saw, but I'm surprised he made that decision in the end. I suppose it worked out after all."

Florian opened his mouth to speak, but stopped short when Elodie abruptly and decisively clapped her hands together, her purple eyes meeting his gaze with a piercing look.

"I can help you find the true nature of this spirit, yes," she continued. "But it will take effort on your part. I can only show you how. And it cannot be accomplished with fae magic. You will need to use old magic for this type of divination."

Again Florian started to speak but was cut off—this time by Kade.

"No," he said quickly, shaking his head. Florian frowned, looking over at him. Kade met his eyes with a stubborn, almost fearful expression. "Don't do it, Florian. We both know old magic is dangerous. Look at what it did to the Summer Court. Look at what it did to *her!*" He gestured toward the hag—her lips pressed together at the insult, but otherwise she looked unperturbed.

"Don't be rude," he muttered, glancing nervously between the two. "I know it's dangerous, but if it's the only way to find out, then..." Kade's expression became pained, and he looked away.

"I can't stop you," he said quietly, brows furrowing as he looked down at his cup of tea that sat, still full, on the table. "But I really wish you wouldn't."

Florian hesitated. The prospect of using old magic did frighten him, remembering the warnings against it from both Kade and his father. But he certainly wasn't going to attempt something as world-breaking as the Summer Queen had done, and Elodie seemed confident that she could show him how to do it. She didn't say that it would be particularly dangerous, only that he would have to be the one to do it.

"What we will be attempting should have no inherent danger. It won't break any of the rules of the old magic," she said, as if she could sense his thoughts.

"Any of the *known* rules," Kade remarked, and her lips twisted into a slight smile.

"Of course," she said. "But I think we can both agree I understand how the old magic works: the types of rules it tends to have, if not the exact rules themselves. If there is some unknown rule that won't allow us to ascertain this fae's identity, I would be quite surprised. And even if there is such a rule, the price to be paid for breaking it will likely be a trifling matter. We aren't attempting anything particularly groundbreaking here."

"It's dangerous," Kade repeated, this time to Florian rather than Elodie.

"I need to know... Sorry," Florian said softly, glancing up at Kade apologetically. The other man's face became stony and still. "I'll be okay."

A beat of tense silence passed, then Kade sighed, his shoulders drooping, and he nodded as he looked away.

"Then come with me," Elodie said, standing up. At her full height she was nearly seven feet after all, far more intimidating now than she had been while sitting. "And we can begin."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Elodie moved toward the fireplace on the far wall, her gait long and loping, and beckoned for Florian to follow. Florian looked down at Kade, who remained seated. Their eyes met in silence for a long moment, until finally Florian scrubbed a hand nervously through his messy hair and murmured,

"It'll be okay. I just need you to trust me on this."

Kade seemed to almost flinch, looking away quickly with a pained expression. At first he didn't answer, which set Florian's heart beating fast against his ribs; but finally he gave a small, curt nod, and replied stiffly,

"I know."

Florian wasn't sure what exactly that meant. It didn't seem hostile, but he didn't have time to dwell on it. Tentatively, he reached for Kade's hand. The other man didn't pull away, and when Florian squeezed his fingers hard, Kade squeezed his hand back.

"Come along," Elodie said from where she stood by the fireplace. Florian nodded, and with one last look at Kade, he pulled his trembling hand away and followed her.

Once they were both in front of the fireplace, Elodie extended her hand to him. This close, her skin seemed pale and thin, stretched tightly over her long fingers. Her nails were black, almost like claws. Gingerly, Florian set his hand in hers; the moment their skin touched, a familiar lurching sensation rocked him forward.

He flinched on instinct, his eyes squeezing shut, and when he opened them again, they were no longer in the witch's sitting room. It was bright, almost too bright—there were no walls containing them and no floor beneath them. They were surrounded by white space on all sides, as if they were floating, though he still had the sensation of his feet on... something.

Florian looked around wildly, but it was only him and Elodie in this massive white expanse.

"No need to be concerned," she said, as idly as if they had simply stepped into another room. "We're in a... well, a liminal space, of sorts. We won't be interrupted, and there will be no distractions. I find more involved magic easier to work with in this space."

"How did...?" Florian stammered, still looking around. The unchanging landscape was disorienting. "Where is this?"

"Nowhere," she answered with a shrug. "A quiet place I made for my own use, outside of the world."

"You can do that?" he asked incredulously, finally settling his gaze on her. She laughed.

"There is much that can be done," she replied, stepping closer to him. "Now, would you like to identify this fae connected to you or not?"

"Yes," he said. He wanted to ask how any of this was possible, if she could show him how to do this, too—but there were far more pressing matters. Maybe someday he could come back.

"Give me both your hands."

He obeyed, holding out his hands, which she grasped tightly in her own.

"Now," she said, looking at him carefully—in this light, her eyes were a much brighter purple than before. "I will show you first how to differentiate between using fae magic and old magic. I want you to try pushing my hands out of yours, without speaking, without moving any part of your body."

"Okay," Florian said, frowning. He closed his eyes and imagined pushing her hands away with his words, sending the sensation through his fingertips while biting his tongue. With a slight jolt, like a zap of static, he felt her hands forced away from his.

"That was easy," he said as he opened his eyes, grinning—only to hesitate at the look of surprise on her face, slowly morphing into a frown with furrowed brows.

"Curious," she murmured. "Curious... What was the first thing you learned to do with your magic?" "What?"

"You weren't raised in the Veil, so I assume Jerah taught you to use fae magic, right?"

"Well, yes... The first thing he taught me was how to make a little light in my hand. Like the floating lanterns in the castle." He remembered being so enamored with the little floating lights, but now it was as simple and easy as tying his shoelaces.

"Show me," she said, gesturing abruptly as she took a step back.

"Why?" he asked, confused. What was the point? Weren't they here to figure out about the fae spirit?

"I need to see something," she replied simply. Florian sighed, unnerved at her sudden intense focus, but he cupped his hand in front of him anyway.

"Light," he said. A globule of light blossomed in his palm, though it was almost indiscernible against the bright white of everything around them. He looked back at Elodie; her expression was

more thoughtful now, almost curious.

"You haven't been using fae magic at all, have you?" she said.

Florian blinked, unsure how to answer. It sounded like a trick question. "What do you mean?"

"I could see it when you made that light. You cast as if you were using fae magic, but the magic you used wasn't fae at all. It was old magic."

"What are you talking about?" he exclaimed, shaking his head. "No, I used fae magic. All I know how to use is fae magic."

Elodie held up a hand, and his protests died in his throat—whether she had used her own magic to quiet him, or whether it was simply the intimidation of her presence that had silenced him, he couldn't tell.

"Have you ever done something that other fae couldn't do?" she pressed. "Something that surprised them, or that you picked up too quickly, too easily?"

"No," he said quickly, though a sinking feeling started to trickle down his throat as he said it. "Well... Maybe. I don't know."

"Tell me."

"I can... I can teleport, I guess," he stammered. "I've taken me and Kade. But only to places we've been before."

"That would be impossible with fae magic," she said. "Not difficult, not challenging. Outright impossible. The rules of fae magic wouldn't allow it."

"But..." he started. Nothing else left his mouth. Had he really been using old magic this whole time? How? How had he not known?

"I'm more curious about this spirit, now," Elodie murmured, stepping closer to him. "Perhaps this is a more powerful being than you thought, someone who was also well versed in old magic, and somehow you're channeling that instinct."

Florian barely heard her. Every scenario where he'd used magic was running through his head. Jerah had said that he'd been a quick learner, but he never suspected that he was using old magic--it wasn't even a possibility to worry about. It hadn't occurred to anyone, not a single fae or shifter, even when Kade had remarked about not knowing how he was able to teleport.

Quietly, he had thought it was because he was special, the prophesied prince, so of course he could do things other fae couldn't. But now there was no prophecy, nothing that made him special. Old magic was supposed to be powerful and dangerous, and this whole time he'd been using it, so flippantly, so easily.

"I don't understand," he finally managed to croak out, and he realized with a burning sense of shame that he was on the verge of crying. "What does—what does this all mean?"

"I don't know yet," Elodie said. "We'll find out."

Florian nodded and weakly wiped at his eyes; but when he looked at Elodie again, she only observed him for a long moment, her head tilting—this time looking more like a bird of prey, analyzing him thoroughly with a piercing gaze.

"You're upset," she remarked, and despite himself Florian rolled his eyes.

"Yes," he said.

"Because you didn't know you were using old magic?"

"Because I feel like I don't know *anything* anymore," Florian snapped. He pressed a hand to his eyes in frustration. "I thought—I thought I knew what was going on, what I needed to do. But I don't know. I didn't know I was using old magic, and I still don't know anything about the Arrows, and the whole reason I even came to the Veil in the first place turned out to be a lie."

For a long moment Elodie was silent, her head still tilted slightly to the side. As she considered him, she looked less human now than ever before.

"Not a lie. A misunderstanding," she corrected, and Florian let out an irritated huff of breath.

"Sure," he said. "Still."

"It's not a bad thing to learn that you have more to learn," Elodie continued. "And isn't it better to know the truth than to continue to believe a falsehood?"

"Well, yes," Florian relented. "I'm just... frustrated. It's a lot."

"You'll need a clear mind in order to separate the spirit's latent memories from your own. Tell me what you're feeling," Elodie said.

Florian shook his head. "Won't I have a clearer mind if I don't talk about it? I can focus on this."

"Not unless you want your emotions to fester like a wound," she retorted.

"I didn't know this was going to be a therapy session," Florian muttered. Something in her demeanor had changed—he couldn't put a finger on what, exactly, but it made him feel on edge, like she was scrutinizing every part of him.

Her head tilted again, in the opposite direction this time. "You retreat into anger."

"You don't know *anything* about me," he snapped, only for a hot surge of irritation to rise in his chest, both at the anger he did feel, and at the knowing smirk that crossed her face.

"I know very little about you, Changeling King," she agreed, nodding. "Educate me."

The tension in Florian's shoulders deflated. Clearly he wasn't going to win this argument, so he might as well tell her what she wanted to hear.

"Of course I'm angry," he muttered. "We've been traveling through the Blight for nearly two weeks. And then we fell into your jungle and I hurt my back and then I almost drowned. Trying to get here sucked."

Slowly she nodded. "Yes, that would be frustrating. What else?"

Florian shrugged. "I don't know."

"I think you do," she pressed.

He scowled, but considered it for a moment.

"I'm angry my dad died," he finally said, quieter this time. "I'm more angry about it than sad. I barely got to know him. I didn't know him at all for twenty years, and then when I finally met him he died a month later. And he was supposed to help me. This would all be a lot easier if he were still alive. But everyone else seems more sad about it than me, and that makes me... I don't know. I guess I feel guilty I don't really feel sad about it anymore."

"How could you mourn someone you barely knew?" she agreed, shrugging. Her bright purple eyes remained trained on him. "But there is more you feel guilt over."

Florian's face burned red with embarrassment. "What, do you want my whole life story?"

Again she shrugged. "If that's what you feel compelled to tell me."

"I don't feel *compelled* to tell you anything," he muttered. But she kept looking at him with the same expectant expression. "What? What do you want from me?"

"I want to know where the rest of this guilt is from," she replied.

"My dad just died. Why wouldn't I feel shitty about it?"

"You just said you didn't feel sad," she answered, and he scowled.

"That isn't what I meant," he started, but something in the air changed as Elodie started to speak again. The white nothingness around them seemed to almost take on a lavender tinge for only a moment as she opened her mouth.

"Tell me," she said, and Florian could feel the magic rush through him like a wave. He couldn't stop the words bubbling up from his throat.

"It's my fault," he croaked, hating her as he said it. "I didn't listen to him—and he died—it was my fault."

The words seemed to float through the air, a soft reddish hue against their white surroundings, like tiny threads spidering out from his mouth. Elodie reached out and grabbed the ephemeral threads.

Their color became purple in her hand, and she tugged.

"And I'm s—s—"

Florian gagged, trying with every ounce of willpower to stop the words that she was pulling out from his body, but it was like trying to plug up a dam that was already overflowing. "I'm scared."

He burst into tears as he said it, and everything came gushing out of him at once. "I didn't ask for any of this—I just want to go home—I want to go on that trip with Nadia—and I don't—I don't want to die."

Elodie's face was unmoving as she watched him, still pulling on the threads of magic in her hands as if she were rolling up a ball of yarn, and the words kept coming out of him.

"Those shifters in the Blight," Florian cried. He squeezed his eyes shut so he didn't have to look at her pallid face as he spoke. "I killed—at least one of them. They weren't monsters. The Arrow made her shift back—they were probably all shifters, and maybe we could have s-saved them. And Kade is ___"

He slapped his hands to his mouth, but the words still came, muffled as they were.

"I know he's going to leave eventually. I was so shitty to him before—I don't even know why he likes me. He should hate me. I don't want him to leave." He felt the next thought bubbling up in him, and pressed his hands closer to his mouth, but he was still helpless to stop it.

"And I still haven't told him—told anybody—how much I f-forgot—and that scares me too, I don't know w-what it means... I don't w-want to forget." His voice broke into a sob, but still he spoke and cried, unintelligible.

Slowly Elodie nodded, her hands stilling. The thread coming from Florian's mouth snapped, and in her hands was what looked like a tiny spool of glimmering red-violet thread.

"That should do it," she said.

Weakly Florian's hands pulled away from his mouth, the pressure in his chest finally subsiding.

"What the fuck is w-wrong with you?" he forced out between shuddering breaths, wiping his tearstreaked face.

"I took all those feelings out of you, for now," she said, holding up the threads. "So that when we begin, you can focus, and discern what are your true memories and what aren't."

Frustrating as it was, Florian did somehow feel more... not quite calm, but not entirely numb. There was *quiet* in his mind—he hadn't realized just how loud and anxious and constant the noise in his head had been since his father died. It was exactly as she described: the emotions that she had drawn out with her magic were simply gone. When he thought about them, he was distantly aware that he had

felt angry, and guilty, and scared; but it was like someone else was feeling it. It was almost a relief, but distantly he thought that he should be angry at her for doing this to him.

"Take some time to center yourself," she continued, moving to sit down despite the lack of visible ground beneath them. "We're in no rush. When you're ready to begin, let me know."

Her eyes closed. Florian watched her suspiciously for a long moment, but she kept the bunch of softly glowing threads loosely grasped in her hand. Her eyes remained shut, her breathing even. He wondered if she was sleeping, or meditating, or just waiting.

Eventually, Florian awkwardly moved into a sitting position as well, then tentatively laid down. It was strange, feeling some force on his back that kept him in the same position; but there was no shadow beneath him, and no visible sign of anything other than the blank white background that stretched in every direction.

With his hands pressed to his eyes, Florian forced himself to breathe slow and deep. While Elodie seemed to have taken the most distressing of his emotions out of him, his heart still thudded with stress and resentment. His face felt hot to the touch—he could only imagine how red with embarrassment he must have been.

But... There was a certain relief to having spoken aloud everything that he'd been trying to keep down for the past several weeks, much as he hated to admit it. Everything had felt so big and unmanageable, but now that he had said it all aloud, it felt smaller somehow. At least, some of it did.

He wasn't sure how long he lay there on his back, hands over his eyes and breathing evenly. He might have fallen asleep; he was exhausted and sore, after all. Eventually he pulled his hands away, wincing in the bright white light as he slowly sat back up. He felt not exactly well-rested, but at least not as tired as he had been.

"Okay," he said softly, looking down at his hands with half-lidded eyes. His voice was still hoarse. "I think I'm ready now."

"Good," Elodie replied. When he glanced up at her, she was standing, and her eyes were open as if she'd been watching him the whole time.

She gestured for him to stand, so he rose to meet her. When she offered him her hands again, he hesitated before gingerly placing his hands into her palms—the ball of his emotions was no longer in her grasp. Distantly he wondered where she was keeping it, or if it were gone forever. He felt like he should be nervous about it, but everything from his collarbones to his stomach felt empty, the place where he would normally feel anxiety simply hollow instead.

"Now," she continued, pulling him from his thoughts. "I want you to focus. Use your magic to draw out the memories of the spirit attached to you."

"How?" he asked, frowning, but she only shook her head.

"That part is up to you," she said. "It will come naturally to you. Maybe you'll force it to reveal itself, or coax it into showing you. Old magic is intuitive, more instinct than anything else. It is a primal force of nature, so to wield it is primal as well. Channel it through yourself, and it will do what you want."

Florian sighed. That didn't really help, but he closed his eyes anyway and tried to concentrate on the flash of memory that he had of Soleil, of the strange sadness that wasn't his own yet made him cry in grief, what felt like a lifetime ago in his father's study in the Winter Court. He remembered, and reached out with his magic. Instead of allowing it to flow through him and out through his words, Florian let it sit, feeling the pressure mount in his chest like a held breath.

"Who are you?" he heard himself whisper, and behind his eyelids a clear image erupted.

He was no longer standing across from Elodie in the liminal space that she had created. Now he was standing in a forest, watching a faerie circle in the ground, waiting.

"I see something," he said, his voice sounding impossibly faraway. "I'm in the woods. I'm waiting for her."

"Keep following that thread," Elodie's voice came, muffled and distorted, as if he were underwater.

Florian nodded, and felt himself sigh—no, not himself, the body he was inhabiting. He knew she wasn't going to come, not today. The sun was already setting. She never came past sunset. He turned to go. He would come back again tomorrow.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I turned to go, and I was in the Summer Court now, following her. She wanted to go read in the garden. I followed her.

She turned and smiled at me, and something about the golden light catching her eyes, making her hair shine, like honey on her skin—it makes my chest ache. My love. My wife, if only...

There is a ring on my finger that hasn't left my skin in years. Its cool surface is a permanent part of me now, familiar as my own reflection.

I should have just put my foot down—

We've been to so many places together, on both Earth and in the Veil. For all the fantastical sights I've seen, I think the Summer Court remains my favorite place of all. The heat is far preferable to the bitter winters of home: the colors of life splashed across every surface so unlike the cold, austere estates that were so inaccessible to me, to my mother—

My mother! I still wonder what she must have thought of me, where she thinks I went. There is guilt, still, when I think of her. How different the world would be if I had stayed.

I should have just told her no!

The Summer Court remains my favorite. Sometimes it still feels surreal to live in such luxury. We have our own quarters, a bath house, multiple gardens, libraries, my own study, and her work room—a yawning chasm of darkness, blood—it hurts—ithurtsithurtsithurts—

I could never tell her no. She wanted more, wanted it so badly that she held too hard and broke it, broke the world—and for what? For me?

For me—she did the impossible once, after all, of course she could do it again. But I remember the witch, how she was certain it wouldn't work, but wouldn't dissuade her either. The witch couldn't tell her no. Who could tell her no? She was a queen, and I was born a stable boy, nothing. Why was it me? What did she see that day that kept her coming back for me, that she might do the impossible to keep me with her? I was nothing, nothing, I'm nothing. She made me everything and nothing now.

And I couldn't tell her no! If I had just told her no we would have had more time. We knew it was dangerous, but she believed she could, and I believed in her... But look at us now. Look at the world now. Was my life worth so much? The lives of the whole Summer Court, so many fae? So many shifters? The entirety of the Veil? This is the price she paid, and still it couldn't save me.

I miss her—I miss the Summer Court—I want to go home!

"Don't lose yourself, Florian," a woman's voice—not *her* voice—came distantly, so faint it might have been an echo. Florian?

He blinked. He was Florian. He had to hold onto that, had to remember—

"Who are you?" he whispered, but he thought he knew now.

He was standing in the same forest again—no, not him. He was looking through someone else's eyes. It was the same forest, but a different time—and stepping out of the faerie circle was *her*, the woman he had seen, Soleil. She was smiling at him, almost shy, almost amused. She was waiting. She had asked him something.

A voice came from his mouth—it wasn't his own. His heart was pounding—he was nervous. "I'm Thaddeus Brown, ma'am, a stable hand over on the Hershel estate. Are you lost? Do you need help getting home?"

"Not at all." She laughed as she spoke. Her voice was so familiar, a voice he heard every day for twenty years. His lover, his wife, his queen. He would know her anywhere, even now in this muddle of time and memory. How long had it been? "You are a handsome one, aren't you, Thaddeus Brown?"

His heart leapt into his throat, blood rushing in his ears. She was the most divine being he had ever seen, and she thought he was handsome.

"Th-Thank you, ma'am," was all he managed to get out.

"Please, you can just call me Soleil."

Recognition had dawned on Florian, but this only confirmed it. He tried to pull away, but a wave of grief grabbed him and pulled him back down—not his own, but strong enough to keep him in the memory.

Her name was like the sound of windchimes in a breeze. My Soleil!

I could see myself, then—after it happened. I watched her weep over me. There was so much blood. My eyes were pale, then, the same color as her own. She did it. She loved how dark my eyes were, plain brown eyes that were somehow such a wonder in the Veil where everyone's eyes glowed with magic. I knew she was going to try it before she did. I was floating away, and then she pulled me back—and that was when it happened, the light, the heat. Don't you see? It was all my fault. I

couldn't tell her no, could never tell her no for anything. Of course I wanted more time with her. But instead we cut our time short and doomed everyone else with us. She couldn't let me go, and here we are.

"I know who you are," Florian—he was Florian—choked out.

I know you do. I know you do. I know.

"You have to let me go."

But it's been so long—please—don't you want to see? I could show you, show you everything—

Images flashed by faster than he could process, distant snippets of age-old memories. He was a small boy weeping, stumbling to his feet in the forest—he was a young man bewildered and awed as she led him into another world, the Veil—he was a human amongst fae, none saying anything, only their knowing, gleaming eyes watching how he held her hand—he was consort to the Queen, never a king himself, never truly married—he was an outsider, a foreigner everywhere he went, as they visited every kingdom and nation in the Veil—he was home no matter where he went, because she was always with him—he was so in love, watching the way the sun caressed her bronze skin, her pale eyelashes fluttering as she slept in the garden—he was *dying*, crying out her name as hot knives of magic tore him open from the inside—and he was nothing, only guilt and memory flung across the Blight like a haze, waiting to find a tether. He was tethered to so many, but they never went back to the Summer Court—how could they, when there was nothing to return to?

And then he was a newborn fae princess, wailing at the agony of light and cold when there had only ever been comfort and warmth. Then he was a Changeling child that went away: to Earth where no magic could tether him, and he was nothing again until... until now?

He was *Florian*. He held onto the thought like a lifeline. He was Florian, and the other was Thaddeus, and they were separate. Weren't they? He was Florian. He wasn't anyone else.

"You have to let me go," was all he could repeat against the onslaught. "You have to let me go."

And, finally, he did. Florian felt the tendrils of memory relax around him—a sensation of loss, of guilt, of yearning, of hope. He couldn't make any sense of it, but pushed through anyway until his eyes flew open, burning in the white light.

"It's him," he gasped, sucking in a deep breath as if he had been drowning all over again. His hands were trembling in front of him, gripping hard at a single glowing thread that came from his chest—a pale, pale blue, almost white, the color of seafoam. The color of her eyes. The color his eyes had been when he died. "It's Thaddeus. Her lover. It's him."

Elodie's hands were wrapped around his wrists, watching him carefully with her gleaming purple eyes.

"Yes," she whispered, for once sounding... unsure, maybe, though Florian couldn't quite place it. His heart was hammering in his chest. It was impossible to focus on anything other than the tether to his chest, holding it tight as if he would forget everything that he saw the moment he let it go. "I saw... bits and pieces."

His whole body ached, he realized, and his legs were quivering weakly beneath him. How long had it been since the process started? With a groan he sat down, blinking hard against the bright light. Elodie moved with him, so they were sitting across from each other. Her too-long limbs folded under her as she sat cross-legged, her eyes never leaving him.

"Curious," she muttered. "A human shouldn't be able to linger beyond death like this. Not this long."

"I don't think he was human when he died," Florian panted, still trying to slow his racing heart. "I think she did it. It killed him, but she did it. Did you see—did you see after?"

"After?"

"After she changed him."

Elodie frowned. "No. How could there be an after? Turning him into a fae was what started the Blight."

"No," Florian protested, shaking his head. "It was after. She tried to bring him *back*." He could still see it clearly, looking down at his—no, Thaddeus'—body covered in blood. His pale, dead eyes were still open, as Soleil screamed for him to come back, reaching out with her hand to seize his soul out of the old magic where it began to dissolve.

It had felt like ripping, like burning apart, when she grabbed his soul. He didn't know how it worked—how it caused the Blight—but somehow that was what triggered it, the light, the heat. It didn't make sense, but he knew it was the truth.

"The little fool," Elodie breathed, leaning back as she processed the words. "The first rule of old magic is that life can't be restored once it's gone. This is *known*. And still she tried it..." She let out a long huff of a breath. "And of course the payment of breaking this rule must have been the Blight. She doomed countless others to death for her arrogance."

That, at least, made sense: of course the first rule of magic would be that the dead couldn't be brought back. But Soleil had already tried the impossible and succeeded, when she first brought

Thaddeus into the Veil. Maybe it was arrogance that blinded her, in the end, rather than love—but the thought made his heart hurt.

"What do I do now?" Florian whispered. He certainly had gained the insight that he had hoped for. It wasn't some random Summer fae that had latched onto him, but Thaddeus himself, the next closest thing to Queen Soleil. Yet now that he knew, he was at a loss as to what to do with that knowledge.

"Well," Elodie said slowly, thinking it over. "You know more about Soleil and the Summer Court than anyone else alive now. Surely that must be of use to you."

"I... I guess so."

"Let go of that, now," she said, gesturing to where he still held the thread that protruded from his chest and floated up into the air. "He's not going anywhere."

"Will I forget?" Florian asked, frowning. Despite his worry, Elodie laughed.

"Of course not," she replied. He nodded, and hesitantly, Florian started to release his grip on the thread. It had no weight, but as he opened his hands, there was a strange sensation as it snaked back into his chest. The pale thread quickly disappeared, but it didn't feel like he lost any of the memories. He could still imagine Soleil standing in the faerie circle in the forest—could feel Thaddeus' awe and anxiety as clearly as if it were his own.

"I think that's why you've been using old magic all this time," Elodie said suddenly, and he looked back up to her in confusion. "Whatever magic is keeping his spirit on this plane, binding it to you—it all just glows with it. You've been surrounded by it your whole life. No wonder it was what you instinctively reached for when Jerah tried to teach you fae magic."

Florian sighed. That made sense, too, in a way.

"So I know more about her," Florian muttered, leaning back until he was on the ground once more. He felt weak, his hands still trembling—he imagined it must have taken a lot of magic to accomplish. "But how is that going to help?"

"It may give you more insight into the Arrows," Elodie said. "Or, when you eventually meet her, if she still remains in the Summer Court, you will already know her."

"She won't know me, though," Florian said.

"Perhaps," Elodie said. "But if nothing else, at least now you know. Isn't that what you wanted?"

"Yes," Florian sighed, looking away. "I guess I had hoped figuring this out would help me figure out what to do next. But it hasn't really changed anything."

"No?"

"No, the plan is still the same... Keep finding the Arrows." Florian sucked in a sharp breath, thinking of Kade. "Shit. I have to tell Kade about all this."

"Are you ready to go back?" she asked.

"Yes," Florian said, forcing himself to sit up. His neck and back were tense and painful. When they were back in the Winter Court, he was going to sleep for days.

"Here. Let me give this back to you first," she said, holding out her hand once more. This time, the amber-colored ball of glowing string rested in her palms—the emotions she had taken from him. "You only need to touch it and all these will be returned to you."

Florian eyed them for a moment. It was... nice, not having the roiling feelings inside of him.

"Don't," Elodie said quickly, as if reading his thoughts. "They'll just come back on their own, over time. None of it ever completely goes away. Better to hold onto the feelings you know."

With a heavy sigh, Florian nodded. He supposed that it couldn't be avoided forever. He reached down to take them—wound up like a tiny ball of yarn—and the moment his fingers touched them, they were gone. A tingling sensation shot up his arm into his chest, and his breath shuddered as it all came back—subdued, but there, as if he had been drunk and was just now sobering up.

"Okay," he said, looking down at his hand as he flexed his fingers nervously. "I'm ready."

"Then let's go," Elodie said, reaching out her hand. She helped him to his feet, and Florian watched the white light around them wink out into darkness, then with a lurch they were standing once again in her sitting room.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The sitting room was empty when they returned, the fire in the fireplace extinguished.

"Kade?" Florian called, letting his hands fall away from Elodie's as he looked around. Cluttered as the home was, it didn't look like there was another room. He wasn't in any of the chairs, either. "Kade?"

"He must have gone back outside," Elodie sighed. "And probably couldn't get back in."

"Shit," Florian muttered, heading for the door. "Are you out here, Kade?"

He took a few steps outside, but almost immediately stumbled to a stop. Their shelter had been set up outside of Elodie's tree, and a thin line of smoke rose up into the air from its other side—but he barely had time to wonder why it was there as Kade came out, nearly running up to him. He looked—almost scared? Worried?

"Florian," Kade breathed, wrapping his arms around him. He was *relieved*, Florian realized, but the realization only made him more confused. "You're okay. God, I was so worried about you. Are you alright?"

"I mean—yeah?" Florian stammered, absently patting his back. "I'm a little tired, but I'm okay. You don't have to be so worried, Kade."

"Worried?" Kade exclaimed, pushing him back to look at his face. He seemed bewildered. "Of course I was *worried*, Florian, you've been gone for days."

"What?" Florian said, frowning. He looked back into the tree where Elodie was watching them from just outside the doorframe. "No way. A couple hours, maybe, but..."

He trailed off. *Had* it been days? It didn't feel like it had been that long, but wherever they had been certainly wasn't the Veil and wasn't Earth. Elodie looked utterly unperturbed. "How long were we gone for?" he asked her, but she only shrugged.

"Three days," Kade said quickly, his tone suddenly blunt. "It's been three days."

"It's a different plane of existence, so some time dilation isn't out of the realm of possibility. I've never had to worry about how long it's been before," she said, and Kade's face darkened to a scowl.

"Jesus. I'm sorry, Kade, I had no idea," Florian stammered, looking nervously between them.

"I—" Kade started, anger flashing across his face. But abruptly he let Florian go and took several steps away, facing the tent. Even from where he stood only a few steps from the threshold of Elodie's home, Florian could hear Kade breathing hard, his hands first balling into fists at his sides, then coming up to press to his face. He wanted to go to him, but his feet were frozen to the ground with uncertainty. He had no idea how to even begin trying to comfort Kade, if he could even do anything at all.

"I'll give you some privacy," Elodie said dryly, slowly starting to close the door behind him. "Why don't you come back in once everything is settled?"

"Sure," Florian replied, his eyes still lingering on Kade. How did he always end up doing something to hurt him?

Slowly he took a step closer to him, then another. "Kade?" he said softly.

After a moment of visibly hesitating, Kade turned to face him again. The anger had left his face. Now, he only looked defeated, and that was somehow worse.

"You were gone for three days, Florian," he muttered, shaking his head. "I had no idea where you were, if you were okay... I didn't have any way to get home. I couldn't do anything but wait and wonder if you were ever going to come back. I thought I was going to go crazy."

Florian winced. He had known going in that if anything had happened to him, he would be taking Kade with him—but to have it laid out so clearly now filled him with guilt. He could get back to the Winter Court on his own without a problem, but Kade was completely reliant on him to get through the Blight. If something had happened to him, if he had never come back...

"Please don't do this again," Kade continued, his voice rasping, and when Florian looked back up, he was on the verge of tears. "Please don't go somewhere I can't follow."

He blinked back his own tears. What could he say? He couldn't promise that to him, to anyone.

"I'm sorry, Kade," Florian repeated, gingerly reaching out to press himself to Kade's chest and wrap his arm around the other man's waist. "But I... I don't know if I can guarantee that. I don't know what's going to happen."

Kade's arms tightened around him. "I need to keep you safe."

"I know. I'll try," Florian said softly. It was the most he could promise.

For a long moment Kade was silent. His tension was all but palpable against his skin. Florian could feel his heart thudding fast from where his cheek was pressed to Kade's chest. Finally, though, he felt more than heard Kade swallow hard, then say in a voice barely above a whisper,

"So what did you find out?"

Florian sighed. It seemed so pointless now—to have left Kade alone and worried for three days just to know the identity of the spirit—but he needed to know, to be certain.

"I'm gonna sit down," Florian muttered, stepping away from Kade, who released him from his arms. They sat down cross-legged, facing each other—Florian was acutely aware they mirrored how he and Elodie had sat across from each other in the same way, and for some reason it made him uncomfortable. He stretched his legs out instead and began to explain.

"Something my dad told me as part of my history lessons," he started, looking down into his lap to avoid Kade's eyes, "Was that Queen Soleil had a husband—or, well, I guess a partner. But he was a human, and somehow she brought him into the Veil."

"I know," Kade replied. "Jerah taught me all that too. That she tried to make him a fae, and he died. And that's what they think caused the Blight."

"Well," Florian sighed. "It's him."

A beat of silence passed, then Kade repeated uncertainly, "It's him?"

Florian nodded. "It's him. Her partner. His name was Thaddeus. That's who's connected to me. I could see his memories. And..." He hesitated. "She did turn him into a fae, and it did kill him, but I don't think that's what caused the Blight. I think the Blight happened right after that, when she tried to bring him back to life."

Kade sucked in a sharp breath, and Florian chanced to look up at him. He looked first surprised, then his brows furrowed in concern.

"She tried to bring him back," he repeated slowly. "That's... definitely not allowed, with any kind of magic."

"That's what Elodie said," Florian murmured, nodding. "So... I don't know. It feels like that should be important, that he was such a major person in all this, but I don't really know what it means."

"You have to bring him back to her," Kade said quickly, looking up to meet his eyes. He made it sound like the most obvious thing in the world. "That's why it has to be you."

Florian blinked, dumbfounded. It was completely antithetical to what Elodie had told him—that what they had thought was a prophecy was only a prediction on her part, that if he had not stepped up to start gathering the Arrows, then someone else would—or someone else might, it was all so confused now. After all, someone else had tried before, he thought, and failed. It had made the Blight worse. They had failed so miserably that their names and identities had been lost to time; and maybe that someone else didn't carry the soul of her partner with them.

"Could that be it?" he murmured, pressing a hand to the place in his chest where the thread, Thaddeus' soul, had connected to him.

"It would make sense to me," Kade replied.

They were both silent for a long moment, Kade watching Florian with his eyes gleaming orange in the dim light, his expression inscrutable. Florian couldn't put a name to the emotions making his chest feel tight and his hands tingle. He missed his father. Jerah would know, he thought. Jerah could tell him if that was the truth.

"I don't know," he finally said, barely above a whisper. "Maybe you're right. I don't know. I guess it does make sense."

"The witch was wrong," Kade said, as if reading his thoughts. "Maybe she didn't think it was a prophecy. But I know you're special, you're important. I know it has to be you. And now we know why."

Weakly, Florian nodded. He wasn't convinced, but Kade seemed to already believe it fully. It was only a theory, really; but if Kade believed it, he would trust him.

"Yeah," he said. "Okay."

Kade reached out and squeezed his free hand. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Florian said quickly—too quickly, he thought, as Kade looked completely unconvinced. "Just... thinking about it all, I guess."

Slowly, Kade nodded.

Florian sucked in a sharp breath and blurted out, "There's something else I have to tell you."

"Something else?"

"Well," he sighed, looking down at his hands. "When I was... with the witch, she was able to figure out that I... Um, I haven't been using fae magic right."

For a moment they were both silent. "What does that mean?" Kade asked, but something in his tone had changed. Florian knew, somehow, that Kade knew.

"I guess I'd been using old magic, on instinct," he said slowly, still unable to look Kade in the face. "Elodie said she thinks it's because of the fae spirit—because he had so much old magic infused in him, and that's how we're connected. So when I tried to use magic that first time, it's what came to me most naturally and then I just kept... kept using it. I didn't know at the time."

He felt more than heard Kade breathe out, long and slow, deflating as he processed.

"I see," he finally said, his voice tense. "I... It's a good thing nothing went wrong up until now, then."

Hesitantly, Florian glanced up at him. His expression was careful, but he didn't seem angry. His eyes flickered to Florian's, and the corners of his mouth twitched in an attempt at a smile.

"You're not mad?" Florian asked, and Kade let out a huff of a laugh, shaking his head.

"No," he said. "No. Maybe I would have been, but... I'm just relieved you're safe."

Florian blinked, surprised. He had expected the news to upset him—with how adamant Kade had been for him to not use old magic—but his countenance now was one of weary resignation. The cold, numb feeling had started to creep up the back of Florian's neck again, but the sensation of Kade taking hold of his hands snapped him out of it with a jolt.

"Can we go home now?" Kade asked. "Back to the Winter Court?"

Florian nodded, then looked back at the tree. The single handle on a knot on the trunk was still there. "Yeah. I need to ask her one last thing first, though."

He looked back at Kade, and somehow the other man seemed to know that he needed to talk to her and only her. Kade nodded.

"I'll start packing all this up, then," he said slowly, and got to his feet.

Florian watched him for a moment before getting up as well. His legs quivered underneath him as he walked back to Elodie's tree and placed his hand on the door knob. The door swung open for him easily, and he found Elodie sitting at her large plush chair again. The two chairs that he and Kade had been sitting on were gone, and she was reading a large book propped in her lap—she glanced up at him over the tome, and he realized that she was wearing half-moon reading glasses. He stifled a laugh: it was somehow endearing, despite the oddity of it all. She was rather eccentric, but he couldn't think of her as a hag anymore, even if she did live in a swamp.

He closed the door behind him, and she set down her book.

"Leaving so soon?" she asked idly, and he nodded.

"I just wanted to ask you," he said, and bit his lip. The thought had been gnawing at him since they'd returned, but it felt almost poisonous to speak aloud. "Do you... Do you maybe think that his soul being tethered to mine is what made me a Changeling? Could it have made me—made me trans?"

She tilted her head, and he looked away, feeling ashamed the moment the words left his mouth.

"Explain," she said simply.

"It's just," Florian stammered, feeling her piercing gaze on him even though his eyes were locked on the ground. "He's, you know, a man, and maybe if I hadn't had his spirit connected to me somehow, I would have been... I would have been okay with being a girl." His mouth twisted into a grimace. "Do you think that could be possible?"

"Hmm," he heard Elodie hum under her breath—and then, to his surprise, she laughed. His head snapped up to look at her again. "Fae worry over the silliest things. To your first question, that this could have made you a Changeling—it's entirely possible. Housing a second soul inside you, especially one so suffused with old magic, could certainly be the source of your Changeling nature. In fact, I would consider it quite likely. Changeling fae stopped appearing right around the same time the fae collectively decided to stop using old magic. There is almost certainly a connection there."

Her gaze became more pointed now, searching him—he wanted to look away, but couldn't bring himself to do it.

"As for your second concern," she continued. "I don't think so. But who can be sure? The true question is, why would it matter?"

"I mean..." Florian started, but there were no words to explain the roiling in his chest. "I don't know. It feels like it would matter."

"Who you are is your truth now," she said, gesturing toward him with an outstretched hand. "The future is nebulous and may as well not exist. Your actions determine your future, and your past determines your present. This has been your reality for a long time. There are no longer any futures where you might have been content to remain female. All that exists is the present you made."

Florian was silent for a long moment. Somehow her answer was not comforting, but the alternative would have been worse.

All he had wanted was answers. He hated that he had found none, only different questions.

"Thank you," he said stiffly. Though her expression remained the same, he could tell she knew he was unsatisfied—he remained an open book to her, it seemed. A beat of silence passed as she observed him, and again he felt very much like a tiny animal being scrutinized by a bird of prey.

"I wish you only good fortune, King of the Winter Court," she finally said, standing up as she spoke. "Despite my seclusion here, I do share your dream of seeing peace and abundance restored to the Veil once again. If there is ever anything I can do to help you, or if you simply want my advice once again, you will always be welcome here."

Florian nodded. That seemed significant—he remembered even his father had needed an invitation to come here—but all he could focus on was the growing pit of frustration in his stomach.

"You are angry," she said, in the casual tone she had used so often, as if it were an idle observation about the weather. It still stung to hear.

"Yes," he sighed, rubbing a hand to the back of his neck. "None of this turned out the way I imagined. I guess nothing ever does."

"Anger has its place," she said, shrugging. "Only take care not to direct it where it doesn't belong."

"Right. Thanks," Florian muttered, glancing away. But the irritation at her words left him as quickly as it came, and he forced himself to stay, despite how much he wanted to go. "Really, thank you. It didn't go the way I thought, but it was still... important. I appreciate your help."

"As I said, I will always be happy to help," she said, and this time a slow smile spread across her face. Her mouth stretched unnaturally far, but he knew better than to be afraid of her now. "Until next time, then."

"Yeah," Florian nodded, turning to go. "Bye."

She didn't answer as he opened the door and stepped outside.

Kade was packing up their belongings away, and only a few panels of their shelter remained standing. When Florian glanced back at the tree, the door knob he had used was gone, and in its place stood a purplish mushroom. He let out a dry chuckle, shaking his head, then turned back to Kade.

"Need help?" he asked, and together they finished packing away the last of the tent.

When they were done, Florian glanced back at the tree one last time, but it didn't look any different than before. He looked back at Kade; his face was stern and still. He felt tense, though he couldn't quite place it.

"Ready?" he asked, holding out his hand. Kade nodded silently, but took his hand and squeezed it hard. There was tension in the air between them, but Kade was quiet, and his face didn't betray any emotion.

Florian sighed, centering himself, and imagined them both back home, standing in the Moon Garden. This time he didn't even try to speak the words aloud. He only exhaled the magic, and with a popping sensation, they returned to the Winter Court.

TO BE CONTINUED

AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading *The Drawn Arrow!* Book three of the Chronicles of the Veil will arrive mid-2022.

To receive the prequel novella *The Endless Summer*, please sign up for my email newsletter here.

The Endless Summer is a secret history of the Veil. This 14k word novella provides additional information about the mysterious figure of Queen Soleil of the Summer Court and takes place approximately two hundred years before the events of *The Changeling Prophecy*. It is not required reading to understand the events of The Chronicles of the Veil, but just provides some extra backstory for fun.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lionel Hart (he/him) is an indie author of MM fantasy romance and paranormal romance. Currently, he resides in north San Diego with his husband and their dog. For personal updates and new releases, follow the links below.

Twitter: @lionelhart_

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