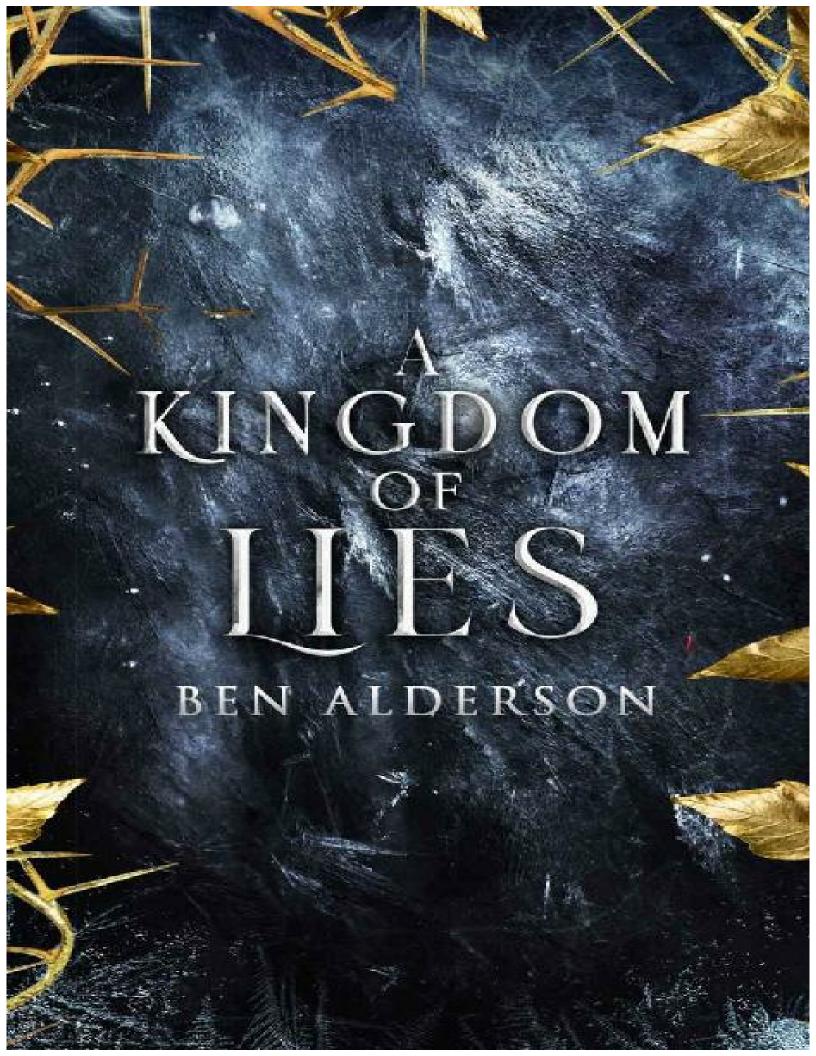


## A KINGDOM OF LIES

A REALM OF FEY SERIES

## BEN ALDERSON



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Jasmine, for being a passionate supporter for this series and encouraging me to carry on.

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

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

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B lood dried between my fingers as I held a hand over the fresh wound. It was a strange feeling, to heal without medicine or prolonged time. The smaller the cut, the quicker the flesh knitted back together. Large wounds took longer to heal, but still faster than it would have been before.

Before I claimed the Icethorn Court and became its King.

"Careful," Erix said, bending his knees with the blade raised before him. The dawn light caught its tip with a wink.

There was not a cloud in the clear blue sky, but even with the rising sun, there was still the chill of new winter in the air.

"Do you find yourself distracted, or do you put your clumsiness down to lack of sleep?"

Erix knew exactly what to say to get a reaction out of me. And his words created a burning warmth that flooded my cheeks and made them stand out like twin, red cherries.

"If you concern yourself with the missing hours of rest, then perhaps you should find another bed to stay in," I replied, fighting a sly grin from spreading across my face.

Erix pouted, straightening his posture until every one of his eight mounds of muscle across his abdomen flexed. Yes, eight. I counted a few times to make sure I was not wrong. And it was actually the rolling bead of sweat that ran a course down his chest, across his lower stomach until it absorbed in the hem of his training trousers that distracted me.

"Now why would I do that?" he said, one dark brow raised above his silver stare which was full to the rim with mischief. And danger. "It is more... exciting being beside you."

I shrugged, twisting the golden dagger in my hand without thought. It had become an extension of my body in the past weeks. Training daily on rotation with Erix, Althea and Gyah meant that the dagger never strayed far from my hand.

"Careful," I repeated his initial warning. "Or you might find yourself distracted."

It was a thrill to see his mind catch up with my own, unseen action. I sprang forward, the cut on my upper arm now hardly a faded scratch, and ran towards my guard. He shifted his footing, but failed to take a complete step before I was upon him.

The grass at his feet were now blades of frozen glass. Erix had not spied the creeping ice that I forced across the ground towards him during our conversation. It encased his feet, all the way up to his ankle, preventing him from moving.

"You tricky little—"

I was behind him in moments, reaching up on tiptoes until I could wrap my forearm around his neck and squeeze. With my free hand I held the golden dagger, the very one he had given me as a gift, directly before his face.

We waited like that for moments of silence until the low rumble of his laugh interrupted the stillness. "Very good, little bird. I must say I am impressed. But—"

"Ah, ah, stop right there. Can't you just leave me with praise and not have to point out a flaw? I mean come on, Erix, admit that I won and be done with it."

"All I was going to say is you should never stop until your enemy has truly been dealt with. Have I not made that completely clear?"

There was something about his bossy nature that turned me on. I was sure he knew it too because it seemed to only intensify during our morning training sessions in the private gardens within Farrador castle's grounds.

"Do you speak to all your initiates like this?" I squeezed tighter, flirting the edge of the blade across his throat. "Or am I the only lucky one?"

"You, little bird, are the only one."

With his words, I felt the pinch of something sharp at the soft part of my inner thigh, even through the form-fitting trousers Eroan had crafted for me. I looked down to see Erix's own weapon turned on me, all without realising.

"Fuck." My eyes rolled as I released my hold on Erix.

"You were close this time. Closer than you have been before."

"But..." I added for him.

"Yes, but as I said before... Never leave an enemy breathing long enough for them to take the precious moment they require to end you. End them first."

I sheathed the dagger into the strap at my hip, admiring the callouses across my palm. Proof I had worked hard to train since the Passing. Not that I knew who I was trying to prove anything for; myself or those who still refused to acknowledge my status as an Icethorn instead of the reason behind the fey's failed plans of domination over Durmain, the realm of humans.

To many that was still all they could see when they looked at me.

"Then I should get in my practice since my list of enemies seems longer than it needs to be."

Erix had a way of seeing the inkling of emotions I fought hard to hide from him. A frown creased his sweat-glistened head as he closed the space between us. His frame was so broad that he blocked the sunlight out entirely, bathing me in cool shade.

I allowed him to press his hand to my cheek. Our skin was clammy and wet, but it did not matter; I enjoyed his touch in whatever variety it presented itself to me.

"Must I remind you, little bird, that you are one of the most powerful creatures on both this side of Wychwood and beyond? Do not worry yourself with the likes of scum who wish to see you harm. Your enemies and my enemies."

King Doran's petition for Erix's head had only intensified in the past weeks. It was part of the reason we had not left the safety of Farrador's boundary walls. Doran's soldiers waited beyond for the moment Erix stepped free of his sanctuary of blessed protection by the Cedarfall Court.

"How is that a fair comparison when Doran is a shared enemy?" I dropped Erix's stare, unable to hold it as flashes of my father cursed my mind. It had been weeks since I last saw him, suffering from a sickness brought on by poison, a stab wound that had been inflicted by one of the Children of the Asp as they had tried to take my life under Tarron's orders.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Erix asked quietly.

I shook my head as his finger found the base of my chin and held it softly.

"There is nothing to say. Nothing that will get my father back."

Father's abduction by the Oakstorm Court was the sole reason why I filled my days with training,

and my nights with Erix.

Distraction.

Distraction was the only remedy to stop me thinking about him. Not the promises from Althea who had taken it upon herself to counterpetition for my father's return. Nor her mother, Queen Lyra, who swore to see him back in her lands even with his past as a Hunter common knowledge across the Courts. Only a distraction, whether training in combat and magic, or spending those mindful moments before sleep, entangled in Erix's strong limbs.

"He *will* be okay," Erix said, his tone almost promising. "Doran would truly be a fool to kill someone important to you. Your father would have been dead long ago if that was the case. But he is not, and that will be for a reason."

I gripped Erix's arm and squeezed as my mind suddenly raced, making me dizzy. "Erix, please. I —I can't think about this right now."

He moved swiftly until the tips of his boots pressed into my own. Taking my face in both hands Erix pressed a kiss to my lips.

Like butter over an open flame, I melted. Melted into him as his tongue parted my lips and enticed my own to join its dance. This was what I required, and he knew it. Part of me felt guilty for using him when I knew it clearly meant more to him, more than just a way of taking one's mind off another matter.

But I could not burden myself with such worries. I gave into the tidal wave of calm that always greeted me when Erix and I became intimate.

I wrapped my arms around his back, feeling his muscles tense in reaction. He released a groan as I gently scraped my nails across his skin, something that had him purring with pleasure during our nightly entanglements.

"Keep that up." Erix broke away breathless with lips tainted pink. "And I will take you right here."

"Here?" I giggled, pulling back to survey the castle's outer wall and the many arched windows across it. Even now someone could be looking, watching, and that was likely since there was always a host of guards shadowing me, even if Erix commanded them to give us space. "What do you take me for, Erix?"

"Do you truly wish for me to answer that?" His mischievous grin flashed for a moment before he dove into the crook of my neck. I leaned back as his teeth grazed my skin, kissing and sucking until I could not tell if it was pain or pleasure which I felt.

My fingers clawed across his head, holding him from escaping. His hair had grown slightly since I had first seen him riding into the Hunter's camp encased in silver armour with his wandering stare. It no longer scratched against my skin but felt smooth. And I had discovered that his hair was a warm brown with the faintest hint of amber.

"You will get us in trouble."

Erix broke away, silver eyes glowing from within. "Fey are not bashful and shy when faced with the promise of sex. No one would care if I tore the clothes from your body and you sat atop me like I'm your personal throne."

A tingling chill spread up my spine. My mouth grew wet and cheeks puckered as though he held a sour cherry before me, and I pouted. "I am beginning to believe you do not tire or grow bored."

"Bored?" He scoffed, pressing his crotch into me until I felt the outline of his very hard, very unbored cock. "I have a storm within me, little bird, and I am ready to unleash it."

My hand pressed between us and ran down the dampness of his stomach until it tickled across the

bulge in his pants. I grabbed it, asserting my dominance for this moment before it truly got out of hand. "A storm? How poetic you are, Erix. But I think it is best we calm you down. All good things come to those who wait and I would rather have something... entertaining to look forward to this evening."

A flickering of disappointment pinched his brow, but it was only fleeting. "What if I told you I could manage it twice?"

I released his cock and patted his hardened chest as though he was a puppy. "How very valiant of you, and how lucky I am to have you as my guard. Always looking out for my best interest... and his own," I said the last part through the corner of my mouth. "Then again... we could give them a sho—"

"Robin!" My name echoed loudly across the grounds. We both looked toward the speaker to see the bobbing of poppy-red hair atop the tall frame of the Cedarfall Princess. She was dressed in similar clothing to me, material which hugged her body and was perfect for training, except hers was crafted from an ivory material that had her red hair standing out starkly against it.

"Bit early, isn't it?" I raised a hand to shade my eyes as I called out to her. Our training never began until after lunch had been served. She was usually tied up with courtly matters in the morning whilst I fooled around with Erix.

I expected a sharp-witted response from her, but she remained silent. That was when I noticed her pace was frantic and her cheeks were flushed as red as her hair.

Something was wrong. Erix shifted beside me as though he recognised it too.

"You are required in the throne room, Robin." Althea reached us in seconds, her face pinched with turmoil. "Both of you."

"Something has happened?" Erix said, asking the question before I had gathered the courage to.

"I think it is best you both come and see." She referred to both of us, but why did she not stop looking at me?

I stood my ground, fists clenching in retaliation. "Althea, tell me."

It was not a command, but more of a request. If she said nothing and expected me to follow her then she was truly deluded.

Her curved brow pulled down into a frown as she nibbled on her lower lip. I waited, with bated breath, for her to say something to put my mind at ease. Yet I knew that my worst nightmare was a mere few words away from being revealed.

"It is your father," she began, voice strong but light as though she was careful not to break me with them. "This morning another letter arrived from the Oakstorm Court, but this was not full of the usual demands others held. It had something... else alongside it. Something for you."

In a single moment the sun was covered by dense, grey clouds. I did not need to look skyward to know the storm brewed, conjured from nothing until hardly a spec of blue remained. Winds picked up around us, shifting the hairs around Althea's face and blocking her worried expression from view. Our breaths fogged past our lips in puffs of silver smoke, greeting the sudden drop in temperature that enveloped us.

"Is he..." I could not find the words to finish my question, nor did I need to.

"Alive, we believe." I felt some form of relief thanks to Althea's response, but not enough for me to entertain stopping my magic from spilling from my very skin. "Robin, you need to come and see for yourself."

Her hand was outstretched before me, pale skin glowing in the darkened light of the storm. I watched intently as flakes of snow fell upon her skin, hissing out of existence from the flame hidden among her blood. Cedarfall power.

"Please," she said, stealing my attention away from the falling snow. "I promise we will help."

"Help..." I managed to repeat, echoing the word in a tone that suggested I didn't recognise the definition of help. "Weeks have gone by already. I do not think your *help* is doing much to get my father back."

Althea did not lower her hand as I snapped at her. Instead, she kept it raised, waiting for me to take it. "Together, Robin, we promised we would do this together. Now please... come. It is only right that you see this."

B lood stained the round marble table before us.

Red seeped from a package, small enough to hold a ring, which waited patiently in the table's centre for my arrival. And all I could do was look at it. I was vaguely aware of Erix's presence behind me. Althea waited patiently beside her parents, Queen Lyra and King Thallan Cedarfall, who had given me nothing but painful looks of sympathy.

There were others in the council room, old and young. Some dressed in similarly decorated uniforms to Gyah whilst others adorned the outfits that signified them as serving staff.

I had an audience, one who flinched as my wild, winter winds ripped at the outer walls of the castle and caused the glass windows to rattle like bones in a casket.

"Read it again," I said sternly, not taking my eyes from the bloodied package.

Althea cleared her throat, the rustle of parchment audible over the deathly silent room.

"King Robin Icethorn, if you so desire the return of your father, then, in good faith, I will ensure it happens. However, without the exchange of my son's murderer, you can expect your father to be returned to you in pieces. Little by little, bit by bit—"

"That is quite enough," Queen Lyra snapped, slapping a jewelled hand upon the table. "We have heard the tyrant's threats multiple times. Hearing them aloud again will not change them."

"Does it make you uncomfortable?" I glared up at her slowly, my eyes dry and body deeply numb. "Or is it the bloodied fingertip sitting in that box making you uneasy? Can you only imagine how I feel? Standing here alongside you all instead of leaving for Cedarfall to take my father from Doran myself."

"I cannot allow a civil war to start over one man."

Queen Lyra knew she had misspoken the moment the words left her mouth.

"Doran did not worry about such problems when he sent his hordes of Gryvern into Icethorn land to slay my family. He wants war. Let me give it to him," I snapped.

"May I be the one to remind you, Robin, that you have no numbers. No army who hold your banner," Queen Lyra replied coolly. "By all means act with haste and retrieve him yourself, but in the meantime, we will continue to try and petition your father's release without the need for bloodshed."

meantime, we will continue to try and petition your father's release without the need for bloodshed."

"And how is that boding for you thus far?" I asked as Erix's anchoring touch landed on my

"I understand you are angry." She ignored my question.

shoulder.

"Angry?" The air of the room plummeted in temperature. I barely noticed the gasp of the serving staff as they dismissed themselves from the room, unable to stand the magic's cold. "I am far more than angry. He is the only family I have left, and I am not going to let that monster take him from me.

He has taken enough."

Now that I had pried my eyes off the bloodied gift that King Doran had sent alongside his letter, I could not fathom returning my attention to it. The idea made my stomach twist, and the room began shifting beneath my feet.

"There must be something else we can do," Althea said, mimicking her mother's regal voice. "Robin should not have to sit and wait for Doran to have an excuse to send yet another threat. This one is more than enough."

"What do you suggest we do, daughter?" Queen Lyra said, tone almost defeated.

That was when I saw Althea's stare flicker to the man standing behind me for a moment long enough to understand.

"No..." I muttered.

Erix stepped forward, towering at my side as he said, "I will go."

No one spoke. No one refused him. I watched and waited for Althea or her parents to tell Erix that his idea was stupid and for him to stand back in line. But they didn't.

"He wants me. Doran has already promised Robin's father's return in exchange for my arrival. So, I'll go. It was only ever a matter of time before he got his hands on me anyway."

"Erix." I grabbed him harshly, trying to spin him around to look at me, and not Queen Lyra. "You can't leave me... I... I need you."

All of a sudden, my hold on the icy magic slipped through my fingers. The sky beyond the arched windows lightened as the threatening clouds dispersed. The deathly chill faltered until I felt hot enough to claw the shirt from my back.

"No, you do not." Erix's reply was detached and cold. I could see his desire to look at me in the eyes, but he fought to keep his stare anywhere else. "Doran is a deranged man. This is the only way for you to get your father back and I cannot stand in the way of that."

"Shut up!" I screamed at him, looking around the room at the cowards who could hardly hold my eye contact. "Say something. Someone tell him that he is wrong."

The room was silent. No one was brave enough to be the first person to speak, until Althea broke their cowardly silence. "It is Erix's choice, not ours to make for him... Stupid as it may be."

I could have laughed, but not as a result of happiness. Delusion. "It is suicidal, not stupid."

"It has been a long path keeping you from him thus far, Erix," Queen Lyra scolded finally. "Are you going to throw away our efforts without truly thinking about the outcome?"

I had to place my hands upon the table to stop myself from falling in relief.

"Thinking about the outcome." Anger pulsed from Erix. One moment he was calm, subdued, and now his fists shook as he clenched them at his sides. "I have thought nonstop about this since I took Tarron's life. It was only a matter of time before Doran realised he had leverage over us. I cannot stand in the way nor be the cause of Robin losing the last family he has."

"Do not speak on my behalf." I mirrored his tension, hissing through gritted teeth. Anxiety rocked through my body, making even the dull light through the windows too intense to see. I just needed a moment, to allow myself a second to truly work out the impossible puzzle that had been put in front of me, so I buried my face in my hands for an undetermined length of time.

Someone's hand found my shoulder and held it. I did not need to open my eyes to know it was Erix, whose touch was almost etched into my being at this point. I would know his hand and its print for all of eternity.

Think Robin, think.

It was hard to do anything but envision the bloodied part of my father upon the table. This was

only the beginning, that much was clear. If we did not respond to Doran then he would continue sending his threats. When would he stop? When my father was dead? When there were no more body parts left to cut and carve to send as a threat?

Time was not on our side, it never had been.

"I want to speak with him," I finally said, looking back over the crowd. "Let me negotiate my father's return. No matter what Tarron had done to me, he was still Doran's last living relative. Just as father is mine. I am not saying what Doran is doing is right, but in a warped sense it is justified. I want to speak with him myself before I allow anyone to make a sacrifice on my behalf."

Erix flinched at my comment.

"He may not come peacefully," Althea confirmed, flexing her fingers at her sides as though she stretched, ready for a fight.

"And I do not expect him to," I replied, jaw clenching. "I will be ready."

Erix turned his back to the room, facing me with an expression of pure terror, eyes wide, the usual bright silver now a dark storm cloud that mirrored the one I harboured within. Both his hands gripped my arms as if I would simply slip away from him. "Please, allow me to do this for you."

"Why?" I whispered. "Why would you throw away your life for the sake of my father?"

I waited for him to admit his feelings, as though I longed to hear them aloud. Because I wished to hear how he felt for me in hopes it conjured the same reaction inside of me. For me to feel anything but the deep, terrifying numbness that had clawed into my soul the moment Father's life became threatened in the hands of the Oakstorm Court.

"You deserve the chance of normality." His response caught me off guard. "Do not question it. Please, just let me do this. I deserve what is to come."

There it was. The truth that glimmered in his eyes. Guilt had eaten away at Erix, a silent assassin, devouring him from within. I could see through his false confidence as though his mask had slipped.

I sighed, longing to reach for his face and pull it down upon mine. But I stayed ridged to the spot, unable to give Erix the solace he longed for.

"Queen Lyra," I said emotionlessly. Erix dropped his stare to a spot on the floor, released my arms and stepped aside, defeated. "I would like to invite Doran for a discussion on the basis he brings my father and I bring Erix."

Althea caught a gasp as she pressed a hand to her lips. Out the corner of my eye I noticed the lack of reaction from Erix.

Queen Lyra nodded, silently gesturing to the decorated, aged soldier at her side. "There is one place where Doran would be foolish to bring violence. If you are certain you want to meet him then we shall do so on neutral ground. We shall send our invitation to Doran, with my seal of approval, to meet at Welhaven, Altar's blessed resting grounds."

agic sparked across my hands. Rings of sharp, crackling ice turned my skin a violent white.

The power did not conform. It spread with wild intention, devouring the brick wall beneath my fingers. If I did not focus the ice would soon spread across the room entirely until it glittered in silver and white. Part of me wanted to let go of my control, to allow my emotions to storm outwards until I felt some space within me for more positive thoughts.

Instead, as I listened to Gyah and Althea mumble about our pending journey, I held the magic at bay somewhat. My full energy may be required soon enough, even if Althea's warning still echoed through me. Morning had become late afternoon, yet the hours between this morning's discussions had not dampened the threats that came with it.

Welhaven is recognised as the creation point of the fey at the beginning of time. The land is unclaimed by any of the four Courts, and thus may not be a place for war, hate, or the spilling of blood. It is sacred land and was historically used as a neutral ground for disagreements between the Courts to be discussed peacefully.

It made sense as to why Queen Lyra wanted my meeting with Doran to be there. Insurance. A way of ensuring he did not go against the law of the land and anger his God. Yet deep down I knew there was nothing stopping me from unleashing this storm, not if the moment required it.

"...then our focus may return to our shared enemy, The Hand."

I looked back at Gyah who spoke, running the whetstone across her sword.

"We have not heard from him since the Passing." Althea shifted on her seat, visibly disturbed by the mention of the mysterious figure who hid within the human realm of Durmain. "Nor have our guards sent word of Hunters... or the warped, powered humans that we had seen weeks ago."

"They cannot just disappear," Gyah confirmed, not taking her focus from the edge of her sword. She flicked her thumb across the metal, inspecting just how sharp it was. "They will return. My suggestion? Do not wait for them to make the first move. Little is known about this Hand and his creations. It is pure luck he has stepped back from the forefront of our minds whilst we deal with the more... immediate threats this side of the border."

"I know what you are doing, Gyah," Althea said, one brow raised as she surveyed the Cedarfall soldier.

Gyah shrugged her broad shoulders as if she did not know what Althea spoke of. But even I knew. Gyah hadn't silenced her request to join the frontline and monitor the Wychwood border alongside the Cedarfall soldiers. Since the powered human had walked through the Mists of Deyalnar, Queen Lyra had sent countless numbers of her legion to prevent another from stepping through alive. Gyah wished to be there, doing her duty, not babysitting a capable princess.

We all knew that Gyah wanted to join the efforts with a burning desire. She had made that very clear. And yet, whilst other enemies still lingered in the shadows, it was important we had an Eldrae close by. Her ability to shift into a wyvern was rare, which made her presence paramount.

"There will come a time that I am required to be there, Althea," Gyah said, looking up from her weapon for only a moment.

"And until that time, I am going to need you by my side," Althea replied curtly.

There was something that troubled Althea deeply. It had her losing herself to dark thoughts which devoured her in quiet moments. She did it now, fixating her gaze on a spot on the floor. Gyah briefly looked to me, both of us sharing our concern with a single glance.

"Does she frighten you, Althea?" I asked, sitting with them in the small circle we created.

I did not need to speak the name aloud for fear of triggering Althea.

"Nothing has the power to cause me fear, Robin." Althea snapped her gaze to mine. She almost spat flame with the sudden reaction. "I only hope Briar is foolish enough to come and see me. There is much I have to say to her when she finally decides to show her face again."

"And she will." Gyah narrowed her golden eyes, the skin around them pinched into the pattern of crow's feet.

"You said that no one disappears forever, but the Children of Asp have never been found. I want to find their burrow and burn it from the inside." I winced as heat radiated from the princess's skin. Gyah noticed it too. I had never thought it possible to see a person spit flame but could tell it was moments away from happening.

"If you present the right amount of coin then they would show themselves again," I said, clenching my hands into fists to call in the power that gloved them.

They both turned to face me at the same time.

"What are you suggesting?" Althea asked, curiosity dripping from her tone.

"They kill because of coin; Briar made that clear. Would there not be a way of putting forward an abundance of money that would even entice an assassin out of retirement? It does not need to be Briar who presents herself... only another sloppy initiate. Then we can find the burrow. Follow the lone Asp until it returns to its Queen."

"Just like that aye?" Gyah scoffed.

I gritted my teeth, growing bored of my ideas being brushed aside. "Yes, just like that. Unless you have a better suggestion. I am sure we would all love to hear it."

Gyah forced a smile then returned to the sword across her lap.

I watched Althea contemplate my words. Her stare was lost to a painting on the wall behind me. "How is it we went from having an Asp at every corner before the Passing, but now there has not even been a whisper of one?" I said.

"Their benefactor had his head caved in by..." Althea cut herself off as she glanced at me. Erix. His name was at the tip of her tongue. Flashes of his bloodied fists and twisted face of anger filled my head.

Althea swallowed her words and changed the course of the conversation before I could dwell on his loss of control for another moment.

"If I was to gather the funds to put forward then I will need Mother's involvement. I may be a Cedarfall, but I cannot simply walk into the royal bank and demand the papers required. That is dirty money, tainted. I hardly imagine Mother would allow it... finding Briar is not exactly on her list of current importance."

Althea was right. Our conversations bounced between The Hand or King Doran. The guild of

assassins was solely a topic of discussion that kept our small group distracted from those other matters. That and the fact Althea felt scorned and used; I had come to learn those two emotions did not sit well with the Cedarfall Princess.

"Could I help fund it?" I asked. The idea of having access to money was strange and new. It was still incredibly hard to imagine.

Althea's gaze brightened for a moment. "Perhaps. Your families' Court should have access to coin, however it has been many years since anyone occupied the capital of Icethorn. The Court's vault has likely been ransacked during your families'... absence. Without visiting it is impossible to know whether the funds survived the storm... or they were stolen during it."

We had not left Farrador since the Passing, not with King Doran's need to capture Erix, making visiting anywhere but this castle impossible.

There was much to being a King that I had not had the luxury of uncovering. Queen Lyra encouraged the idea of creating a council who would help with my future ruling, since I had close to no idea how to rule anything besides a ramshackle pub, and those days were long gone.

Surrounding me with people who had knowledge on courtly affairs and what it meant to be a ruler was a good idea. But creating a council required finding people who wished to see me take my place within Icethorn. So far, the Council consisted of myself and Eroan, and I could not imagine the gentle thread-master had much experience in courtly matters, beside what they would have worn during important meetings. However, he had, thus far, been the only fey from Icethorn who had shown interest of returning.

I was a King of one.

Erix's voice filled my head, echoing amongst my anxieties. A King of one is still a King.

"When this is all over with Doran and his attention is diverted from me, then I will leave for Icethorn. I cannot be expected to hide within the city's walls forever. I have a responsibility now, I just need the chance to locate it."

"Here, here!" Gyah cheered. "If I cannot visit the Wychwood border, then I require an excuse to stretch my wings."

"A little trip may be exactly what is required," Althea agreed, a fleeting smile flittering across her face. "I was never one for sitting still. And castle life is rather... dull. It was why I left and threw myself into the missions of infiltrating Hunter camps and taking back the stolen fey. Gives life more purpose. Makes it less... boring."

I didn't want to admit aloud that it was hard even imagining a time where Erix's life was not threatened by Doran. Even after the pending meeting I could not see how I would entice Doran to let go of his desire for revenge.

"Life is far from boring..." The comment slipped out of me without much thought. Deep down a small part of me would have traded this all for the chance of being back in Grove, sleeping in bed after a long shift at the tavern. My shoulders were less heavy, the burden almost non-existent.

"Could be worse." Althea nudged my knee with her own. "You might never have met us."

That conjured a smile, a genuine one that warmed my chest. Althea was right. I had never had friends such as these.

"Or me." Our heads snapped towards the door to my chamber to see Erix leaning up against the frame. His arms were crossed, his chest standing out prominently through the formfitting black top he still wore from our morning training.

Althea rolled her eyes, gesturing with a nod towards Gyah. "And that is our cue to leave."

"Oh, do not rush out on my behalf," Erix purred, striding into the room with his chin held high.

"Robin," Althea said, completely ignoring Erix. "I suggest you get some rest tonight. You are going to need a clear head for tomorrow."

"I will try."

Althea raised a brow, her expression smug and knowing. "Say the word and I will dismiss him for the evening. I do not imagine the nights are restful with your personal guard warming the bed and messing the sheets."

I leaned into her, mischief twisting in my chest. "Believe me, Althea, I have always slept better in a warm bed. And even if you dismissed him, do you truly believe he would heed your command?"

"Not at all." The corner of her lip tugged upwards as she exhaled a light chuckle. "Gyah, I am going to need a drink to remove a certain image from my brain."

Erix cleared his throat, cheeks blossoming red.

Gyah's chortled laugh was a mix between a bark and a grunt. "I think we will need more than one, Princess."



I woke to darkness. It was not noise that roused me, but the shifting of Erix's hard body as he peeled himself away from me. For a moment it felt as though we had only just fallen asleep, but a single glance towards the endless black beyond the window told me otherwise.

"Where are you going?" I asked, voice croaky. Rolling over, I was met with the outline of Erix's bare back. He sat on the edge of the bed, just out of reach.

"Go back to sleep..." he replied softly.

Something was wrong.

Erix turned his head to the side so I could see his sharp jaw and taut expression. I pushed myself up and crawled over until I was behind him on my knees. Reaching out, I let my fingers trace the curve of his shoulder. His skin was cold to the touch. Erix shivered as I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and brought my lips towards his ear.

"You are not permitted to tell me what to do."

He sighed slowly. Two strong arms snaked around me and in one, great motion, I was sitting upon his lap, nothing but his firm hands holding me in place. Erix had a tendency to sleep without the constraints of clothing, however he now wore trousers.

"Are you planning on leaving me?"

"I could never leave you, little bird." His nose pressed against my own as two strong hands ran down my back and cupped my hips. "I could not sleep and needed some fresh air. I thought a walk would help. I never meant to wake you."

Beyond the window the sky was still dark, not even the stars had come out, hiding behind the dense, winter clouds that drifted through the night.

"And if I command that you stay by my side?"

Erix pouted, fingers slipping and gripping slightly harder upon my butt. "Then as your personal guard I would have to obey."

"Good. Then stay." I pressed a small kiss upon his face, inches beside his lips.

It should have alarmed me how quickly his demeanour changed. One moment his expression was distant, but the next it sparked with emotion as though there had never been a problem.

"Do you have any other requests for me? I am awake, after all... perhaps a walk is not the only

activity that would clear my mind."

I did not want to acknowledge what worried him, for the same thought also filled my mind. Morning was not far away and with it came the meeting with King Doran.

"No," I replied, voice light and full of innocence. "Nothing that I can think of currently."

"That is a shame." Erix stood from the bed, picking me up with him. My legs wrapped around his middle to keep myself aloft. His hold was unwavering, hands still splayed and firmly grasping my ass. He moved away from the bed, my stomach jolting with sudden excitement.

"Because my mind is full of ideas," I finished.

Erix stopped when my back was pressed up against the wall. There was something thrilling about sharing the night with him. It was as though the fear of darkness vanished when he touched me.

It was easy to keep a hold of his eye contact for the silver glint pierced through even the darkest of shadows. But the rest of him was engulfed in the lightless room, leaving everything but his sure touch to the imagination.

"Why did you offer yourself up so freely?" I asked quietly, as though the volume of my question determined the mood of the room. I had not braved the question yet. There was nothing good about this time to ask it, but then there never would be.

Erix did not reply instantly. Instead, he leaned into me, nestling his face into my neck.

He was hiding from me.

"Please, can we talk about something else?"

I gripped the back of his head and tried to pry him from me. "Okay. But only if you promise to never do it again. Never say you will leave me so easily. You are supposed to be my constant. I cannot fathom to hear that threat again."

Erix's lips stilled on my skin, teeth grazing slightly, enough to conjure a shiver to race up my spine. "How do you look at me and see someone who does not deserve pain for what I have done?"

The air stilled at the sudden depth of his voice. "You did what you had to..."

"Did I?" he interjected so quickly it snatched my breath away. "It could have ended differently. Tarron deserved to suffer, but I took that possibility away during my mindless loss of control."

Erix dropped me slowly until I was standing on the ground, no longer supported by his hungry hands. He stepped back from me, face obscured by the lack of moonlight. Part of me wanted to reach for him, to apologise for ruining the moment, to beg for him to return his lips to my skin.

I didn't.

"I do not know what you wish for me to say to you."

Erix turned his back on me. "You cannot offer me what I require. No one can."

"And what is that?" I asked, voice breaking slightly. "Perhaps you should give me the chance to help you instead of turning your back on the possibility that someone else can help you carry your burden. Tell me, Erix, what can I give you that will help?"

"Forgiveness."

Silence thrummed painfully, the cord finally snapping after days of unspoken tension. "Then you will punish yourself until the end of days searching for such a thing."

"If that is the penance I must pay then so be it, let that be the outcome. Or I return myself to the Oakstorm Court and right my wrong by ensuring you have your father back, that is my only option."

"No, it is not." I raised a hand and placed it upon his upper arm. It lasted all but a moment before he shrugged me off.

"You do not know me. Not entirely." It was impossible not to hear the undercurrents of deep sadness as he spoke. "You either do not wish to see what I am, or you are blind to it."

"Tell me then," I snapped, unable to hold it in. "I have explored far more with you than I have with another before. And yet I do not know you?"

"What I am and who I am are two starkly different matters. It was a mistake ever getting this close to you. I had to feel a connection that I had not in a long time. A silly dream. And it now ends the same way as it had before." Erix faced me slowly, his eyes glazed with tears, not a single one brave enough to take the first fall. "After tomorrow I retire as your personal guard. How can I keep you safe from others if I am not confident that I can keep you safe from me?"

I shook my head, confusion mixing with annoyance. "I have never heard something more ridiculous in my life. Stop speaking in riddles, Erix! It is late and you are clearly tired. Can we please, please talk this through tomorrow?"

He just stood there and stared at me, shadows creating shapes across his face. "Ask me what I am."

"No!" I almost shouted. My breathing grew frantic, chest rising and falling in an awkward, unnatural rhythm. "I will not play this game, Erix."

"Ask me!"

I shook my head, unable to look into his wide, panicked eyes.

"Robin," his voice deepened into a growl, "Ask me."

"NO!" My shout was muffled by a rush of frozen air that exploded outwards. It silenced Erix, snatching away those same two words he was about to repeat. As he studied me and the curling of freezing mists that danced at my feet, it was not with fear... It was with something else entirely. "I do not care to know what it is you think is so deeply important. What you are, Erix, is the gentle soul who saved me from the Hunters and helped me through this unexpected and frankly unwanted transition in my life. You are not a result of your actions. Do you hear me!?"

I waited for him to reply, to say something... anything that would take back this entire evening. There was a part of me who wished I had the capacity to sleep without him by my side. Perhaps I would not have woken to him leaving; if he had left, this would not have happened at all.

"Promise me one thing..." Erix begun; his deep voice gruff with emotion. Even in the dim light I could see the sharp rise and fall of his shoulders as he also struggled to even out his breathing.

I had heard enough. "Erix, come back to bed."

"Robin, please." It was the use of my name that stilled my refusal to listen. "Tomorrow, no matter what happens, I want you to know that I will forever be sorry. Sorry for what I have done. Sorry for what I will no doubt do again. I hope you see me for the man you have come to know, and not the monster I have fought hard to hide."

With haste Erix left the room, leaving behind his shirt and boots in his desperation to flee. He didn't give me a chance to question him. Bathed in darkness as my guard dismissed himself from my presence, I was numb. I opened my mouth to call his name, to demand that he returned to me at once...

But I failed to even catch a confident breath. All I could do was listen to the slap of Erix's feet as he left me behind, until there was only silence and emptiness that accompanied me within my chambers.

A storm brewed across Wychwood's horizon, mirroring the one buried within me. From the moment our small yet well decorated party left Farrador's walls the sky was a deep grey, and the visibility of our journey was close to non-existent. It was my doing. My power seeped out of my body and encouraged the gale of winds to scream around us as we moved through Cedarfall's autumn-entrapped landscape.

I was thankful for Althea who rode upon a mount beside me, and Gyah who sat perched before us, steering our company through the sheet of snow. Their presence was calming, making it slightly easier to make sense of the meeting that was going to unfold when we arrived at our destination.

Focus was proving difficult when all I could think of was Erix and how he had left me, and how Gyah was his replacement. Althea had been the one to tell me that Erix had retired as my personal guard when she had collected me only hours ago. I had never seen someone so close to letting steam explode from their ears. Althea was seething at his resignation, and the lack of answers as to why he had done so.

"Whatever happened between you two I am sure it will blow over. In the meantime, let him fucking sulk," she had told me as my aching, exhausted body attempted to dress myself.

"Have you seen him?" I had asked, eyes rimmed red with more than tiredness.

"Have seen him since? Fuck no! Nor do I care to. There will be plenty of time to berate him for his brash decisions but that can wait until today is over. Until then, put him out of your mind. Altar knows I need to!"

I clung to her words throughout the long day of travel. There was a patient part of me who could understand that Erix was going through something he didn't wish to fully divulge; but the other part of me wished to have the luxury of simply walking away. And I was far from having that luxury because I had grown attached; my walls had come down in the weeks we had shared together, and his closeness was both required and necessary to survive throughout the day and night.

I would not have noticed that we had arrived at our destination as tall oak and yew trees had grown so close together it was impossible to know where one began and the other ended, like a giant wall. But as our party slowed, and when we fully stopped, I finally saw Welhaven; hints of aged stone peeked through blankets of wisteria and creeping vines.

Welhaven was a place of quiet. Even the air stilled around the ruins of what had looked to be a cathedral, a place of worship and power. Time had devoured the light-stone ruins, allowing vines and foliage to grow amongst it, as though nature had claimed the place as its own after years of being forgotten.

We traversed through the consuming foliage, under an archway of budding violet-coloured

flowers. They shifted in a light breeze, dancing as though celebrating our visit. That was when I sensed something lurking beneath the silence of this place. An ancient power. Archaic and wise.

I was not a religious person; I never had been. Stories of the Creator, as the humans had named him, filled homes through stories and teachings passed down from parents to children. Tales of how He crafted the world with His bare hands, plucking His own strands of imbued hair to create humans, designed in His image.

But then there was the God named Altar, whom the fey believed to have created them, giving life to the four Courts and gifting them with the magic that now pulsed through my blood.

I had not spared it much thought as to whose belief was more justified, for I hardly cared. But now, standing among the ruins of Welhaven, I could not ignore the aura of pure power that radiated within this place; it was as true as my own.

"We are alone..." Gyah said as she joined Althea and the small circle of guards who surrounded me. "The scouts have returned and confirmed that there is no sign of Doran nor a track to suggest he has been here yet."

I could not discern the wary nature of the fey guard as her golden eyes continued to survey the overwhelming forest.

"I thought he had accepted the invitation?" I said, feeling an unwanted lump of worry budding in my throat, one that I could not swallow away.

"He had." Althea scanned the ruins, stopping to admire the circular glass window which still hung unbroken above the remnants of a dais ahead of us. It spread vibrant colours of blue, red and green across the overgrown ground. It was near impossible to see if the floor was once made from the same stone as the ruin's walls since grass and other thick foliage now created a soft bed beneath our feet. "I have no doubt he will soon show himself. When he does you have to be ready, Robin."

I did not need to ponder the statement to provide a sharp, curt reply. "Yes."

"Take solace that this is a safe place. Doran would not disrespect Altar and defile his sacred land with aggression. However, if you leave the boundaries, you are free to attack in his eyes," Althea repeated, echoing the same warning she had shared before. "We can all stay with you if required."

"I told him it would just be me and him during this meeting. Doran needs to trust me, and for that you need to let me do this alone."

It pained me to say it. I wanted nothing more than to have Althea and Gyah at my sides as I petitioned for my father's release with nothing to offer in return. But this was my war. One I would win alone.

Althea nodded, offering me a weak smile that did not reach her eyes. "Let me be the first to admire your bravery. You know where we are if you need us. The moment I sense something is wrong then we will come and break up your little meeting. That is final."

"I have no doubt," I replied.

The anxiety that stormed within me was like a siren call to my magic. It took most of my concentration to keep it at bay.

"We *will* be listening," Gyah confirmed through a light snarl. "I do not trust Doran and nor should you. No matter where he finds himself standing. It is clear he sees himself as more than his title for he has already broken Altar's balance once before."

When he ordered his Gryvern pets to kill my mother.

"I will be fine." I hardly believed myself as I said those words. Would I be? I had nothing to bargain with. Nothing to offer Doran in trade for my father. But I had to try.

"Good luck." Althea rested a strong hand upon my shoulder and squeezed.

"What if he does not show?" I asked as Gyah began to guide the princess away. They both paused, shared a strange look and then glanced at me.

"He will come," Althea confirmed, stoic. "Doran is many things, but heedless is far from one of them."

They left me alone, bathed in this silent and powerful place. I hugged my arms to my chest as our small party walked out through a curtain of hanging vines held up by broken pillars on either side. All I could do was wait and hope that Doran would come before my worry consumed me entirely.

There were pews buried beneath green foliage to my left. Whatever this place had been used for before likely involved a crowd. I soon recognised the shapes of more stone and wooden benches on either side of the room, a mirror image of each other, and a relatively clear pathway down the ruin's middle.

I chose to sit and wait, unsure if my legs would have given out with the heavy weight of anxiety that had rested upon my shoulders.

Time was an unclear concept here. I focused on the branches of pink blossom that protruded through a half-crumbled wall before me, unsure how much more of this deathly quiet I could stand before I gave up.

It was as though Welhaven warned me of the change before I noticed myself. A prickling sensation spread up my spine so fast it had me gasping out as I instinctively looked toward the dais. I watched as the air above the dais seemed to split as though sliced with a knife. It parted in two spindles of light, and from it stepped a man with heavy feet and laboured breaths.

King Doran.

I stood abruptly, hand reaching for the dagger at my waist as instinct took over. But Doran did not pose a threat as he stood with limp arms at the sides of his bulging, swollen belly. He was simply a man, one of greed. Even his hands looked bloated, his fingers a deep scarlet as the rings adorning them constricted the blood flow.

"I am pleased to have received your invite," Doran rasped, voice echoing across the ruins. "Robin Icethorn."

I had to stop myself from thanking him, as though relief that he had actually turned up flooded through me. "Did only half of it arrive?" I replied, keeping my voice as calm as possible. "Because my invite was for both you and my father, yet you have come alone."

"I thought it best to let Kings discuss matters without distractions."

The man made me sick to my stomach. He spoke with clarity, yet he looked far from it. The closer he got, carefully plodding down the steps from the dais to greet me on an equal level, I could see the dark stains across his dirtied tunic. How his golden-thread jacket was frayed at the edges with seams that were unrepairable. Even his face shone with grease, prevalent around the plump chin and cheeks that looked hard to the touch.

"I want you to return my father," I demanded before Doran stopped walking.

"Of course you do..." Doran replied slowly. The way his voice scratched up his throat made me want to demand he coughed; it irked me, itching at my skin. "And *I* want my Tarron returned to me. Do you see how we do not get everything we wish for in this world? Alas, it would seem that *want* is something shared between us."

"This needs to stop," I said. Doran continued walking toward me, but I refused to step back. I did not want him to see that his presence caused me great discomfort. I simply kept repeating Althea's confirmation of my safety. Doran's touch may not cause me pain, but I still did not want it. "I understand the grief you—"

"Ah, now I see it. You wish to relate to my pain so we can work through it together. Manipulate me just as you did my son."

"What?" His words stung as though he had slapped me across my cheek. "I did no such thing."

"Tarron was a strong man. Smart and focused. My prized boy. Until you came along and ruined it for him. Although I understand it was not your hand that took his life, your presence certainly caused it. You poisoned his mind with futures that Tarron would never have dreamed to discuss with me. He knew what was required, and you distracted him."

I spluttered a laugh, feeling heat rise up into my cheeks. "You cannot seriously look at me and point the blame. Your son died because he tried to kill me. How is one life more important than another?"

"Because Tarron was mine."

Silence grew taut between us. Not even the winds dared make a sound. Doran's face turned scarlet, his eyes bulging as spit dribbled down his chin. For a moment, through his cracks, I saw a man gripped with desperation and madness. It soon faded as he recollected himself, rubbing the back of his hand across his lips to clear them of spittle.

"Just as Julianna was mine?" I asked, voice cold as the magic that lurked within my skin. "That did not stop you from killing her. You have spent days demanding Erix's return for whatever sick actions you believe will bring you peace. However, I have not once petitioned for you to be brought to me. I am beginning to think that is what I now want... The same revenge you sought after with Erix? I wish to have with you."

"YOU ARE A BOY!" Doran screamed. The whites of his eyes suddenly bloodshot. "I WILL NOT BE THREATENED BY YOU."

"I am an Icethorn. And the last one, thanks to you." I hardly cared for the spittle that had shot toward me, not as I focused on keeping the wave of rage within me. "Calm down, you fool, before you tire yourself out."

Doran could hardly keep a breath in. His large, protruding chest rose and fell, tugging at the worn buttons across his jacket. "You want to bargain for your father? Then bargain."

I turned around the space, arms wide. "I have nothing but a promise."

"And pray tell, what is this promise? More concealed threats?"

"Perhaps," I said, shrugging. "Doran, if you do not return my father then I *will* hunt you down. In this place, or the next. Do not be the hand that causes me to lose the final thing I have left. Do not be the reason I break."

If it was not for the ominous power that hummed through Welhaven, I would have unleashed my ice upon the man before me. But Welhaven whispered its warning, telling me to keep it in. Was Altar watching? Waiting for me to step out of line and unleash His wrath upon me in return?

Even with that thought niggling in the back of my mind, I knew I would still make the first move against Doran if I had to. No matter the consequence. If my father's life required my action, I would do it.

"You must wish to see him terribly," Doran sang, expression melting from one of fury to serenity in a discerning moment. "I cannot disagree with you, Robin. It does not feel right to be the one to keep you from someone you love."

My body flinched as Doran raised a hand before him, splitting the air in half until the spindle of light allowed for a hunched body to be pushed through. I felt nothing for the masked guard who guided my broken and bruised father into the ruins; I watched, frozen to the spot, as the shell of a man I had once known was deposited on the ground at my feet. In that moment I cared little for what Doran saw

me as. The walls of confidence I had built crumbled as I threw myself to the ground, cradling my father with gentle hands.

"You can have him," Doran mumbled, watching as I searched my father's pale face. His skin was cold, yet slick to the touch, so terribly pale that I could see hints of his veins beneath.

"Why?" I looked up through blurry eyes as tears of anger threatened to escape with a single blink. "All of this, all of your requests and demands, and you give him to me so willingly. I do not believe it could be that easy."

Doran chewed on his lower lip, flashing yellow stained teeth. He raised a hand and weakly flicked two fingers in signal for the masked guard to stand by his side.

"I have everything I require."

"Ro... Robin," Father croaked, distracting me.

I looked down to him, relaxing my features, as I cupped his bearded cheek. "I am here. I promise I will never let you leave my side again."

"My Robin..." He spoke, not because he knew I was here, but because he called out for me. Slipping in and out of consciousness as he called my name shattered my heart into more pieces than I believed possible.

"Touching, truly," Doran cooed, his face pinched in disgust as he watched us. "Seeing father and son reunited. Something I never believed possible after Tarron's life was taken from me."

Should I have shouted for Althea? I had the burning urge to get my father as far away from here as possible. To keep him from Doran. And I was prepared to fight my way out if the moment required, even with the low hum of warning as the ancient presence lingered through the atmosphere of Welhaven.

"Do you think I will forgive you for what you have done?" I said through gritted teeth. Father's hand was wrapped in dirtied bandages. I could hardly look at it. I knew what waited beneath the wrappings just as I knew what didn't...

A finger. A finger that resided in Farrador.

"Believe, my boy, I do not require forgiveness. There is nothing I want from you anymore."

I smiled, knowing the man he had spent weeks petitioning for was still miles away, in the safety of Farrador's walls. "Well, that is just not true, is it, Doran?"

"Is it not?" Doran returned my smile, one that seemed to glow from within his mischievous gaze. "You are not the only one who has had a reunion with someone of their blood today. You took something from me, but in return have given something as well. And for that I must thank you."

I watched as the mad King raised a hand and placed it on the shoulder of the statuesque guard. The iron-wrought mask obscured their features, a monstrous face carved into the metal, one that would inspire fear in those unfortunate enough to be close to them. "I do not need to hear any more from you. We are done here."

"Stay," Doran purred, pouting slightly as though I had offended him with my wish for haste. "I have something I would like to show you before we depart ways again."

He leaned into the guard's shoulder, hand covering his mouth, as he whispered. I could not hear what Doran said, nor did I care. Instead, I wrapped my father's arm around my shoulder and hoisted him from the floor. For a man of his age and size, it should have been impossible to carry him alone. But the weeks had been unkind to him. I could feel his bones beneath the thin, ratty layering of his clothes.

"Tarron was my prized possession. His mind sharp, his spirit unbroken. He was whole. Special, one would say. Beside his brother Lovis who was stolen with my wife, all my other... offspring

never seemed to be entirely... right. They were given a name in my Court, one that no one dared speak before me, but I heard whispers, nonetheless. A title given to them from infancy for the demonic outbursts of aggression and anger. Some had even killed my Mounts... *their mothers* for the smallest of matters that other infants would have simply cried out for: hunger, tiredness."

The guard rose a shaking hand, slowly reaching for the mask; Doran never removed his unrelenting grip from their shoulder as he gloated aloud.

"I had spent years making sure they were killed. Even being the one to draw the knife across their little... soft necks. I could not trust others to do what was required to younglings. But I was strong. I was King. Then I had a change of heart..."

"Get to the point." I was already taking steps backwards, slowly moving through the overgrown wall towards the concaved entrance and those who waited beyond it.

"I realised that they were just as useful. That time and patience would give me something that others would not dream of owning, controlling."

The guard's finger grazed the metal mask, hesitating as though he fought internally to stop himself from lifting it. And it was that hesitation that entrapped my attention upon him.

"What... what were they called?" I asked, voice shaking as it echoed throughout the ruins.

Doran tilted his head downwards, grin extending from ear to ear. His lips split slowly, linked by lines of spit which he spoke through. "Berserker."

I spluttered a gasp as the mask fell freely to the floor.

"Hello, little bird."

he vision of Erix did not waver. I rubbed my eyes hard, once, twice and still he stood before me

It was him. The shine of his silver eyes confirmed that. But something was different. Dark shadows that hung beneath his eyes; the hollows of his cheeks deeper against the dulled tone of his usual sun-kissed skin.

"This is a trick..." I muttered, body numb as Erix walked toward me. "Keep away from me. Stop! Whatever this illusion is... end it."

"I am flattered that you believe me to be powerful enough to conjure the unreal, but I am no God," Doran said. "What you see before you is very much real. Touch him, see for yourself."

A faint breeze picked up Erix's scent the closer he came, warm cinnamon and crisp fallen leaves on a mid-autumn's morning. Still, I refused to believe it.

"This was your plan..." I said, voice a pathetic whisper. My hold on Father grew tighter as Erix towered above us. "You left and gave yourself up..."

"I did." His reply was as cold as the power that longed to escape my body. One single thought and I could devour this entire place in ice and wind. "It worked, didn't it? You have what you wanted."

I stared at him, unable to formulate a word. Father groaned as I still fought to hold him up, and all Erix could do was look at me with his empty, uncaring eyes.

"What has he done to you?"

Erix's lip curled, flashing teeth. "I went home. Doran welcomed me back."

Questions thundered through my mind; it was near impossible to only pick one and not spill them all out at once. "He is your... Doran is your father?"

Erix nodded in confirmation, not bothering to spare me the courtesy to reply with words.

"Have you known? All this time?"

"I came to King Doran expecting to be killed for my crime. Instead, I have been given another choice. Another chance."

"Forgiveness!" Doran shouted from behind Erix, interrupting the moment. "I gave him what he sought. Do you see now? I am not the heartless monster you may see me as. You have what you desire, and I have what I desire."

"Answer the question," I seethed, tears spilling freely down my cheeks. It was easier to ignore Doran as I focused on my former guard. My Erix. "Is this why you never told me anything about your past? You hid your true self from me... for what? What was all this for?"

"I did it for you..." Erix's lips twitched. "And yes, I knew. How could I not have known when my mother was King Doran's prized *Mount*. I knew from an early age of my heritage, what it meant for

me..."

Everything was falling into place. How Tarron and Erix's relationship was so taut yet so intertwined with secrecy. And Tarron knew, he had to. He had openly referred to Erix as *Berserker* on enough occasions for me to understand that it meant something between them. But I would never have known it would have been this. I would never have guessed it was a nickname shared between siblings. Half siblings, but family all the same...

Erix was Tarron's brother. His blood.

"You see now, Robin? I was within my rights to demand Erix's return. He is my property."

I could hardly hold a breath. My chest shuddered in rhythm with my heart that hammered within it. Physically Erix and Tarron shared no similarities, however, as my eyes darted between Erix and the mad King behind him, I could see subtle hints. In the colouring of his hair which had begun to grow over the past weeks and the light tint of King Doran's eyes.

"What does this mean...?" I spoke the haunting thought aloud. "You are an Oakstorm by blood..."

"Powerless in the sense you are imagining," Doran confirmed. I had not seen Erix with an ounce of magic. During all the fights and training, I had never seen a slip of Oakstorm power, only his controlled, yet buried aggression, kept him swinging a sword.

"Berserkers do not qualify for magic," Erix said, his voice a low growl. For a moment I was certain the shadows that hung beneath his eyes moved. "We do not require it."

"You do not need to stay with him," I pleaded to Erix. My speech was frantic, my eyes flicking back and forth between the two men. "We can leave. He will not fight us here."

Erix turned away from me in silent refusal. Doran laughed softly as though my begging entertained him greatly. Dread sliced its hateful claws through my soul as I looked upon the man I had known. Who I had *believed* to have known. *I was wrong*.

"Interesting creatures. I admit I regret killing the majority off. I could have had a legion of chaos and destruction at my fingertips. More so than I do now." Doran strode toward Erix with pride. "Tarron was *almost* perfect, in all ways. However, he had one flaw that resulted in his downfall. The inability to listen to commands and follow through as I so wished. He should have killed you, however, you burrowed yourself into a pocket of his weakness and, ultimately, resulted in his demise. Berserkers are different."

I could not ignore the way Erix flinched as Doran returned a bulging hand to his shoulder. Even his lip lifted into a snarl of refusal, but his body did not move an inch. Erix did not fight him off. He complied, allowing the man to touch him as though Erix did not have a say in the matter.

"I have had enough of this," I said, my arm going dead beneath the weight of my unconscious father. "Our meeting has finished."

I looked to Erix, pleading with wide eyes for him to come with me. But with each step I took backwards, my heart broke into one more piece, for Erix did not follow.

"But I have more to share with you. Did your dear father not teach you manners?"

"Fuck you," I snarled.

Doran's face elongated into a gasp of horror. "Terrible choice of words. How unbecoming of a King."

"Please... Erix," I begged a final time. "Come with me."

"He stays because I command it." Doran laughed as though he was utterly proud of what he had to say. "He will do everything and anything I so desire. It is the curse of his kind."

The atmosphere was changing quickly. A sense of danger itched at the insides of my ears and scraped along the bottom of my spine up to the base of my skull.

- "Speak..." Doran commanded.
- "ROBIN, RUN—" Erix's outburst had my blood turning to ice.
- "Silence."

Erix's lips sealed, his eyes shifting back to the empty dull sheen that I had seen this entire time. For that single moment, it was as though a mask cracked and I saw him behind it.

Fear bridled within me.

"Can you just imagine the possibilities...?" Doran's free hand reached down to the bulge in his worn trousers. "Now I have what I require I can lose myself for days with the Mounts who wait for me back at Court. I have many years ahead of me. All it takes is minutes to secure more of Erix's kind."

My stomach twisted, bile rising in the back of my throat.

"You sicken me." It was a natural reaction to spit on the floor before Doran. The taste in my mouth was too unbearable to swallow at the thought of the disgusting creature bedding those he spoke of. Doran's red-swollen hand gripped the space in his crotch and squeezed, gargling a laugh as he revelled in my reaction.

"Do not rush off, Robin," Doran replied, frowning. "Are you not going to bid your lover goodbye?"

I shook my head, unable to look at the empty shell of the man who held the name Erix. A man who I had spent nights with, lost in his touch and taste. A man whose warm hands still had left imprints on my body.

"Fuck you."

Doran ran his yellowed tongue across his equally yellowed teeth, making a sucking noise that made my skin crawl. "Erix, kiss him goodbye."

"No," I spluttered as Erix began stepping toward me. "Stop, Erix, do not do this."

I cared little for the warning of Altar as my magic seeped from my body. I would not, *could* not, let Erix near me, even if a part of me longed for his touch a final time.

The greenery around me crystallised as a cool breeze of ice spread. It did not deter Erix who kept coming, even though his boots crunched the blades of iced grass and stone with each step.

Father was growing too heavy to hold as I stepped backwards toward the exit. I could not risk seeing where I walked.

"Robin, do not regret the opportunity for saying farewell to your love." Doran's voice deepened as though he concealed something beneath it. "I admit I never had a taste for boys. Not when the Mounts within my Court present themselves like honey to the tongue. But in this light, I can see what entrapped Tarron. What piqued the interest of my berserker..."

"Please..." I sighed, defeated as my back pressed against something hard. I turned to see the vine-wrapped pillar which I had walked into. Father slipped from my arm and crumpled to the floor, wheezing upon impact, but I could do nothing to help him now. Not as I held both hands out, pressing them with as much might into Erix's chest as I could muster. My back arched against the stone as Erix still pressed forward, my arms shaking with the effort to keep his unwanted mouth from leaning toward me.

Ice spread across the leather of his breastplate, devouring the dark material until it glittered beneath my hands. "No."

"No?" Doran called from somewhere behind me. "Say it louder. Scream it."

"Get off me, Erix, please!"

"Louder," Doran commanded.

"Please..." My voice was broken, shattered like my soul.

Doran spoke to Erix as though he was a dog upon the end of a leash. "Erix, hold."

And Erix did, frozen in place as his lips were inches from my face. I was crying, tears turning to beads of ice as they crusted upon my cheeks. I closed my eyes, turning my head to the side to stop myself from seeing Erix's shadowed face so close to mine.

"Release him."

I spluttered as the hold on my upper arms released. My legs gave out, my back slipping down the vine-covered pillar until I was in a ball at his feet.

It took everything in my power not to look back up at him. To my relief, Erix stepped back, stare locked to a spot on the pillar behind me. He moved as though he was soulless, empty and void of who he truly was. It made it hard to hate him for his actions, which shattered my soul more than I believed possible. It was only until I truly realised I no longer had him which made me want him, truly want him with a desire so intense it could melt the ice within my blood.

He was mine, but now he belonged to another.

"Help the Hunter from the floor, my berserker."

Erix followed Doran's command, gripping my father's frail shoulders and hoisting him from the heap he laid in at our feet. I reached out for my father, but Erix battered my attempt away.

"Now..." Doran purred, dragging out the word until it was unbearable to listen.

"Give him back to me... Erix..." I stared deeply into his unseeing eyes, pleading.

I reached out again, winds howling around us like screams that mimicked my inner turmoil.

Doran stood rigid, smiling with pride as he watched his berserker complete his bidding. Then his smile faded, expression draining of all visible emotion as he spoke three words that shattered my entire world. "Kill the Hunter."

"NO!" I screamed as winds ripped up throughout the ruins. The ominous presence no longer warned me to stop.

Erix did not hesitate to complete the task commanded of him.

I had no time to act.

There was no stopping the crack of bone. It sang above my winds, the clearest noise I had ever listened to.

I was powerless to stop the way my father's neck twisted, unnaturally, by the hands of Erix. For a moment I watched as father's eyes exploded open, full of knowing before the life drained instantly from them.

All I could do was watch, disbelief storming through me.

This could not be happening.

This was not real. It couldn't be.

Dark, scarlet blood spilt from the jagged wound on the side of Father's neck where bone protruded through skin. It spread down his neck, covering Erix's hands. Helpless, I watched as it splashed to the ground at our feet.

And there it melted the ice-covered ground until the foliage drank it.

I blinked, once, twice, only to see the greenery turn black. It rotted before my eyes, spreading quicker than my ice until the ground was covered in dead grass and vines.

"Oh dear..." Doran sang, his voice muffled as though he spoke beneath a body of water. It was near impossible to hear through the ringing in my ears. "It would seem I have angered a God and a King all within the same moment. How terribly inconvenient."

A growl built in my chest and exploded outward. I first believed the shaking that gripped the

world was a result of my fury, but it was the ruins themselves that shook.

Erix lost his footing and dropped the lifeless body of my father to the ground. Doran's pleased face was cracked with concern as he watched Welhaven tremble.

"I will kill you!" I screamed, block rot devouring the ruins around me. It drained the colour from the beautiful flowers that draped from beams and filled trees. Where my father's blood spread, so did the rot until plants shrivelled and the sweet smell of death filled the air.

I had to grip onto the pillar behind me to stand as Welhaven violently shook beneath me.

"Best we be off, Erix, come."

"I will kill you for what you have done!"

Erix walked calmly through the ruin towards Doran who waited by the dais. There was a hint of fear in the King's eyes as he looked around the ruins. Dust showered us as the deathly cracks of stone began to explode, no longer held up by the strong foliage as it perished.

Welhaven was dying. Altar's sacred land had been defiled by my father's blood and His anger echoed through the air of this place.

But my fury was nothing compared to that of the unseen God.

The air grew thick with cold mist as I allowed the magic to be free. In the place where my heart had been was now a storm of ice. I felt no fear. I felt no sadness.

I felt... nothing.

"You do not have the power to kill me, Robin Icethorn. I am an equal in your magic. I best you with my armies, where I have many, you have nothing. And I shall sleep well knowing I took everything from you." Doran grinned, lifting a hand before him until the air began to peel in two, revealing his portal of light. Erix stepped through it first, not caring to look back at the death he had left behind.

My mind was hardly allowing me a moment to make sense of what had happened. All I knew was fury and thirst for death.

I cared little for who I took down in the meantime.

"Run, coward... I will come for you."

"You have no army to rival me, Robin."

"No, not yet," I growled, forcing my hands forward as spears of dark ice exploded across the ground.

By the time my power ripped toward Doran, he disappeared through his spindle of light that blinked closed behind him.

My knees clattered to the ground as Welhaven crumbled around me. I encouraged my ferocious winds to keep rubble and stone from falling upon us as I covered my father's dead body. "No, no, no," I spluttered, forehead pressed to his still, lifeless chest. "Don't leave me."

stood deathly still as Queen Lyra Cedarfall's words rested upon me. They echoed within my head so violently that if I closed my eyes, I was confident she spoke them on repeat. Taunting me.

It would have been easier to look away rather than seeing the burning sorrow that lingered upon the Queen. The way she looked at me, as though I was the most precious thing in the world, caused my skin to itch with discomfort.

"Mother," Althea snapped, putting her body between me and the throne upon which Queen Lyra sat. "Find some heart!"

"I cannot allow it, Althea. My decision does not discern the sadness I feel for Robin. Regardless it is the right one to make." Her response was cold. "One day you will be in my position and understand that difficult judgements are required to be made by someone whose shoulders are already heavily weighed down from the responsibility of ruling."

Althea's grunt of disapproval sounded through the throne room as she turned her back on her mother and faced me. "I am sorry, Robin."

Four short words and she dismissed herself. Did I expect her to fight harder for my cause? Or did I expect her not to? I could not see the difference as the twisting of anger only gripped its claws deeper into my soul.

"I need an army." My voice trembled, but not from sadness. I did not feel sad. It was strange as I expected that to be the emotion that came naturally with losing a loved one. All I felt was empty and angry. It happened in waves. The moments of emptiness felt as though time itself did not exist. It was what I felt when Althea found me within the rubble of Welhaven, sheltering my father's broken body with my own. The journey back from Welhaven to Farrador was a blur. Even now I could not remember a single detail from our return. Only the silence. And him. Father's body, draped over Althea's mount and covered in Gyah's burgundy-fringed cloak, how it moved with the rhythm of the stag's trotting, tricking me into believing that he was waking beneath his cover.

He never did.

Father was dead and there was nothing in this realm or the next that would bring him back to me.

Up until his murder I had believed to have known grief as a close friend. I was wrong. Instead of sadness, it was fury that kept me from breaking into pieces. Moments of anger sharpened my mind, giving my viewpoint a sense of refreshing clarity. I saw every expression of those who filled the throne room. The flick of an eye or the turn of a lip, I noticed. Even the tones Queen Lyra and her consort, King Thallan, spoke to me when we had arrived carting the dead and broken body of my father back to Court.

Pity oozed from everyone around me, and I despised it.

"Our numbers are stretched thin across the border of Wychwood. It would not be a wise choice to send the little we have to Oakstorm's gates to demand revenge. Robin, I understand you have lost more than many of us will ever experience. However, I cannot fulfil your request."

"You don't understand..." I muttered, body rigid as my nails dug crescent moons into my palms. "They killed him. There was no reason, yet Doran commanded it anyway. If you think that I will stand here and do nothing..." I choked on my next words, taking a moment to breathe and calm myself. "Lyra, if you will not stand behind me as the ally I had come to believe you were, then I will find another."

King Thallan leaned forward in his throne, elbows resting upon his knees. "You are a King now, Robin. You have the Icethorn Court ready and habitable. In time you will grow an army. Focus this emotion into rebuilding the Court and the support will come in an abundance of numbers."

"Time is not a luxury I have," I replied through gritted teeth.

"Doran has angered a God, leave his fate in Altar's hands."

"No," I snapped with great urgency. "Altar will not take this from me. Doran is mine."

My words silenced the room entirely.

Lyra shared a look with her husband. She nibbled on her lower lip, eyes flashing wide for a moment. "Something has changed, Robin. News from Wychwood and Durmain's border reached us alongside your arrival back at Farrador, reports of strange happenings. Altar is angry from what occurred in Welhaven, that much was clear when the ruins crumbled after your father's murder. This has not happened in our history, where a God has become involved in our realm's affairs. But never has a fey disregarded the sacred rules that have been passed down since Altar blessed the first ruling Courts. A storm is coming, and I think it wise we do not disrespect Altar any further by threatening war against one another."

"A storm is most certainly coming." I turned from the ruling monarchs of the Cedarfall Court until my back was to them. Althea and Gyah waited before the closed doors, expressions pinched from inner turmoil. "My desire to see Doran dead is far more than a threat. It is a promise. Your God did little to stop my father's neck from being snapped. His rules warned us from spilling blood, yet for such a powerful being he just simply watched without intervening."

"Careful," Lyra warned. I glanced over my shoulder to see her stand from the throne, flames dancing between her clenched fingers as she called back at me. "I would choose your words wisely, Robin. You are in my Court, and I do not care to listen to your disregard and blasphemy."

My jaw tensed as I carefully picked my next words. "I thank you for your *strained* hospitality, but my stay here has come to an end."

I raised a hand, willing a gust of frozen wind to screech through the throne room. Gyah and Althea moved in time before my power slammed into them. Instead, it crashed into the door, throwing them wide until they slammed against the walls beyond.

Someone was shouting after me, but I no longer cared. For I had nothing left to care for. Father was gone. Erix was gone. And I was alone.

There was nothing more terrifying than someone with nothing to lose.

The leather of the reins rubbed my palms raw. I did not let go. The pain helped keep me from slipping into my dark thoughts. It kept me from selfishly falling into the promised sleep which I had kept at bay since the previous night with Erix.

I needed to focus on the path ahead instead of looking back at the burning pyre that glowed proudly against the night. It was hard not to turn and watch as the glow of orange shrunk in the distance the further the stag clopped away. I left as the first hungry flames lapped across my father's blue-pale skin. Even in my state, I could recognise that seeing his body devoured by fire was not good for my mind, heart, or soul.

As I had stood in the cold, I had longed for company at that moment. The feeling was fleeting and soon passed. Perhaps I should have allowed Althea to come with me. To be by my side as I gave my father's body to the fire and allowed the wind to reclaim his ashes. It was custom in Durmain to burn the dead from fear they would one day walk again. That notion always caused me dread, but the thought of my father returning to me was a torture I could not focus on.

He was gone.

Father's body burned over the border of Icethorn land. I did not know where I was, but the feeling of being home had told me I was within my Court. The stag I rode took me east as it was a sure way of reaching home.

But my father's cremation was not the only reason I had come here.

Firstly, I wanted my father to be closer to Mother so that she did not have to search the afterlife to find him. It warmed my chest to think that the winds reclaimed him and guided his soul straight back into her arms.

The other reason I had come here was far more sinister.

Although I had refused Althea to join me, I knew she would follow. I had sensed a presence from the moment I left Farrador gates until I passed onto Icethorn land. For my plan to succeed I needed them to believe I was retreating here so that they would stop following me.

But my visit here was only going to be brief. It was important that I was not followed to my next destination for fear of being stopped. Although I was certain that if someone dared to prevent me from doing what my mind had fixated on, then I would have gone through unimaginable lengths to ensure that did not happen.

I rode for hours, the dark-grey cloak tugged tightly around my shoulders to keep out the night. Most of the journey was exposed as I clambered over steep hills laced with snow or passed through empty, forgotten hamlets and villages that reminded me of Berrow.

Icethorn was quiet place, which was both a blessing and a curse.

Eventually, I gave up fighting the heavy drop of my eyes. Not even the horror for what waited for me during sleep could keep me from finally giving in, aided by the steady rhythm of the stag who showed no signs of slowing.

I must have slept soundlessly for a long while, finding solace and peace in slumber, where I would have expected nightmares.

When I woke again, I was greeted by clear blue skies. I jolted at the bustle of noise surrounding me and the clip of hooves against the cobbled stone. Blinking away my exhaustion, I tried to make sense of where I was. Faces looked up at me, all with wide eyes and expressions of disbelief. From both sides of the street, people watched on as I rode upon my mount before them. It took me a moment to register that the people were humans, evident from the rounded ears and now more noticeable lack

of grace that the fey held.

I was in Durmain again. The stag had listened to my silent wishes without the requirement of guidance. He had brought me exactly where I wanted to be.

I turned around, no longer caring for the gasp of those who watched, likely expecting I would lash out. No fey followed. I had made it here without being obstructed. A slow smile spread across my face but only lasted a moment. The pocket of happiness for my success was ruined by the realisation that my father was dead. There was a brief moment I had forgotten.

All at once, grief rushed over me, intensified by guilt as a result of my forgetfulness.

The skies could have clouded over in that very moment, and I would not have cared.

I was here for a reason.

Focus.

"Where am I?" I called out, pulling on the reins until the stag stopped in its tracks. I was almost certain I felt the wobble of the mount as though its legs were seconds from giving out. The loyal creature would walk to the ends of the earth if I commanded, and I knew a time would come that we would stop, but that all depended on what answer I obtained from the crowd.

There was a long pause of silence before someone brave enough to shout at me broke it. "Go back to your realm. No one wants you here."

"Yeh!" another voice chimed in. "Fuck off!"

All around me humans, young and old, hurled abuse towards me. They, as I would have been before my life turned down its chaotic path, would have been shocked to see a fey beyond the Wychwood border. It simply never happened. Perhaps that was because they never made it far enough before the Hunter's found them.

All around me the humans reacted with both shock and anger, encouraged more by each other. Even the small voices of children cried out.

I gritted my teeth, glowering through the shadow of the cloak's hood as I studied the faces to see if there was anyone or anything I recognised. Besides the black beamed and white panelled buildings, the town around me looked no different to any other hamlet that peppered Durmain's expansive lands. And from the carts and stalls that the people stood amongst it was clear the town relied heavily on street trade rather than the traditional experience of shops in the bigger cities.

I was close to Grove. Home. But how close remained a secret.

The stag huffed in discomfort as the crowd grew in confidence and stepped closer towards me.

"Keep your distance..." My warning was wasted, drowned out by the cries of humans. I yanked my arm towards me as a man with dirtied hands and a mouth full of missing teeth reached for me. "I said stay back."

"Lost, are you?"

"He was sleepin'. Took a wrong turn by the looks of it."

"Fucking fey scum."

I gasped, head snapping backwards as a glob of wet spittle crashed onto my cheek. Sound disappeared as I closed my eyes, trying to register what had happened. My fingers reached up and came back wet with a thick, white liquid that made my stomach heave.

I blinked and saw red.

"ENOUGH!" My cry tore through the crowds, sounding no different to a torrent of screaming wind. All around me the crowd tumbled backwards, forced by the hands of my winter storm. A chorus of their frightened shouts froze, immortalised in a cloud of breath that fogged beyond their mouths.

Power radiated from my very skin. It spread across the cobbled street, lacing up the closest

building's outer walls until everything was devoured in a glittering layer of ice.

My stag bucked, causing the humans closet to me to get out of the way. I would have kept spilling out the powerful magic to instil fear, but my eyes caught the terror-stricken face of a child, no more than five, gripping onto his mother's skirt where he hid. His wide, tear-filled eyes reminded me that this fury could be controlled. I reined in my power, calling it back within.

"I asked a question and would..." I drew out my words, struggling to force some decorum. "... very much appreciate an answer. Where... are... we?"

My heartbeat drummed in my ears as I waited for a response.

"You have no dealings here..." a woman spoke, the very same who had her child tucked behind her in protection. "There is nothing for you."

"Answer the question and then I shall leave," I called out, allowing everyone to hear.

"Ashbury."

The moment the woman confirmed our location my brain raced with pinpointing it upon the blurry map in my mind. Perhaps it was my sense of urgency to leave that made the destination familiar. Ashbury was half a day's ride to Grove, a trading town that sat in the heart of a collection of villages; many could get food and items they required without travelling miles to Lockinge. I had not been here for many years which was why I had not recognised it.

I was already clapping my heels into the stag's side and urging him forward with a click of my tongue when the shouting began again. Keeping my head down and body tight to the stag, I allowed the loud clatter of its hooves to signal the crowd ahead to move out of the way.

There was a small part of me that wished to scold myself for my lack of awareness upon entering Durmain. I did not need to concern myself with the ideas of being followed by the fey but focus on not being captured by Hunters.

At least not yet.

As I rode against the wind, cheeks stinging with cold wind, I left Ashbury. I could not help but hope my short stop in town had piqued the interest of those I wished to know I was here. There were some rather pressing matters I wanted to take care of before the Hunter's caught word that a fey was threatening humans far from the Wychwood border.

Let them come. The dark thought encouraged a grin. I have use for them.

he King's Head pub was as busy as I last remembered it. Even as I trudged through the main street of Grove, I could hear the noise of drunkard singing and ale-thick laughter spilling beyond the aged door and iron-wrought windows.

I had waited for night to fall before entering my home village. It was best I did not make a scene as I had in Ashbury, so I left my stag at the village outer limits and as far from human eyes as possible. It was best I slipped into town during the darkening of early evening; no one paid attention to another cloaked figure fighting their way through the cold breeze that ripped up through the narrow street in search of a drink to warm one's stomach.

The welcoming stench of stale ale enveloped me as I entered the pub. The feeling it brought within me was one of comfort. I had almost forgotten how strong the scent was, stubborn enough to cling to clothes for days no matter how many times they were washed through with warm water. And the taste of ale... I longed for it.

I kept my head down and hood up as I navigated my way through the wall of bodies before me. It was dark in the pub. Only the light of the hearth gave it a warm glow that barely covered the inside of the low-ceilinged building.

The seat I found was in the far corner of the main room, surrounded by shadows. It gave a perfect view to the bar and the countless familiar faces of the barmaids who rushed around pouring pints of amber ale and flutes of more piss-coloured liquids. I caught glimpses of people I recognised as I studied the crowds before me, people my father had worked beside, even those who had treated me with some respect as I had spent evenings helping behind the bar or cleaning the dirtied mugs and glasses.

Being half-fey never bothered the people of Grove. And if it did, I was not aware. I was under the impression my father's reputation kept the hate at bay, in this village at least.

I gripped onto the table as the ghost of my father suddenly played out before me. I imagined him knocking back jugs of beer with friends as he did frequently during a shift. I blinked and saw another taunting memory, one of him carrying a fresh barrel full of drink across one shoulder, not a bead of sweat brave enough to soak his brow.

This had been a home away from home for him. A place, I could now imagine, took his mind off my mother the years after she had walked away from him.

## A distraction.

I felt a single tear trickle down my cheek as a hard-edged voice called through the haze. "If you don't want a bloody drink then shift yourself, boy... that seat can be for another who's willing to part with the coin." The speaker kicked my foot, snapping me out of my thoughts.

"Sorry," I spluttered. "Yes, a drink. I will have a drink."

"I'm not a mind reader. Ale, beer, spirits? Name your poison—Robin? Is that you under there?"

I pulled away as the woman's calloused fingers threw back my cloak.

"I thought I was going crazy, boy! Why didn't you say it was you?"

There was no point averting my eyes from the speaker anymore, not since my face was exposed, and the two points of my ears with it. Looking up I took in the entire vision of the rose-pinched cheeks and bundle of grey hair.

"Mable." I forced a smile, rubbing my cheek as though it had an itch, and not because I wanted to clear any evidence of the tear away. "How have you been?"

Mable had worked at the King's Head for as long as Father had. I should have known it was her from her voice alone. She was a short, round and powerful woman, cheeks speckled with red veins and eyes heavy from age. Mable had a way of always fiddling with her apron, worn and stained from overuse; the stains across its material told stories of the pub's history far more than any book would have.

"Overworked and under-appreciated. The usual." She punched out a fist, knocking it into my shoulder. "Where's your bastard father? Henry hasn't come to work for weeks. Got the rest of us sorry lot covering his shifts whilst he is off galivanting around doing you know what with you know who."

My fake and forced smile faltered. Now was the time for me to lie and pass off my father's absence with a made-up story. But I could not bring myself to lie.

"Gone..." I said through a lump in my throat.

I could see from Mable's expression that she did not know what to make of my comment. Her lips twitched as though she was going to laugh, but then she caught the lack of emotion on my face, and she stopped herself.

"Well, wherever he has gone to, tell him he'll be lucky to have his job back. Master is fuming. Anyway, you didn't come here to listen to my gripes. What are you having?"

"Ale. Half-pint."

She nodded, looking everywhere but back at me. As Mable turned from the table I reached out and grabbed her wrist. "Are you not going to ask where I have been?"

If she had noticed Father's disappearance, then surely, she had noticed mine.

"It is not my business worrying about what young lads get up to," Mable replied sharply, as though she rushed out her response because she simply did not want to answer it truthfully. "Two ticks and I will be back with your drink."

Mable tugged her wrist from my hand. I could have sworn she muttered something beneath her breath as she waddled away from the table like a stiff goose.

Perhaps I should have raised my hood but there was no point since those near me had caught a glimpse. The patrons of the pub did not look at me in the same way those in Ashbury had. This was different. They recognised me as I recognised the majority of them. Each stare was full of wonder and confusion, but mostly shock more than anything. They were surprised to see me. It shone across their wide, untrusting stares as clear as looking through polished glass. It had me sitting straight with my hand only a hairbreadth from the dagger at my waist, the very dagger Erix had given me.

*Erix*. I looked down at the table as my head spun for a violent moment. *Father*. My stomach jolted aggressively, the thought of them both making me want to vomit across the table. Pinching my eyes closed, I focused on breathing. If I didn't, I may have given into the anger that itched to be released, but the time was not right.

Not yet.

I was three half-pints down when the door to the pub slammed open. In strode the very person I had come all this way to see. A small twisting of disappointment flooded through me as the only man who had entered was James. He was not followed by his reedy, aged prick of a friend, the one who had taken my mother's bracelet the night they both sold me off to Hunters.

James Campbell took two steps into the pub, chest heaving, as he searched the crowd. I knew who he was looking for long before his stare settled in my direction.

"I want no trouble tonight, James!" Mable shouted across the now deathly still crowd. "Best that you leave before you upset my patrons."

James was so angry he could hardly formulate a word. All he could do was raise a finger at me from across the room and shout one word. "Outside."

I raised my empty glass and tipped it from side to side, calling back, "I should have saved you something to drink. How rude of me. Mable, another two perhaps?"

The chatter of my arrival had reached him, but I had only hoped it would have been sooner. It would have been better to have a clearer head for this encounter. But at least I was somewhat prepared, whereas James had woken up this morning believing he would not see me.

Yet here I was.

And there he stood.

He embodied the very reason I had become what I was now, the catalyst for why Father had to travel to Wychwood, putting him on the path of his short, interrupted life. In my eyes, James Campbell had caused this all to happen when he sold me out to the Hunters.

It took a moment for James to utter another word. Perhaps it was his disbelief muting him, or the rage at seeing me in this place when he had believed to have gotten rid of me.

When he did speak, he only managed a single, sharp word. "How?"

I kicked out beneath the table, sending the wooden stool on the other side clattering to the ground. "Why don't you come and join me? And I will tell you everything. Unless you wish for everyone to listen?"

"You have a death wish coming back here, boy..."

"I will take that as a decline to my invite," I whispered to myself, standing from my seat and letting the dark cloak unravel to the ground. "There is much I wish for. Perhaps death is one of them. But I can promise you I will not be the first to fall tonight..."

"No no no," Mable said, cheeks redder than normal. "Both of you out. Now."

James grunted like a wild boar, snatching the dirtied blade from his belt and brandishing it before him. The patrons around him stumbled out of the way, some surging for the door, but the majority stayed for the entertainment. The King's Head was not impartial to a fight.

James paced towards me, looking down the edge of his blade as he spoke. "I could sell you again, you know. Probably would get more this time around."

I paid careful attention to the reaction of those around James. People I had smiled alongside, grown-up amongst, to see if they were shocked to hear James's revelation. But there was not a single wince. Even Mable's expression stayed stoic.

They all knew. All of them.

They had known what James and his accomplice had done to me. Who they had sold me off to.

Which made it easier for my conscience to deal with what was to come.

"Come closer and say it again," I said, hands lifting at my sides. "You were lucky the last time, but I can promise you it will be different now. I urge you to try."

"Don't play games with me."

Pressing fingers to my lips, I stifled a dramatic gasp. "How dare you suggest I am not taking this seriously? Believe me, James, I have never felt more serious about anything in my life. Look..." I plucked the golden-hilted dagger and threw it with vigour, the blade's tip sinking into the wood between James's boots. "Look... no weapons besides the one you hold like a child. Come, let's talk like men."

"You are no man," he snarled, lip curling over stained teeth. "Fey scu—"

"Don't!" My shout reverberated through the room in a cloud of rolling mist. Glass shattered as my frozen touch met with tankards upon tables, held in hands, and panes between window frames. The ground was littered with shards, crunched beneath the heavy boots of people who left the pub with haste. "Be careful what you call me, Mr. Campbell. A slip of the tongue will cause you great harm."

James stood still, hair quivering by my conjured winds. I wondered if any of the other patrons watched with the same fearful gaze that spread across his face. The knife James held shook as his fingers gripped tighter. It was about all the movement he risked as I paced through the parted crowd toward him, my lingering freeze of magic still present in the air around us.

"Lost for words?" I asked quietly, as though he was the only one in the room. "Do you have nothing else to say to me now you see who I am? What I am!"

More people scurried from the pub, the door slamming wildly behind them. Those brave enough to watch placed themselves behind tables and black-painted pillars for protection.

"All I see..." he began, lips curling into a cruel smile, "is I could have got far more coin from you in the first place. Whispers say that the Hunter's favour those with magic. You are dangerous. I did the village a favour by trading you off the first time. It will be the same again."

I sighed, disappointed at his reply. In a different world, during another time, a kinder reply may have saved this man's life. Except now all it did was solidify the taste for blood that had settled within me since Father's death.

"Don't stop," I encouraged him, arms wide in welcome. "Tell me how you feel. Come on."

"If we had known what you were, you would have been driven out of this place years ago, you and your father." James sucked in a disgusting gargle of snot and spit then gobbed it to the floor at my feet. I looked down, stomach churning, like the splatter of green and yellow liquid dribbling into the grooves of the slabbed floor. "Believe me, boy, you are nothing I have not seen before. Do not think you are special, for I have traded many of your kind for coin over my years. The only difference is you made it back. Your tricks do not scare me. Know that."

"I do not wish to scare you, James." Even with the knife now pointed inches from my chest I felt calm. Calm knowing that the blade would do little to stop me. I felt like I had won before I had even taken my first move.

"Where is Henry?" The way James said Father's name made my skin shudder. "Sent his little creature to battle on his behalf, did he?"

My chin lowered to my chest as though a sudden weight on my shoulders was too heavy to bear. I looked up at James through narrowed eyes, fingers flexing at my sides. "You have done this to yourself. Sealed your fate the moment you chose me as your next trade. It could have ended so differently. This is the path you choose to walk, I am simply ensuring you meet that path's end—"

"James, enough! Leave the boy and go." I turned my head to look at Mable as she pleaded across from the bar a final time. Her voice was an unexpected anchor, dragging me out of my darkened thoughts. Her face, although stern, was soft and familiar, a face I had looked upon for years, one that had lined with compassion for me and my father over the years.

She was different to James Campbell. Mable was kind. The way she looked at me now with furrowed brows and white, pursed lips of concern reminded me that not everyone had the same thoughts as James.

But the moment shattered when James's sloppy shout revealed his next move.

I turned as he lunged the final inches toward me. It was selfish of me to pinch my eyes closed so I could not see what happened next. I loosed a powerful breath; it conjured a wave of frozen air that spread out before me, ensnaring my attacker in thick mists.

The piercing of James's knife never made it past the charcoal grey tunic I wore.

It was the screams of those who watched that had me prying my eyes open. Before me, encased in jagged, blades of ice, was James Campbell, frozen in place with his mouth captured in an eternal cry, the sound still echoing in my mind.

I stumbled back a step, a hand pressed to my chest.

Come on. My inner voice was a screaming storm. Come on.

Where was the feeling I had expected? Relief. I expected it to piece my heart back together. Yet I still could not locate it. I waited and willed for it to return to me. To make me feel something. Anything. It had been the plan from the moment I left Farrador.

If I could not avenge Father's death by ending Doran's life, then I wanted to go to the man who had started this all. But as I looked on upon him, I still felt the same endless hollowness within me. Not a single broken piece of my heart and soul had slotted back together.

"You killed him..." Mable's voice shook as she walked towards me. Her voice sounded muffled as though I listened through a body of deep, dark water. I watched as she reached out to James's body to touch the encasement around it. Could she see how James's skin had turned a dark, bruised blue? How his final breath seemed to have caught in a pocket of ice beyond his frostbitten lips?

Mable's touch shattered the ice. Her gasp of horror itched up my spine as the crack spread wildly across James's body.

I could not move as he crumbled at my feet. His limbs and body cracked as though his skin and bones were made from glass.

Someone gagged, followed by the splattering of vomit across the stone floor. Others cried out in revulsion.

And all I could do was watch as the bloodied, shattered mess of a man smashed into countless pieces. I studied the smattering of ice, blood and flesh, finding it impossible to believe that a body had even stood before me.

"Get out." Mable smacked her fist into my arm, pounding over and over. "Get out!"

Her hearty sobs would stay with me for a lifetime.

"I am not sorry..." My lips hardly moved as I spoke. "He deserved this. He did."

I tried to convince myself, repeating my words over and over as Mable continued slapping and hitting me. My feet began to move as my mind was completely numb. Even as my boots trampled over the crunching of ice and flesh, I could not truly register what was happening. What I had done.

Where is the relief I desired?

Why am I not fixed?

Something heavy crashed into my back, sending me stumbling forward. A metal tankard clattered to the ground. Then another hit me, pain spreading across the side of my face. I raised a hand to my cheek and felt something warm. Blood coated my fingers as I pulled them away. The remaining patrons of the pub threw things at me. After the first, everyone else joined in. They screamed for me to leave. Called me names far worse than what James had.

Murderer. Killer. Evil.

I allowed the words to settle in my soul. They were right after all. I was all of those things.

The door crashed open as I ran outside into the night. Erix's knife hardly an afterthought where it lay discarded beneath the chaos of humans and smattering of frozen, shattered body parts.

Blood trickled down my face from the cut across my cheekbone, mixing with the tears that had begun to fall freely. I could not clear them away as I still held my arms above my head to stop the objects from hitting me.

It was dark in the street outside of the Kings Head. The world seemed to spin violently, as though the street shook beneath my feet. Night was endless, every single star a witness to my actions as I put distance between the pub and those who wished me pain for what I had done.

I stopped suddenly, eyes pinching shut as a flash of burning, red fire exploded before me. I stopped dead in my tracks as the fiery snake spread in a wall, surrounding me from all sides. Panicked at the sudden, unnatural flame, I whipped my head back and forth, searching for the source. My attention became fixated on a parting in the smouldering wall as two figures stepped through; like a curtain it separated, rushing back together once they both stood in the centre of the roaring fire.

Althea Cedarfall swept through flame without fear or trepidation. "Robin, what have you done?"

squinted, trying to focus through the tears and firelight. "You followed me," I accused, voice hoarse. "I do not need you, Althea. Leave me."

A smudging of ash marked Althea's high cheekbone. Her skin glowed against the fire, deep reds that matched the braid hanging over her shoulder. The second figure shifted to her side. Gyah. Her golden eyes were bright, even from a distance, as though the creature within begged to be released.

They both surveyed me with weapons in hands. Althea with her flame, Gyah with a tall blade.

"Perhaps we should discuss this somewhere less... public." Gyah looked around the circular space created within Althea's fire, beads of sweat dripping down her dark, bronze skin. It was not the fire she studied, but the outline of silhouettes beyond it. Humans. The moment the wall of fire was dropped I was confident that many would be standing watch around us.

"Isn't this what you want, Robin?" Althea called, lips pulled tight in a snarl. "To create a spectacle? You do not understand what you have done. Whose gaze are turning toward you!"

My tears dried upon my cheeks, hissing near the heat of Althea's fire. "Turn away whilst you can, Althea. I do not need you."

"Don't you?" She tilted her head to the side. "I understand you are hurting. I understand that you are acting out of pain. But it is my duty, as your friend, to stop you from making more bad decisions."

"Hurry," Gyah warned, knees bending as she lowered herself like a cat ready to pounce. She sensed something beyond the fire, something that set her on edge. "We do not have long."

Althea stepped forward, extending a hand out for me. Ruby flames licked around her fingers like a glove. Although her expression burned with anger, her eyes softened with a sorrow that I recognised as a friend. "Come back with me, Robin. You will not find peace here."

"It is not peace I am searching for."

Althea's hand shook, but she did not drop it back to her side. "Then what is this all for? You have come here and left a perfectly mapped trail behind you for anyone to follow. The Hunters are coming for you after your short stay in Ashbury; you have practically begged them to find you. And when they do, there is nothing I can do to stop them."

"Turn away." Even I could hear the dark edge in my voice. "Let them come for me."

I felt detached from the moment. Where Althea's warning of the Hunters should have brought on fear within me, it now conjured the opposite.

"Why?" Althea asked, voice no more than a whisper.

"Your family refused me an army, so I have gone searching for one els—"

"I strongly suggest we finish this conversation elsewhere!" Gyah shouted. I glanced to her as she

shifted forms, skin melting into shadow and retracting into the long, scaled body of the winged beast that lurked within her.

Gyah shouted again, a roar that hid the undertones of her warning to get down.

That was when the air whistled as a bolt struck through the wall of fire. Time seemed to slow as I watched the sharp edge of the projectile pass inches from Althea's body; only a whisper of hair moved. Althea gasped, turning back to look as another bolt hissed through the air. This projectile's aim was true and met its mark.

A scream of pain tore through the night as Althea fell to her knees. Her hands reached for the short splinter of wood that protruded from her thigh. My senses exploded to life in that moment, as though a bucket of iced water had been thrown upon my head.

I moved for Althea, who writhed on the ground. It became hard to see her as the wall of fire dropped, no longer fuelled by her magic. With the dispersion of the heat came the rushing of darkness again.

Gyah roared, wings flaring wide in warning, threatening the many who stood around us.

Hunters.

They greeted us down the scope of crossbows, each with readied bolts pointed towards us. A wall of shadows armed with weapons. They were here for me just as I had hoped. But not like this. Not with Althea and Gyah. This was never part of my plan, no matter how selfish they believed it to be. I never wanted them in the crossfire.

Althea grabbed my tunic and dragged me down towards her. "My magic. It... It is gone."

A loud pop sounded in the distance. I looked away from Althea's paled, pain-creased face to the sky. At first it looked as though the stars themselves were falling from the heavens. I blinked, unable to make sense of what I watched.

Then the noise of clinking metal revealed the truth.

By the time I realised what was happening, I could not warn Gyah.

A web of chains fell from the sky, unravelling into a blanket as it cascaded over the hissing Eldrae. The moment the net touched Gyah her scales melted away. Smoke curled from the creature's body, now held down by the heavy metal web, until she writhed in her fey form upon the cobbled street.

Iron. It had to be. The only element strong enough to subdue a fey's power.

Althea was still kneeling on the ground as she choked out, "Fight—Robin, fight—"

"There is nothing you can do," a deep voice shouted from the wall of Hunters. "Surrender yourself."

"Do something... Robin." Althea's grip on my tunic was failing. Her eyes fluttered as she struggled to keep them open.

I looked between the Cedarfall Princess who wrestled with consciousness, to the powerless Eldrae who did not move beneath the web of chains, then to the Hunters; countless, narrowed eyes poised above weapons stared unflinchingly at me.

"I am sorry, Althea..." I muttered, pulling myself from her weak grip as I stood. "I did warn you. You should never have followed me."

"What have you done...?" Her whisper haunted me as I regarded the army of Hunters, turning my back on her.

"Steady!" the voice shouted again, followed by the shifting of bolts and the taut pulling of strings. "Ready yourselves."

Slowly, I raised my hands at my sides. The last thing I needed was for them to see me more as a

threat. I had an innate awareness of the many humans watching from the safety of the Kings Head pub and the surrounding buildings that lined Grove's streets.

This was a spectacle that could not be missed, one they would likely gloat about for generations.

"I wish to speak with The Hand," I called out above the ruckus.

I was certain I heard the rumbling of a deep laugh.

"Speak up, fey!"

My hands shook violently, my legs numb, but I fought to keep control over my voice. To keep it steady. "I wish for an audience with The Hand," I repeated, swallowing a lump that crept into my throat.

I was not going to fight. It would have been pointless. The chains above Gyah and the bolt in Althea's thigh suppressed their powers. One wrong move from me and I would have been in the same situation.

Iron. Each of the Hunters were armed with it.

"You are in no position to make demands." The speaker stepped forward, separating from the wall of Hunters. He was dressed in the same black tunic and trousers as those behind him. The only difference was the cloak he wore. Even in the dark street I could see the shimmer of red silk beneath the cloak and the small, white hand mark embroidered across his chest. "And what is it you wish to say to The Hand? Spit it out before I bury a bolt in your head."

"I am merely accepting his invitation—"

The Hunter snatched a crossbow from another near him and raised it towards me as he stalked forward, making me flinch. Physically angered by my comment, the Hunter did not stop until he was a foot in front of me, our boots touching and the sharp tip of a bolt tickling the skin between my eyes.

"Cuff the others!"

His roaring, emerald eyes did not blink as he shouted the command. I could hardly risk a breath as I listened to the footfalls around us. If I dared look away from the Hunter, I was fearful the bolt would find itself buried within my head before I even had the chance to get what I required.

All I could do was look at him, wide-eyed, as he watched me.

The Hunter's dark brown hair hung above his shoulders. The lack of distance helped me discern the colour, hidden strands of honey among deep russet. He was tall—I had to lift my chin to keep a hold of his stare—but not so tall that I'd get a crick in my neck after a while. Beside the snarl etched into his face, and the creasing crow's feet beside his hate-filled eyes, the main feature that stood out was carved beneath his eye, a scar that ran from the outer corner of his eye down to his cheek, as though a tear had left a mark that could never be removed.

"I get the impression that you desired our attention. How does it feel now that you have it? Never have I met a fey with a death wish."

I wouldn't allow myself to blink. I wouldn't miss a sudden move from the stranger.

"There are not exactly clear instructions on finding your *kind*," I muttered, heart thundering in my chest. It was so loud I was certain the Hunter could hear it. "I figured you would find me. Save me a job."

"And find you we did," the Hunter whispered, eyes narrowed as he regarded me. "Why is it you do not fight?"

"What good would that do?" I replied, trying to keep myself still.

"For you," he breathed, a faint smile creasing his face. "No good at all. For me... it would make my evening one to remember. It is the excuse I need to see the life drain from your eyes when this iron pierces your skull."

He was telling the truth. I could almost sense his restraint as his finger hovered above the crossbow's trigger.

"What is stopping you?" I asked quietly.

The silence that followed allowed me to catch the string of pungent swears from Gyah as she tried to fight against those who must have rallied around her. What unnerved me most was the silence from Althea.

"I wouldn't be able to answer that," the Hunter snarled, pressing the sharp bolt into my forehead. I gritted my teeth against the prick of iron into my flesh. "If I had it my way, this conversation would not be happening. But alas, there is someone watching out for you."

I couldn't help the audible sigh of relief when the crossbow lowered. The bolt tip had cut my skin, deep enough to draw blood that dribbled into my line of sight, but shallow enough to begin knitting together.

"The Hand?" I asked, keeping my hands fisted at my sides.

"His hospitality might waver when he learns of the body you have left behind, shattered into bloodied pieces, in the tavern behind you."

My skin shivered, stomach twisting in disgust. "I am not the only one with blood on my hands. I have personally seen your... Hunters murder a fey. And the reasoning? Shall we compare and see's whose conscience is less scarred?"

"Duncan," another Hunter interrupted, snatching the attention of the scarred man before me. "Shall I cuff this one?"

"No." His deep voice rumbled with restrained fury. "This one is mine."

It was clear the scarred man was in charge here. Duncan, whose name rang in my head as loud as unwanted bells during early morning, snatched the strange, shaped object from the Hunter's hands and shoved the crossbow at him. Slowly, Duncan turned back to me, jaw feathering with tension as he lifted the metal towards me. It took a moment to realise where I had last seen that iron collar, wrapped around the necks of the fey at the Hunter's camp, the fey whom held magic that required iron to subdue.

"I will not fight you..." I could not ignore the desire to step back as Duncan moved the contraption toward my neck. "It is unnecessary for me to wear that. You see, I wanted you to come here. This was all to get your attention. I am not your enemy."

"You. Are. My. Enemy," Duncan snarled, body stiff and lip curled. He struck forward, thrusting the cuff around my neck in an instant; it snapped shut with a click that set my nerves ablaze.

I reached up, fingers desperately pulling at the lip of the cuff that closed around my skin. The desperate need to get the cuff removed was all-consuming that I hardly noticed the heavy and hollow cavern that filled my body.

My mind caught up and I stopped my struggle. Duncan stepped backwards, a true and honest smile filling his devilish face.

"It suits you," Duncan said as he turned his back on me. I was left to watch the wall of Hunters race towards me with outstretched hands.

"Duncan, wait, please!"

"Never speak my name again," he warned before disappearing into the dark wave of bodies.

I felt nothing as they grabbed and pulled at me. Not their touch. Nor the echo of power that had grown so familiar.

For the first time since the Hunter's stole me from my home, I felt human.

The pressed down on the floor of the cart, splinters of wood cutting deep into my palms. Behind my back, with each jolt of the screeching wheels as we navigated over potholes in the road, my back slammed into the iron bars.

There was nothing I could do to create comfort, not when a chain linked me to the iron bars from the cuff around my neck. I was leashed like a dog. We all were.

If it was not for the chain that connected Althea to the cage, she would have slumped to the ground. I sat opposite her, unable to do anything but watch as her eyes would flutter open and close. Even in the dark night I could see the thick sheen of sweat that clung across her forehead. The wound on her thigh still oozed; it was close to impossible to ignore the tang of copper as it spread in a dark puddle beneath her leg. The bolt had been ripped carelessly from her thigh before the cart had moved. Because of the iron cuff around her neck, she had not had the chance to heal. It was evident her body could not handle the lack of power; unlike mine, it was not used to being severed from her natural abilities.

Gyah did not pay Althea any attention from her corner of the cage. Instead, she watched me like a starved hawk sizing up a fleshy meal. Disdain pulsated from her, silent, taut anger so palpable I gave into my guilt and refused to look her way.

Around the cage the Hunters' rode upon the back of obsidian coated mares. The cage was being pulled by many as well, the backs of tall Hunters all I could see ahead of us. Duncan was among them but where I was not sure. There was something about him that conjured a kindling of fear in my gut. Every now and then I could feel the stinging of eyes across the back of my neck. I would turn to find the back of Hunters' heads, but I was confident Duncan was among the throng, watching with the same hateful stare he had given me as he held the crossbow between my eyes.

This was not how I saw this ending. Being locked in a cage of iron was far from a possibility. I was so blinded with my want to cause Oakstorm's mad king pain that my mind had sugar-coated the idea of finding the Hunters and requesting them to take me to The Hand.

Becoming a prisoner was far from what I imagined, but it was now a painful reality.

I dared close my eyes for a moment of ignorant bliss. It was easier to give into the darkness of my mind than fight to not look at Gyah or ignoring the army of Hunters and pretending that Althea was not deathly ill before me.

Selfish little bird. A voice haunted my mind. You search for reprieve in the dark, yet you deserve nothing but the reminder of what you have caused.

I could not discern the voice. Was it my own? Something else? It echoed across my skull, impossible to ignore.

They should not have followed me.

Ah, but they did. Now one bleeds out before you, iron poisoning her from within. The other wishes to devour you whole for threatening not only her life, but the life of her Princess, and yours.

I left without them. If they would have stayed away, then this would never have happened. I cannot be to blame for their decision to come for me when I did not request it.

I argued with myself, my conscience refusing me a moment of peace which I clearly did not deserve.

Blame their actions if it makes you feel somewhat better. Do not be surprised when guilt consumes you.

My fault.

Yes, your fault.

"Something troubling you, princeling?" Gyah spat, her tongue as sharp as a knife.

Reluctantly, I opened my eyes to regard her. The moon above flickered beyond the bars. It was not full, but its silvered glow danced across Gyah's dark skin like dawn's light across a still lake's surface.

"Gyah, I did not want this to happen. Believe me." I spoke in hushed tones, aware of the many Hunters around us.

Gyah did not care. She feared little for people to listen in as she replied. "I admit you never struck me as a pathetic, careless fool. But now look at you. Tied up like cattle being taken to slaughter and still you do not see the reality of what is happening."

Her words felt like a punch in the stomach.

I rested my head upon the iron bar behind me, pleading for some support but finding it lacking. "You do not understand."

"Then help me see how your actions are just!" If it was not for the chain that kept her pinned to the cage, I was certain she would have jolted across the space for me. Deep within the fanged creature the iron cuff kept at bay coiled like a snake ready to strike.

"I am doing this for him," I replied through gritted teeth.

Gyah's features softened, her gaze dropping from mine for only a moment. "Do you truly believe your father would have wanted this? He kept you from the Hunters, turned his back on them himself, yet you have run straight into the arms. And for what?"

"An army," I said, refusing to let the rest of her words settle into my mind. "I need an army and no one north of the Wychwood border is willing to aid me against Doran. This is not a path I wished to go down, but the lack of support has placed me here. I am desperate, Gyah."

"You truly believe The Hand will aid you?" I could tell from the way Gyah asked her question that she already had decided on her answer.

"He prepares an army of powered humans. His stance on the fey is clear. If I can give him a reason to attack Oakstorm then he may embrace me."

Gyah stared at me with furrowed brows, judging me as clear as day. "You are forgetting something important. A piece of information that contradicts everything you have just explained to me."

"Enlighten me."

Gyah reached up to her ear and flickered it with a finger. "You are fey. We all are. If this Hand wants to go to war against us, that will include you."

"It is worth the risk. Knowing that Doran would fall and Eri—" A lump formed suddenly in my

throat. I covered my mouth, shocked at the response I had to saying part of his name.

"I understand it may be hard for you to see it, but Erix did not have control over what he has done. Even now he is not the same person we have come to know. Erix is nothing but a vessel for Doran now. A puppet with gold strings."

I had not allowed myself more than a short moment to think of Erix. Even with my father's murder replaying in my mind, I always ignored the hands that took his life. The vacant look in Erix's eyes as he followed the command his father had given him.

Turning my head, I gazed to a huddle of Hunters riding beside us. They clearly could hear what we discussed, but still paid me no mind. I had never felt so invisible yet so surrounded.

"Did anyone know what Erix was?"

Althea moaned, stealing my attention. Her eyes were cracked open, the whites bloodshot and skin pale around them. She struggled to push herself up to sitting, wincing with a hiss as she dragged her leg back towards her. "I did."

Those two words sent a sharp chill up my spine.

"Althea, are you okay?" Gyah's voice was filled with nothing but concern.

All Althea did was bat it away with a weak hand as she replied to me again. "I knew everything about Erix and his truth. What he was. What that meant."

"And you chose not to say anything?" I replied, feeling a mix of anger and worry as I regarded the Cedarfall Princess.

"It was not my story to tell. It was his. Do not blame me for his lack of ability to open up to you." The wind was knocked from me. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Althea scoffed and smiled grimly. "The truth hurts, Robin." Her eyes rolled into the back of her head, losing her battle with consciousness.

"Althea, you need to stay awake." Gyah spoke over me, stopping me from saying something I regretted. "Keep talking."

A string of inaudible sounds flooded from her paling mouth.

"Althea!"

She was gone again, slumping back to the ground. Gyah fought against her restraints to reach for Althea but failed miserably. The roar she let out finally had Hunters' heads turning in our direction.

"If she dies, her blood is on your hands."

Gyah was right. This was my doing.

It was punishment to listen to Gyah's shouting as she commanded Althea to open her eyes. The iron bar behind her groaned as Gyah tugged and yanked to get closer to the unconscious girl ahead of her. Her desperation was so raw that I was certain the bar would have snapped in two if the cuff was not suppressing her abilities.

The cart slowed suddenly, sending me jolting to the side. Around us the Hunters' circled on horses, each looking in at the chaos before them. Heavy boots squelched across the sodden ground beyond the stationary cage. Darkness coated everything, making it impossible to see clearly. There were no lights of villages and towns, only the quiet, dark and barren landscape of Durmain with nothing but Hunters around us.

Gyah was too engrossed in her shouting for Althea, her panic hot like pure fire, that she did not notice the Hunter come up behind her. Hands reached through the bars and latched onto her chain.

"Gyah, stop!" I shouted. But it was too late.

The Hunter pulled hard, yanking Gyah back against the bars of the cage. The crack of her skull against metal turned my stomach. It silenced her pleading, and a single gasp escaped her mouth as her

expression pinched in pain.

"Enough." A face peered through the bars. Deep, forest-green eyes narrowed as he looked across the cage at me.

Duncan.

"Don't—" I pulled forward, straining against the chains "—fucking touch her."

"Believe me, boy, I have no intention of soiling myself." Duncan released the chain, allowing Gyah's head to roll forward until her chin was pressed against her chest. I watched, seething, as Duncan stalked around the cage. He did not take his gaze off me, not once.

"Care to explain what all the fuss is about?"

It was as if we were the only people in the world, Duncan and me.

"She is bleeding out," I said, jaw taut and voice deep.

"And that is my problem? What do I care if she dies in this very spot?"

"Oh, you will care when you have to explain to your master why you have let a Cedarfall fey die before she reaches our destination."

There, I saw it. A flicker of something across his dark expression that told me my words had settled into him. "She is the enemy. If she dies The Hand will hardly pay any mind. Her body would only join the piles growing in honour of his name."

"You are wrong."

Duncan smiled, flashing straight white teeth. "Am I?"

"From my understanding, The Hand likes to collect fey with raw power. If you let Althea die, you prevent him from obtaining a fey with the ability to burn this party of Hunters and the acres of land around us with a single thought. Would you truly keep someone with such abilities from him?"

Duncan stopped beside me. My neck ached as I kept my stare on him, not wanting to show defeat by looking away.

There was a weighty moment of silence between us, Duncan studying me through narrowed eyes just as I studied him.

Then he looked at someone behind me. "Change our course to Finstock."

"It will add days onto our journey," the Hunter replied with a light voice as though he did not wish to speak up, and I could see why.

Duncan's face pinched into a frown, his lips curling back from his teeth as though he was a beast that longed for flesh. "I did not ask. I command."

"Apologies, General Rackley."

Duncan turned his attention back to me. "Two days. That is what I will give you."

Shock vibrated through my bones, and all I could think to say back to him were two words that tasted wrong in my mouth. "Thank you."

Duncan winced as my thanks settled over him. The expression pulled at the scar beneath his eye, making it look hollow as it etched deeper into his skin. "Do not thank me yet, little fey. Where I am about to take you, you will soon wish to be put back in this cage no matter who is dying within it."

He smacked a palm onto the cage which soon jolted forward. We were on the move again. And all I could do was watch as Duncan disappeared into the darkness left in our wake.

instock was a fortress of grey stone nestled among the barren landscape of Durmain. I did not know what to expect as we arrived, but this cluster of towering, aged buildings was far from what I imagined.

It had been a long night, one full of concern for Althea's wellbeing. I had tried to distract myself with racking my brain for any mention of such a place as Finstock. There was nothing. Perhaps my anxiety made thinking about anything other than the leaking wound that still poured scarlet blood without a sign of stopping impossible.

I had come up as clueless as I was when Finstock was first mentioned. It was not uncommon for me to be unable to recount the many faraway towns and villages across Durmain; the land was covered with them like pockmarks.

Early dawn was upon us and with it brought a brisker chill that had sunk into my bones. It was a battle to stop my teeth from chattering and my skin from feeling numb to the touch. All there had been, along the dirt path we rode, were rolling hills and glades so far away that my mind played tricks on me as if I could see the glittering surface of the ocean in the distance.

All of a sudden Finstock was before our party, jutting out amongst the calm of the landscape like an angry blade of stone that reached, unwantedly, into the cloud-filled sky. Torn, black banners hung from the stone face of the fortress. They danced in the wind, slow enough to see the recognisable handprint stained in white. The emblem was everywhere I could see. A mark of the Hunters. The very same that had been imprinted into my father's flesh.

I recognised the tug in my chest at the thought of *him* but felt it best to bury the feeling deep down. This was no time for grief, not as the Hunters carted us beneath a stone walkway into a courtyard in the belly of the stone fortress.

All around the straw covered courtyard, Hunters of all ages stood watch as we were parade within. I caught a glimpse of a few who spat at the wheels of the cart, and others who scowled with such burning intent that I could almost read their minds. They did not have to speak aloud the thoughts they had at seeing fey among this place. It was abundantly clear.

But the Hunters were not the only people to dwell within this place. Nimble, small frames adorned in deep, veiled maroon habits, flittered across walkways and through the crowded space. I could not see their features as the heavy material obscured them from view. Just as they were invisible, moving through the space unseen and unheard by the Hunters, they too treated us as though we were not here.

Not a single one turned a head to look in our direction as they hurried past in small, quiet groups. *What is this place?* 

Gyah echoed my thoughts as she spoke for the first time in hours, "What in ten fucks is going on?"

Her voice was rough as cracked stone. I looked across the cage as she fought to keep her eyes open, reaching a hand to the back of her head and wincing as she touched it.

"Are you alright?"

Gyah shrugged my question off, narrowing her gaze beyond the cage where she took her time to look at each and every Hunter surrounding us. Her stare was fierce, one that I did not want to be on the receiving end of, even with a cage of magic-nullifying iron between us. "This is not good, Robin."

"They are all Hunters," I said out the corner of my mouth, feeling the cage finally roll to a standstill. "All of them."

The cart had not even stopped for a moment before a flood of Hunters rushed towards it.

Gyah hissed, pushing herself into a crouching position as close to Althea's unconscious body as she could stretch toward. Even in the face of sudden danger, Gyah was a warrior without the need for steel or claw-tipped wings. Whereas I was a coward, powerless and pathetic, unable to even move a muscle as the threat of so many who hated us rushed forward.

My heart hammered in my chest as the heavy bolt clanged at the cage's exit. I pulled my legs into my chest, hugging them tight as the door was thrown open and greedy, gloved hands reached inside.

"Keep away from her!" Gyah roared, snapping teeth as she tugged on the chain at her neck. "Don't fucking touch her!"

No matter how hard Gyah tried, she could not stop the many hands from unlocking the chain at Althea's throat and then pulling her limp body out from the cage until she was hidden in a swarm of leather-clad bodies.

In a matter of seconds, it was only the two of us left. The Cedarfall Princess was taken from view through an open, dark door in a building to the side of the fortress. Gone, without question or comment.

Gyah was screaming bloody murder. Veins in her neck were straining as she pulled hard on the cuff and chain but to no avail. It was as though the creature within was battling against the iron. And, for a moment, I believed the transformation may have even happened.

Until the sound of someone clearing their throat snapped my attention back to the cage's open door. In the place the crowd had been now stood three men. Two unrecognisable and the third... the third was Duncan. "Do you mind?" he said, voice drab as he studied his nails carelessly. "I would recommend calming yourself down before you force me to do it for you."

"What are you going to do with her?" I asked, glancing worryingly to Gyah who silenced herself so quickly that the sudden change frightened me.

Her golden stare was fixated on Duncan. It swirled with hungry vengeance and something more terrifying. Promise.

"She needs to be healed, that is what you wanted, is it not? Because say the word and I will personally drag her back out by her pretty, red curls and start off for the long ride to Lockinge. We could even place bets to see if she would survive the journey. Not that you have much of worth to offer up."

Duncan could hardly hold my stare as he spoke, as though the conversation was a chore.

"Take me to her," Gyah demanded through gritted teeth.

"Why?" He scowled, long fingers flexing at his sides. "Don't you trust my hospitality?"

"No." It was all I could manage to say for it was the only answer available to me.

"Well, I do not trust you either. Listen... I regret to admit that we have something in common. Even if that thought alone makes me wish to scrub boiling oil across my body just to clean it."

That comment caused the two Hunters behind him to snigger, looking at each other like a pair of mischievous cats.

Duncan glanced between us both, grinning slightly when his eyes found Gyah. "You both are going to follow me. In a moment my good friends here are going to unchain you and I trust you will behave. This is no place to act the hero... do you understand?"

It inked me that he did not refer to me as he spoke. The unveiled threat was aimed at Gyah. Duncan knew I needed to get to Lockinge to have an audience with The Hand. Whereas Gyah would fight tooth and nail to get to Althea and escape if she had the chance.

"Give me the chance and I will tear your face off."

Duncan rolled his eyes. "You are surrounded by men and women under my command. This is my domain, *Eldrae*, you would be a brave fool to attack me here. Brave yes, but still a fool. Do not give the *Faithful* a reason to cause you pain; it is taking me enough conviction not to grant it myself."

"Faithful?" I muttered beneath my breath.

"You have a lot to learn, boy. Why don't we show you to your accommodation first though, yes? We are going to have plenty of time to speak. By the time we reach Lockinge, I have a feeling we are all going to be very... very close."



Even with the countless burning hearths and wax-dripping candelabras, Finstock was a cold place. If the damned iron cuff was not on my neck, I may have even enjoyed the comfort of the winter, how it seeped into the stone walls and clung to the itchy sheets that were fitted onto the bed before me.

There was no reprieve from the cold here.

Gyah paced the flagstone ground before the door, arms crossed, as though she kept them from battering the very walls down. "This is fucked! I can't just sit here and wait for news knowing Althea is left with those twisted bastards."

"There is nothing we can do but wait."

Gyah sneered at me. "Do you mean there is nothing you want to do? You are right where you wanted to be aren't you, Robin? In the belly of the enemy all because you had a whimsical thought that they might help you in your quest for blood. Well look! Blood is what you have got. And it is on your hands."

"You know that is wrong," I said, edging back until I was pressed into the bed. "If there was even a chance to get to Althea, I would take it. But you saw where we are. How many Hunters are around us? One wrong move and we may jeopardise what little help they are reluctantly giving Althea. It is not a risk worth taking."

"I told her we should not have followed you." Gyah stopped dead in her tracks, hands reaching for a sword at her waist that was not there. "Althea was adamant and worried. I said you need space, but that was not something she was willing to grant you. I have never seen her so concerned. And there was nothing I could have done to convince her otherwise."

I couldn't hold her gaze, opting to look at my scuffed boots instead. "I had no idea."

"You wouldn't have. For that you would have had to stop thinking about yourself for a moment to

A string in me snapped, one that I had not realised was pulled too tight. "My father was killed before my very eyes by a man I was beginning to let myself love. In the space of weeks, I had gone

from believing I had a family to learning that I have no one. You were right, you should not have followed me. Go on, break down that door like I can see you are dying to do. Run. Get away from here. I never wanted either of you to come for fear that something like this would have happened. To you it may have looked like I was being selfish, but the truth is I acted in a way that I believed would keep anyone I held affection for out of harm's way."

Hot, sticky tears sliced down my cheeks. They clung to my lashes, soaked my skin, made me reluctant to blink for fear of becoming blinded by sadness.

Gyah just stared at me, standing within the room of minimal comforts that I had named our prison, a room that had been bolted and locked from the outside with God knows how many Hunters listening in.

"Say something then!" I pleaded, unable to handle the harsh silence. "Scream at me, tell me what you really think. Go on, I am all ears, Gyah."

I flinched as she strode towards me, pinching my eyes closed I readied myself for a grounding slap or punch to the gut. It did not come. Arms wrapped around me, pulling me in tight. One, long exhale, and I practically melted into Gyah's embrace like ice above an open flame. Her hand found the back of my head where she supported me like a new-born. Her chin rested upon my shoulder as, she too, exhaled a breath full of heavy emotion. "Robin, my words have been unkind."

"They... they have been just."

Gyah squeezed me tighter. "If I am being honest, I am scared. It is a feeling I am not used to and one that I do not wish to continue experiencing."

"Me too."

I was scared. Scared to death that my choices would lead to more death. Althea's life was in the hands of people who paid coin to hunt her kind and that made me feel as though I was stepping across a bed of knives.

Gyah pulled back, holding me at arm's length as her eyes studied me from top to bottom. "You really want to do this, don't you?"

She did not need to elaborate. I nodded in confirmation. "It is my only choice."

Gyah chewed on her lip, gaze unfocused as she stared at nothing. "Once Althea is back to me, and the right moment presents itself..."

"I know." They would leave. And I would help them if it meant they would get out of harm's way. But even if I longed to turn my back on this path, I was too far down it to give up.

"What do we do now?" I asked Gyah, feeling as though she was calm enough to think whereas my mind was a storm of guilt and grief.

"First we get some answers. Anything we learn about this place and the people here may be useful information for when the chance to escape presents itself," Gyah whispered, eyes wide. "If there is one thing I have learned during my years of training it is that the art of listening is one of the greatest, passive weapons we all have access to."

"In a twisted way, I am glad you are with me." I could not imagine being here alone, knowing Duncan and his Hunters filled the many rooms within the fortress. Part of me could not help but believe the locked door was not only to stop us from leaving, but to prevent unwanted guests from entering.

"As much as I enjoy your company, I admit there are other places I would wish to spend time with you than this." Gyah looked around the room with a distrusting stare. "We are not safe here."

"I was not safe back in Wychwood."

It was true, and Gyah knew it. That was why she neglected to make a comment.

"Get some rest, Robin," Gyah commanded, releasing me and gesturing to the bed with a flick of a finger. "You look like shit."

I grunted and smiled, clearing the tears away with the back of my grime-smeared hand. "I do not mind taking the first watch."

Gyah simply shook her head in refusal. "I would very much like to be the one to welcome any Hunter who dares visits this room first. Sleep. I promise to behave, for Althea's sake, not theirs."

T t was the unfamiliar presence that woke me, not a sound or slight sudden movement, but the knowing burn of someone's unwanted, silent stare that dragged me from the pits of the deep sleep I had found myself prisoner to.

Abruptly, I sat up in the bedsheets, panic coursing through my veins.

"Was it something I did?" Duncan leaned against the wall opposite the end of the bed, one leg propped up behind him. His arms were folded across his broad chest as he surveyed me with eyes glittering with intrigue.

Perhaps it was the grogginess, but it took a moment to register what was happening. Instinct had my hand reaching for my waist, but the golden handled dagger was nowhere to be found. A stone dropped into the pits of my stomach as I remembered it upon the floor surrounded by the frozen, broken remains of James Campbell.

I looked across the room for Gyah, but the lack of her presence was abundantly clear even without the need to check. There was a hideous quiet among the darkening room which only added to the fear I felt with the man looming over me.

"What have you done to her?" I accused, arms shaking as I held myself up.

"Which one?" he replied curtly, simple words that made my anxiety spike even further.

"Gyah," I replied cautiously, feeling as though any detail I gave up could soon be used against me.

"Ah, the one who looks as though she wants to pick the skin from my very bones." Duncan kicked off from the wall. "I thought she may want to see your friend. She had no problems leaving you alone may I add. Never seen someone move so quickly from a place."

His words were meant to hurt me, but he didn't understand the dynamics of our close-knit trio.

"Something amusing you?" Duncan tilted his head, narrowing his stare until his scar pulled into a deep crease beneath his eye.

"Do you enjoy watching the helpless sleep?" I questioned, ignoring him.

"I never once believed you to be helpless," Duncan replied, taking slow steps around the base of the bed to its side. I felt the need to draw in my legs but did not want to show signs that his presence caused me discomfort. "I was going to wake you eventually, I promise."

"What do you want, Hunter?"

"The question is, what do you want... Robin?" Duncan's cherry-red lips pulled into a tight line. "Care to indulge me as to why you find yourself begging for the attention of the very ones who would wish to see your innards spilled freely across the ground? I have never known someone of your kind wishing for an audience with The Hand, a person who supplies coin to encourage your capture and... in most cases, eventual death."

I should have cared how he had obtained my name. How the sound of it caused my skin to shiver as he spoke it. But I didn't. He was not the first man to utter my name, and he would not be the last.

"Are you the mysterious Hand, Duncan?"

That had the man loosing a noise somewhere between a laugh and a gasp. "Do you truly think I would be staying in the likes of this hovel if I was?"

"Then the reasoning as to why I request an audience is not any of your concern."

I was coming to realise that Duncan had the ability of switching from calm to feral in a blink of an eye. I had no time to gasp before his weight was on the bed and his hand was gripping my chin, stopping me from uttering a word.

"Do not mistake me for a person who enjoys a game. I can assure you I do not. You will learn, quickly or not, that if I ask a question, I damn well require an answer." His grip on me relaxed and he rocked backwards. "Let us try again shall we...? If you think I will allow an audience with The Hand, what is it you require from him?"

"An. Army." I seethed, teeth gritted so tight that my jaw ached.

Duncan's eyes widened for a moment, quiet whilst he allowed my truth to settle in. "What do you, a measly fey boy, require an army for?"

You do not know who I am. What I am. Good, I thought, imagining my power flowing from my hands and turning his flesh to deathly, hard ice. When the time comes, I will show you.

"To kill a King."

"Treacherous words do not befit you—"

"A fey King," I quickly interrupted, revelling in the way his face melted to shock. "I get the sense that I would only be joining a cause that this... Hand already has planned. And if that's the case then I would gladly aid him in his attempts."

"You know nothing of the war he prepares for." Duncan turned from the bed, stalking towards the main door of the room. The dark-clad clothing he wore enunciated the V-shaped sculpture of his back. Duncan was tall and reedy, however I did not trust that beneath his clothes he did not house a multitude of muscle. He certainly moved as though he carried the weight of strength across his body.

"Then tell me," I called after him, swinging my legs over the bed and coming to a stand.

Duncan looked over his shoulder, emerald eyes full of judgement. I had never experienced the overwhelming urge to read the inner thoughts of a person... until now.

"Let us go for a walk, shall we?" Duncan pushed open the door, which had clearly been left unlocked since he had entered. It unsettled me that I still didn't know how long he had been watching me for.

"Fuck your walk. I am staying here."

"Do you not trust me?" Duncan pouted, clearly amused by the idea. "Robin, if I had wanted you dead, I could have finished the job a hundred ways whilst you slept. Believe it or not, you are likely safest with me than any of my fellow Faithful."

"Faithful?" I mused, burying the question about trust as that was a conversation, I was not willing to have. "Why do you call them by that name and not Hunters?"

"Follow me and you shall find out."



It would have felt more natural venturing the endless corridors of Finstock with a chain connecting me

from the cuff around my neck to Duncan's hand. Instead, he allowed me to walk freely, likely because he knew I wouldn't try to escape. I understood the threat of Hunters that filled the fortress like ants across rotting food.

"Four questions."

I skipped a step, not wanting to fall behind for fear a Hunter would snatch me from the shadows. Night had fallen on Finstock, which meant I had been asleep for a long time. Outside the narrow-slitted windows all I could see was the dark sky and the way mist clung to the empty courtyard.

"What?"

"Three left," Duncan said, amusement dripping from his deep tone.

"Where is everyone?" I asked, mind racing. I silently scolded myself for wasting yet another question on something so pathetic.

"Evening worship. And if I do not show my face I may be disgraced by The Hand before we even have the chance of reaching Lockinge. It is unbecoming for a Faithful to miss prayer, no matter the reasoning."

His short reply only conjured more questions. I felt as though I was reaching in a river for gold, unsure which lump to pick out of the bunch.

"Why do you call them Faithful?"

Duncan's jaw tensed, muscles feathering. Whereas I studied his face to see if it provided me any information beyond words, he only looked forward. His stare fixated ahead as though I was not by his side at all.

"We are the Faithful. Warriors of our God, commanded by His voice, The Hand."

I was not a religious person, nor had Father been. Growing up in a household where Father scorned the Creator, rather than praised Him, it had made me look at the stories as no more than what they were.

Fiction.

Although the teachings of the Creator, the human's God, was preached within schools and whispered about during holy sabbats that I never found myself joining. It was in Aurelia that I had learned the humans and the fey did not worship the same God; the Creator and Altar were different beings. Altar... the very God who had graced me with his presence within Welhaven, tearing down his place of worship as my own father's blood spoiled his holy place.

"That explains it all," I said. "Crazed people who worship a god who would smite them down with sickness and plague if given the choice. You are a cult. Who follow the Creator in a twisted way that the teachings never suggest."

Duncan paused in his walking, stopping suddenly. "You are wrong."

"Which part?"

"Ah, fourth and final question. It is not the Creator that we worship. Far from it." Duncan began walking again, his pace quickened this time as we split from the corridor and began our descent down a twisting staircase. The walls were narrow, so much so that I felt as though they pushed in from either side, restricting my breathing. I had to hold my hands out at my sides, steadying myself against the rough, stone wall to prevent me from falling. Once wrong step and I hardly believed Duncan would break a sweat trying to stop me from tumbling down to the bottom.

"Then who...?" I said, chasing Duncan around the twisting steps until we finally reached flat ground.

"I would like you to join me for this evening's worship." Duncan ignored my question, gesturing to an arched, doorless frame. Beyond was the courtyard and a dazzling glow of warm, orange light

through yet another archway further away. "Once we are finished you will be taken to see your... companions."

I thought the heavy thumping was coming from my chest as I stared, in wonder, towards to the glow. But it was not my chest. It came from the ground, a thundering of feet as Hunters stomped in unison

"Quick," Duncan said, grin long and sly. He reached for me, fingers grasping my bare wrist. It was that alone that shocked me more than anything he had said. The gentle grasp of his hand that wrapped around my wrist like a bracelet was completely opposite from the grip that bruised my jaw as he held me in the chamber room. "I would not want you to miss this. Tonight is special, for we have a blood rite to witness."

I couldn't have refused even if I wished to.

Duncan guided me into the chilly courtyard, towards the glow of the door on the other side of it. I almost choked on the thick, incense filled air; it climbed up my nose and dug deep into my throat, making every inhale feel like breathing underwater, and the exhale no better.

We waded through the short hallway that soon opened into a room no bigger than the chamber we had left. Except this room was full of bodies. Hunters filled every possible space, each fixated on the podium raised at the far end. Without the countless candles that dripped wax down the walls and from the ceiling, it would have been impossible to see what occurred. But the horror was illuminated in a red glow that danced off the dark, maroon habits worn by the figures lined up like cattle upon the podium.

"...Duwar was kept, starved, beaten and broken, in a prison his own kin had forged. Alone for no one to hear his crying pleas for forgiveness to the very ones who banished him to his dark place. Until he was heard again, a small whimper in the shadows that The Hand had listened to, whispers full of promise." An old man spoke amidst the line of cloaked figures. His back was bent into a shape that should have been impossible. White hair fell from his head, knotting with the beard that hung down to the swollen belly within his plain, brown habit held together with a frayed piece of cord. He swung a brass chalice on the end of a chain that spat out streams of smoke that coiled around his stout frame as he called across the crowd.

"Keep quiet and listen," Duncan murmured into my ear, sending a shiver down my spine. "This would not be the place to draw attention to yourself."

I swallowed hard, wondering why he would even care to give me such a warning, before focusing back on the words the old man recited.

"You know what must be done for His sustenance," he wailed, bloodshot eyes scanning for a crowd as though he could hardly see an inch before him. "We must keep Him fed whilst we wait for His return as ordered by His voice. All hail Duwar, and the blessed mouthpiece He chose for a vessel."

"Duwar." Everyone but Duncan and I repeated, as though entranced by the old man. "Duwar."

"Let the rite begin."

He stepped back, gesturing for the line of veiled beings, the same I had seen walking within Finstock upon our arrival. There were five of them, each a different height than the one next to them.

"Kneel."

They did, maroon habits kicked out around their feet as they got down onto both knees.

"What is going on...?" I said, not for Duncan but for my own mind to put together this strange puzzle and provide me with an answer.

"Watch," was all Duncan said, gaze fixated on the podium.

"Oh forgotten Duwar," the man began again as the veiled figures reached for something on the ground before them. I could not see over their heads what it was they grabbed for until they each raised their arms up, hands held high to the sky. Across both palms they balanced a knife, one crafted from a dark, dull metal that I had not seen before. It seemed to swallow the light from the room, not even reflecting the glittering candlelight that haloed around them.

"...long have you been kept from this realm, from the hearts and minds of those who care for you. Patience is a gift only for a God, and a gift that you hold far greater than your kin. For a time is coming, and you will be brought redemption by your own hand, a second chance against those who scorned you; who locked you away; who kept you from us."

The five figures twisted the dagger until the sharp edge was pointed down from the sky. They each held the hilt in both hands with a sure, strong grip.

"There will be a time when you will be free again, but until we are graced with your presence..." The crowd seemed to inhale at once, everyone waiting on the old man's words with bated breath. "...Feed."

The figures brought the daggers down simultaneously, slamming blades into their chests without word or sound. Where screams should have echoed, only silence replied. One by one they slumped forward—dead—as the crowd of Hunters watched. Then the room exploded in blood-thirsty chants of a name over and over.

"Duwar, Duwar, Duwar."

The brush of cold lips tickled my ear, but I did not flinch. I could not take my eyes off the old man who seemed to writhe, arms held high, as he muttered strange words to himself.

"Those with a belief are known to do desperate things," Duncan whispered. "Have you seen enough?"

I nodded, unable to blink or make a sound.

"Good," Duncan said, hand pushing at my back as he urged me out of the room, all without a single Hunter looking our way. "Now, are you certain you still wish to meet with The Hand?" There was a warning hidden beneath his words, a double-edged threat that would have sliced deep no matter how he said it.

As we left his kind chanting back in the chamber, I could not help but cling to one, important fact...

Duncan had not joined in.

"I f I had known we were surrounded by cultists I would have preferred to be left at death's door."

Althea's skin was as pale as the sheets she laid in, although I could not discern if that was from the iron-poisoning flooding through her blood or the information I had unloaded after Duncan had brought me to her. Strands of poppy red hair spread across the pillow beneath her, lose curls stuck to her damp, glistening neck.

Althea had been awake when Duncan had practically pushed me within the chamber room, locking the door behind me. Gyah had looked up with golden eyes brimming with concern, fingers gripped on Althea's shoulder as though I had interrupted a moment of privacy. She removed her hand before I had a chance to think much of it.

I had quickly proceeded into a breakdown of everything that had happened, briefly skipping over the fact that Gyah had left me to be alone with a Hunter whilst I was at my most vulnerable. Both the girls' expression was stoic until I finally drew a breath at the end of my tale. Then the barrage of panic devoured me.

"And you have not heard of the God Duwar before?" I asked, watching as both Althea and Gyah shared a look of confusion.

"I was hoping you would have had the answer for us, Robin," Althea said, wincing as she pushed herself to a sitting position despite Gyah quietly insisting she stayed lying down. "Humans are known for their strange beliefs and idolism of the Creator. But no, I have never heard of this Duwar before."

"It must mean something to them." Gyah gestured to the door and the many Hunters beyond. "To take your own life in the name of belief shows that this Duwar is important. More than just a name and story."

"Or they are just the crazed fuckers we have always seen them as," Althea added, brows furrowing as she tried to shift her body to get comfortable.

"They helped *you*, how crazed can they truly be?" I added. I thought that admitting it aloud would help make some sense as to why Duncan would willingly heal a fey when he was personally funded to see them captured, slaughtered and stolen.

Althea narrowed her hazel eyes at me, studying every subtle detail of my face. "What point are you trying to make, Robin?"

"I don't know what I am trying to say." I raised my hands to my sides quickly, fidgeting. "I am merely trying to make sense of this."

"Aren't we all." Gyah pressed a hand to her head as though in pain. "All I care about is getting as far away from here as possible. Whatever they believe, I say let them, as long as we are at a distance."

"Robin," Althea said, snatching my attention away from a point on the wall which I had become entranced by. "If there is a chance to leave, we do so together. You understand that right?"

"You are wasting your breath, Althea," Gyah interjected. "Robin has made his mind up long before this moment. Haven't you?"

I would only admit to myself that, for the first time since this plan had somewhat formed in my head, I was ready to turn my back on the idea and return to Wychwood. But for Father's sake, for the vengeance he deserved, I would not.

"I am not leaving."

"What did I say!" Gyah said, laughing but not from humour.

"Then neither are we," Althea confirmed, matter-of-factly.

"Not you as well!" Gyah groaned. "Will you ever listen to me, Althea? For your own sake, if Robin wants to stay then so be it. But I cannot allow you to be here a moment longer than necessary. It is not safe. That is what I was hired for. What I was born for, to protect your family."

Althea rolled her bloodshot eyes, patting Gyah's hand where it rested inches on the bed beside her. "If the tables were turned, I would only hope Robin would be saying the same, Gyah. I could not simply forget him, especially now the Hunters' reckless and homicidal actions have only been confirmed as truth. It would be the wrong decision to leave him."

"Then what?" Gyah said, almost stomping her boot on the ground. "If we do not leave, what do you expect will happen when we finally reach Lockinge...? If we ever make it that far. I do not imagine we will be sitting upon a table with this Hand, sharing wine and discussing simple matters such as the difference between our realms and the differences between how we eat, breathe... fuck!" Gyah's face was tinted red by the time she was done spitting out her words frantically. She rocked back on her heels, inhaling deeply as though she was running out of time. "I cannot see you hurt again."

Her final words were soft and fragile; I felt as though this was something I should not be witnessing as the Cedarfall Princess and her royal guard shared a moment of locked, intense silence.

"We will get through this together," Althea finally said, eyes flicking between Gyah and me, although lingering on her guard long enough for me to notice.

"Will you be saying the same when they drain your blood for the magic within it?" Gyah was agitated, tugging at the collar of her black tunic, jaw clenched tight.

"Gyah is right," I mumbled, shivering as the windowless slits of the night beyond did little to keep the cold out of the room. "You should leave when the chance presents itself."

"Care to point out how exactly?" Althea sucked her tongue across her teeth. "Do we just run away with these fucking cuffs on? If you cannot see, I am currently riddled with pain and frankly rather sick. Even if I wanted to go I couldn't. It is not a choice."

"And what of your family?" I asked; the question had been haunting my mind since we were in that rocking cage. "They will know you are missing and send aid for you?"

Althea nodded. "If we stay here long enough it will only be a matter of time before they find us. But the Hunters know that. They are far from stupid, and I know that they would already be planning their next move. We will be long gone by the time my family can help."

"Then we do anything to push back our departure from Finstock!" Gyah almost laughed with pure joy, latching onto the first true potential of getting free. "Altar be damned, why did I not think of this before? The Hunters will not stand a chance if your mother sends a party after you. After your brother's passing, Queen Lyra will not risk the death of another child."

"How long until they realise you are missing?" I asked Althea, unsure what answer I wanted to

hear.

She shrugged, the simple movement taking a lot of effort. "Days, two at most. Less most likely. Knowing her lack of trust and our return after we told her we were trailing you to Icethorn, she would have had her own scouts following us. Her soldiers likely walk over Durmain ground as we speak."

A strange and sickly mix of relief and disappointment twisted in my gut. In one hand, for their sake, I desired for aid; no matter how their company eased the situation at hand, I would have preferred both to be far away from this twisted hell.

"Then that is what we do," I agreed. "Wait until the rescue party comes and you both get away."

"Haven't I already told you that we either leave together or not at all?"

Before Gyah exploded in another torrent of arguments as to why Althea was as equally stubborn and foolish as a mule, I replied, "Then we go together."

I could not ignore the relaxing of Althea's shoulders as relief settled over her. Forcing a smile, I fought hard to make sure my eyes screamed with sincerity, but one glance at Gyah and I could see that she did not believe the mask I put on. She kept silent though, which I was thankful for. Gyah knew I would not go. Althea, perhaps, wished to believe I would give up on this path so easily.

You would be wrong, friend.

"Gods, that did not need to feel as painful as it did." Althea laid back, closing her eyes with a slight hiss through her teeth. "Now, let me be the bossy princess I was destined to be and allow me some sleep. This salve is wearing off as quickly as my nerves and I admit I cannot cope with the pain."

"Let me help you," Gyah said before Althea finished her next breath, reaching for the brown-glass pot of lumpy cream liquid that rested upon the oaken draws at the bedside. And Althea did not refuse. "It would be wrong to allow a princess to apply her own medicine. How very beneath you."

"Gyah, I have never known you to harbour such sarcasm..." Althea retorted. "It suits you."

Gyah faked a smile, throwing back the sheets to reveal an angry, yellow, wet wound across Althea's thigh. Even now remnants of the Faithful's salve were dried across her skin. The sheets were stained green with puss that seeped slowly from the dark wound, but it was the smell that had my empty stomach nearly spilling what little was left across the floor.

"It doesn't feel right not knowing what is in this..." Gyah dug her fingers into the pot and pulled out a glob. Carefully she slopped it atop of the wound, whispering an apology as Althea released a long curse.

"Not like there is much chance for me to be... concerned." It was clear Althea was in pain as redhot veins spread from the wound. "The relief it provides me is far greater the pain of the iron bolt."

I moved to the side of her bed, carefully brushing red strands of hair from her forehead as Gyah worked at covering every ugly inch of the wound with cream. "I do not trust a single soul outside that door, but I do believe they will not see you harmed."

"Why so sure?" Gyah looked up, expression laced with distrust.

"I woke to a Hunter in our room," I replied. "If they wanted me dead, or any of us, it would have been done. All Duncan's threats are empty."

"I do not believe they are empty," Gyah murmured, focusing back on the task at hand. "I simply believe he has a lick of restraint. Put us in the room with any of his cult-fuckers and I cannot say we would still be having this conversation."

"Is that why you left me with him?" I asked. "Because you sense he has control over his want to harm us?"

Gyah stiffened. "He offered to take me to Althea. I only left when I saw him lock you inside the

room. I did not realise he would go back for you."

There was an apology buried in her words somewhere, I just couldn't see it clearly.

"He is different from the others..." I blinked, visions of the hungry expressions that stained the many faces of the Faithful as they watched the five figures take their own lives filled my head.

"But he *is* still one of them," Althea hissed, followed by another breathy apology from Gyah.

There was nothing likable about Duncan, but I did find myself hoping that his control over the Faithful remained long enough for us to survive whatever was to come. Whatever this Duwar stood for, I was willing to bet that the hate for our kind was mixed within the faith. It was an unconfirmed hunch, one I could not put aside. There would come a time when answers would be required. We needed to know more about the Faithful and Duwar before breaking bread with the mouthpiece of the so-called God that drove people to end their lives in his name.

Perhaps Duncan had those answers. He wanted to show me the blood rite for a reason. Maybe as a warning, or maybe something more. There was only one way to find out.

"Forgive me if I sleep," Althea said, voice a murmur, her eyes already closed. "It would be awfully rude of me, but I feel myself slipping."

Without opening her eyes, Althea patted her hand across the bed until her fingers slipped over Gyah's arm. She grasped her, brows furrowing and pale lips parting. "Do not leave my side."

"I wouldn't dare."

"That is an order."

"A wasted one," Gyah replied. "I will not be going anywhere. It is my duty."

"Duty..." Althea huffed, a weak smile presenting itself across her beautiful face. "You make it sound like I am forcing you."

Althea's mouth parted and a long, exhale followed. She was asleep before she would have heard Gyah's reply. But I did. It settled over me, words which were not meant for me still made me feel as though I was enveloped in a warm embrace.

"It is both my duty and my pleasure."

I instock, among many things, was a silent place. Even with the stone-cold rooms full of humans there was not a sound. It made falling asleep surrounded by enemies an easy feat. Althea, Gyah and I had managed to sleep in the same room as it became apparent that no one was coming to separate us.

At the arrival of dawn, the serenity changed.

When the screams began, it shattered the illusion of being alone. The sound clawed into my consciousness and dragged me, unwillingly, from the dreamless state I had found myself in.

It was Gyah who woke first, urging us all awake with her sudden shout of dismay. "Do you hear that?"

I rubbed sleep from my eyes, glancing at Althea who did the same. Colour had returned to her skin, the apples of her cheeks flushed red once again.

"I thought I was dreaming it." Althea pushed herself to a sitting position with less effort than the night before.

Gyah raced to the glassless window and was about to say something until her eyes settled upon something that caused her distress. She clapped a hand over her mouth, stifling the swear that gasped out of her.

I joined her side in an instant, shoulder to shoulder, as my eyes fixed upon the cause of commotion. Fey. Carted within a wheeled cage, surrounded by the stern-faced cultists.

Gyah slammed a palm into the wall. "This cannot be fucking happening."

"What's going on?" Althea called over, voice strained and pleading.

"They have fey captives," I explained, unable to take my eyes off the three horror-stricken, tearstreaked faces of the prisoners. The fey wailed like cats, each clinging onto one another as though they tried to keep afloat within stormy seas.

"They are..." My voice broke.

"Robin," Althea's tone was commanding, "Tell me."

"Children." Gyah's palm became a fist as she punched the wall. Bone cracked against stone and her knuckles came back torn and bloodied. "They have children."

I had been unable to put it into words, as though the cuff around my neck had tightened to a point that speaking was impossible. I was choking on the reality of what I witnessed. Three children, no more than seven years of age, were being carted towards a camp of crazed, hateful cultists.

"We have to do something," Althea growled, half from anger and the rest from pain as she swung her legs over the bed. She sat on the edge, wild red hair hanging on either side of her shoulders as she fought to calm her breathing. "I will not sit in this room and listen to whatever end awaits them within this hellscape. Robin, help me up."

I did not have to be told twice. Moving to Althea's side, I allowed her arm to wrap around my shoulders so I could hoist her up. She trembled at my side yet held firm. Her strength was fuelled by the growing volume of the young fey's' haunting cries as their cart grew closer. "Let me see them."

"I don't know what we can do, Althea," I petitioned, voice shaking as violently as my body.

"Take me to the window, Robin." Althea glowered.

Gyah was practically leaning out of it when I got to her side, face pressed between the narrow slit as she began screaming. "Touch them and I will bath in your *cunting* blood, you fucking pathetic pricks."

Not a single Hunter turned to look at Gyah as they ran through the courtyard towards Finstock's entrance.

It was Althea's hand that rested upon Gyah's shoulder that seemed to snap her back out of the throes of anger that had overwhelmed her. As if shocked, she turned to face her, eyes red and cheeks wet from the flow of persistent tears.

"Children, Althea. They are going to hurt them."

Althea closed her eyes, lips pulling into a thin line. Gyah hung her head, chin to chest, as her own quiet cries became sobs.

"We will stop them," Althea said, conviction dripping from her tongue. "There is no other option."

A figure caught my attention beyond the window. Duncan. He ran, legs pounding across the ground as he moved past the excited Hunters who had gathered for the arrival; even from our view I could see that something was wrong. Then his own shouts drowned out that of the children.

"Calm yourself down, the lot of you!" Duncan's deep voice thundered through the courtyard, echoing up the grey-stone walls towards our perch in the chamber room. With long strides he was out onto the worn path that led to the fortress, waving his hands above his head.

"Is that...?" Althea muttered.

"Duncan," I confirmed, narrowing my gaze to watch as he unsheathed his sword, the black-metal glinting as he raised it towards the Hunter who led the party to Finstock. We could no longer hear him from the distance, but his movements were dramatic and frantic. He swung his sword wide, pointing it at each and every Hunter as he berated them.

"They are all distracted," Gyah said. "Now is the time to get out."

Althea's weight was taken from my side as Gyah took over, half dragging her towards the locked door.

"We need to think about this. If we get out this door, there is a wall of Hunters to get through before we get to the children. Althea can hardly stand, and we have no weapons or power."

"It is worth a try," Gyah countered. "It has to be."

I carried on watching the scene unfold beyond the window as Gyah and Althea smashed the few pieces of aged furniture into the door. Perhaps I should have helped, but there was something about Duncan and his reaction that captured my interest.

"They are fighting..." I said, fingers gripping onto the stone ledge as I watched Duncan take another Hunter by the scruff of the neck. In a single breath, Duncan had snapped his arm back and smashed the hilt of his sword into the side of his face. The Hunter went down, falling to the ground like a sack of useless shit. Blood leaked from a wound, bone gleaming beneath the crimson stream as he wailed in pain.

"We do not require a running commentary," Gyah snapped, smashing the splintered leg of a chair

into the door. "Get over here now and help us break this door down."

"No... I... I do not think they need our help."

"What did you just say?" Althea asked, the half-broken chair still held above her head. Slowly she lowered it, brow furrowed as she regarded me from across the room.

"Duncan... he is fighting them. His own..." I could hardly make sense of what I saw, let alone put it into words. "Just come and see."

Perhaps it was realisation that they were not going to break free from the room, or the fact that a Hunter was fighting against his own people, that had them clambering to my side.

The atmosphere of the fortress had changed. The giddy, hungry excitement of the Hunters who watched the arrival of the fey became a sombre mood as Duncan stormed back towards the fortress. He held his sword at his side, face pinched with pure fury. Then, for a moment, he looked up to our window and caught my stare. I stepped back, stopped by Gyah who watched over my shoulder.

"Have I not warned you simple fuckers enough? Children! No children are to be brought to my camp. Not now. Not ever." Hunters parted out of Duncan's way as though he was a wave of boiling water ready to devour anything in his path. "Look at you all. Salivating like desperate dogs. Do not give me a reason to put each and every one of you down."

"Sustenance for Duwar!" I could not see who had shouted, but the comment drained the blood from my face.

Duncan stopped dead in his tracks, fists clenched at his sides as he pondered the words that had silenced the entire crowd. Behind him the caged fey had already begun to move towards the fortress, but the children no longer cried aloud; from fear, or confusion, I was not sure.

"Sustenance?" If it was not for the silent, tense gathering who watched for Duncan's reaction, I may have missed his reply. "If that is what you wish to provide our God then offer yourself up. Let me spill your life in his name. Bitter as your blood may be, Duwar would find your sacrifice most satisfying... as would I."

A deep growl vibrated beneath Duncan's voice. I half expected him to snap his teeth. Perhaps even grow horns or fangs as he clearly caged a beast within him.

"Lost for words now?" Duncan turned to the crowd. He waited, as we all did, for someone brave enough to shout or comment. But the fortress and the bastards it housed were deathly quiet. "That is what I thought, you cowards. Prepare me a horse. Now. The children are to be returned and I can hardly trust a single one of you to scrub your own teeth let alone deliver these children back to the border in one piece. Next time you bring a bounty, make sure it has age on its bones. Or face the consequences. It will be your lives given up to Duwar."

I could not formulate a single sound as I watched Duncan clamber onto the back of a midnight horse that was efficiently provided to him with haste, nor could Althea or Gyah. Duncan galloped to meet the cage which had already begun pivoting back in the direction it had come.

"I can't believe what I am watching..." Althea finally shattered the surreal atmosphere as the party rode off into the distance. "Many a time have I heard stories of Hunters maining children. Never have I heard—let alone—seen this."

"May I remind you, *Princess*, that he is still a Hunter. Blood stains his hands no matter his views on the age of his victims."

Gyah had a point. And a sharp one at that.

"This one is different. I do not trust him for that very reason, but I recognise his contrast." Althea gestured to the bed with her spare arm, the other wrapped around Gyah's shoulders for support. "Before I fall, I suggest you get me back to that bed."

"But we were going to..."

Althea silenced Gyah with a smile. "Until that Hunter returns, I do not wish to leave this room. He, as reluctant as I am to admit it, is the only thing keeping us safe. I suggest we keep rather quiet until his horse arrives back. Now is not the time to draw attention."

I nodded, fighting the urge to look back out in the distance to see where Duncan had gotten to. There was something different about him. And like Althea suggested, I should *not* trust him.

But why did I feel as though I could?

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"You saved them."

The door had not even shut behind Duncan before the words tumbled out of my mouth. It was late into the night when the bobbing flame signalled his arrival in the distance. Althea and Gyah, in their attempts to ignore the sickening hunger that had settled over us, slept. Whereas I could not. I busied myself looking out of the window and felt the spark of sudden... thrill as I watched Duncan return.

I knew he would come for us upon his arrival. I could not explain it, but I knew it long before the brass knob of the door turned to reveal him on the other side. Perhaps he did not trust his people not to take his absence as an opportunity to attack, to treat us cruelly, especially since we had heard them sporadically throughout the day whispering hateful ideas on the other side of the door. Although, despite the terrible things they had uttered, the door was untouched. We were left alone. Until Duncan came back.

Gyah was awake in seconds, eyes wide and frantic as she watched the Hunter enter without invitation. I raised a hand at her, standing between Duncan and the bed in which Gyah had been awkwardly sleeping over with her head in her arms as I said, "It is fine, Gyah."

"I did not save them," Duncan replied matter-of-factly, pine-green eyes looking me up and down with distaste. "I simply postponed the inevitable. Given them a few more years until the Faithful are welcome to chase them down like wolves. For now... I do not allow youth into these walls."

"You speak such words as though I will not sip the blood from your veins and use your frayed skin to wipe my mouth clean." Gyah was a whirlwind fury, stopped from pouncing upon Duncan by Althea who gripped her as she woke.

"Now, now, Gyah." Althea blinked sleep from her eyes, wincing. "That is no way to thank our host."

Duncan ignored the comments and slander, looking bored and tired. He clearly did not view us as a threat, entering the room alone with not a single weapon visible on his person. "You need to eat."

"What we *need* is to be let free," Gyah muttered.

"That is not a need you all share," Duncan replied blandly, looking at me as though to prove a point. "Food will be brought to you shortly."

"How generous." Gyah rolled her eyes, teeth still gritted together.

"You know nothing of the limits of my generosity. Do not give me an excuse to make those limits clear. In history you are the most comfortable prisoners who have ever stayed within Finstock. If you would prefer different treatment than these comforts and offerings of food, then please say the word. I will hand over your care to any other Faithful beyond this room. Believe me, many would be honoured."

"The food," I said quickly, preventing Althea or Gyah from speaking first. "We happily accept

your offer. Thank you."

"You will eat with me."

His words snatched the breath from my lungs. I could hardly catch it again.

"Pardon?"

Duncan ignored me and my confusion, hardly even paying me any attention as he spoke to Althea and Gyah again. "We leave tomorrow. Finstock and its occupants are unhappy with my choice today and those loyal to me and my views are thin and far between. Healed or not, we move."

With that he turned on his heel, stomping back towards the door without another word.

I looked to Gyah whose expression was thunderous, and then Althea whose face was unreadable, the visage of a Queen able to hide her true feelings behind a mask, a mask I had not yet perfected.

"She is not ready to leave," Gyah snapped as Duncan reached for the door. There was no denying the pleading in her tone.

Gyah did not notice it, but Althea spared her a stare with wide, glistening eyes. She then squeezed Gyah's hand with lips pursed in silent thought.

"It was not a question," Duncan replied, not bothering to turn and face Gyah who clearly was irked by his lack of respect or care. "Rest and eat up. I cannot promise another stop before we reach Lockinge. And where we are going... a promise of a meal for your kind is a rarity. Now you, boy, come with me. I want to know about why a fey would wish to turn against his own."

"I do not wish—"

Duncan huffed a forced laugh, turning the side of his face to flash the grin upon it. "The idea of it is as intriguing as I find you."

uncan's skin was no stranger to scars.

His back was facing me as he tugged the dark tunic over his head, flexing the muscles across his shoulders and the constellation of marks upon them. He was covered in them from

the base of his neck to the narrowed pinching of his waist.

I couldn't do anything but watch as he undressed before the rising wall of steam that danced from the tub's hot belly of water. I stood awkwardly beyond the now locked door and fidgeted with my hands whilst I waited for him to say something. Anything. Instead, he treated me as though I was a ghost, stripping the items of clothing from his body until only the undershorts were left. Then he turned, looking over his broad shoulder at me as though he suddenly remembered my existence.

"Are you waiting for permission to sit?" His tone was dull and unbothered.

"Waiting for more of an explanation as to why you want me here in the first place," I retorted, trying to keep my gaze upon his instead of glancing down at his exposed skin.

"Company," Duncan said, kicking the pile of his clothing out of the way before reaching a hand for the brass tub's edge. "And conversation. It is not every day I get the chance to speak with your kind so freely. Usually, the circumstances of their stay here is... less fitting for idol chitter. So... sit and let us talk."

I didn't have to be told twice. Water sloshed as Duncan climbed into the tub, but I kept my focus on perching myself on the edge of the bed that waited on the other side of the room. With each inhale I could almost taste the strong scents from the bath, sweet lavender with a faint hint of something sharper. Sandalwood. I recognised the smell from an oil Father had used to tame his beard.

Duncan sighed slowly, lowering himself further into the water until it was up to his chin. His eyes were closed, the furrowed brow I had grown used to seeing him with relaxed. The lack of him viewing me as a threat irked me more than it should. Once again, I waited for him to speak to shatter this silence. It was clear that the quiet was something Duncan was used to, his own company enough to keep himself amused.

"You are different to them," I finally spoke out, unable to sit in this awkward silence a moment longer.

"Do tell me more."

"I do not think I need to."

Duncan peered at me through one eye. "Because I do not wish the murder of children to be conducted beneath my roof?"

I nodded, eyes falling upon Duncan's undershorts that now rested upon the stone-slabbed flooring. Heat flooded my cheeks as I quickly looked away. "You didn't join in with prayer during the rite

either."

"Does my lack of outward belief cause you distress, Robin?" Duncan asked, wet arms holding on to the tub's edges as fat droplets of water fell from him. "The way I practice my faith does not make me any less of a believer than those who would wish to see blood spilled from innocents."

"So you see fey children as innocent? Even if they are the kind your fellow cultists have spent years hunting?"

"I see them as children, nothing more. When I spoke of innocents, I was referring to those who sacrificed their lives in the name of our God with the belief of providing him sustenance in return for His blessing." Duncan reached a hand, his eyes firmly closed, towards a wooden stool that held jars filled with creamy liquids and bars of chopped soaps. "Now, if you wouldn't mind passing me the soap."

"You are joking," I said through a laugh.

"Not at all," he replied, smirking. "Unless you are going to insist that I climb back out of this tub and retrieve it myself."

I couldn't believe, as I stood from the bed and moved towards the stool, what I was doing. But the idea of seeing Duncan without an inch of clothing on had me doing as he requested.

"Careful you do not drop it, Robin."

My mouth was dry as I swallowed, thrusting the square soap above the tub where I let it fall from my hand with a splash.

"Oops," I muttered through a sickly-sweet smile, returning to the seat at the end of the bed. My eyes fell on Duncan with distaste. "If that is all you require of me... then I ask to be returned to my friends."

"I am far from done with you. My journey today has given me a chance to form a rather impressive list of questions I have for you. When I am done, you will be permitted to leave."

I leaned back on my hands, fingers clawing the material of the bed, as I regarded Duncan. "Then ask away."

"You have pointed out my differences, but I must say yours are also rather alarming." Duncan's arms moved beneath the water. I dared imagine what he was doing but I hoped it was something innocent. "You are not a full-blooded fey, are you?"

I shrugged. "Disappointed? Does it lower my value with The Hand?"

"Yes," Duncan replied. "And no."

There was no time to work out what he was agreeing or disagreeing with.

"The differences are subtle. At first, I could hardly tell. But you move like a human. Speak like one. I would sit next to you in a tavern and hardly notice."

Perhaps his comments should not have felt like an insult, but they did.

I tugged at the cuff around my neck. "Take this off and I will show you just how fey I can be."

"I do not doubt that for a second. So how did a boy torn between two realms chose which side he wanted to be on?"

A scowl pinched across my forehead, my jaw clenching until my teeth felt as though they would be stuck together for an eternity. "I have chosen no sides."

"You had me fooled. I thought you wanted to join us, work alongside The Hand in hopes he assists you with killing a fey King. Forgive me, but that seems to me as though you truly have picked a side. Unless your motivation suggests otherwise. So, are you ready to tell me why it is you wish to kill one of your own?"

"He is *nothing* like me." A shuddering growl emanated from deep within me. If the iron cuff was

not around my neck, I would have devoured this entire room in cold winds with a mere thought.

Duncan waved a hand, flicking water onto the floor. "There is a story there and I want to know it from beginning, middle, to end."

We both studied each other. Duncan, the Hunter, and me his prey. I toyed with the idea of lying, telling him a tale that did not do justice to the truth. But what would have been the point? Although his company caused my skin to itch, I still needed him to trust me. Duncan, in many ways, felt like the gate keeper guarding what I desired most. If I wanted to make it to The Hand in one piece, with a lick of comfort for myself, Gyah and Althea, then I felt the truth was the best place to build foundations of trust... Or something close to it.

Duncan combed his fingers backwards through his length of dark hair until not a single strand covered his devilish face. "I am waiting..."

"The man I wish to see dead took the one important part of my life away from me. Stole it right in front of me." A sudden harsh sadness made my throat thick and shoulders heavy. I felt Duncan's stare on me, but felt too cowardly to hold it now, as though the truth made me more vulnerable than the naked, unarmed Hunter before me. "He killed my father."

"Then we share something in common," Duncan replied, voice quieter than it had been before. "The fey are the reason behind my parents' death. Seems we share similarities."

Should I have apologised? It felt as though that was the right thing to say in that moment: sorry. But I swallowed that word down and kept it buried.

"Is that your reasoning behind what you do?" I asked.

"Are my motivations not fair in comparison to yours?" Duncan sat up in the tub, the curves of his muscles etched into his frame like lines within stone. "Murder is murder, Robin. Your desire for it makes you a monster, just like me."

"Have all the fey you have hurt had a hand in your parents' death? Or do you just tell yourself that as you wash their blood from your hands?"

"I will give you some advice when speaking with me, Robin. Do not ask questions you will not like the answer to."

I scoffed. "That is a cowardly response."

"Says the boy who cannot face a single man alone, who needs the support and aid of those he would deem as enemies, just to complete a task that is seemingly impossible to do alone." Duncan stood from the tub, not bothering to cover the swing of flesh between his legs. I hardly had a chance to snap my gaze upwards and hold his, which burned with fury. In a moment he stood beside the bath, dripping a puddle of water onto the floor, as he wrapped a towel around his waist.

"Doran is a powerful man."

"He has a name then," Duncan said, fingers resting upon his muscular hips. "Be grateful you have one to remember. To focus on. It was a luxury I never had, knowing the names of my parents' killers. And a name is a powerful thing. I would give anything to know it. I am left with nothing but choices, an unlimited list of potential names which I mark off with a bloody sword with each and every fey I kill."

I watched, speechless, as Duncan stood before me exposed from the waist up; more scars littered his chest and stomach. "I can see that you have been hurt in the process."

"Believe it or not, Robin, but the deepest scars are the ones you cannot see. And no, these are unrelated to what happened to my parents. A story, perhaps, for another day."

A knock sounded at the door, snatching both our attention. From the look across Duncan's face, it was unexpected. Holding the towel in a fisted hand, Duncan moved for the door and opened it to

reveal a veiled figure carrying a tray of food. Cheese and breads, meats and fruit, a medley of delicious items that had my mouth watering and my mind distracted from the conversation we were just having.

"Ah, supper." Duncan pushed the door wide, allowing the figure in. "Set it down upon the table, sister."

The figure nodded, entering in a long dress that swished outwards with each footfall. She did not jump as I did when the door slammed shut behind her. Even with her face covered in the light lace of the veil, I could still feel her cold stare on me. Duncan was unbothered by her presence as he wandered back towards the tub, pulling a new set of clothing from a pile as he began to dress himself.

"Thank you..." I muttered, trying to see past the veil. I kept thinking about the five veiled figures who had driven knives into their own chests. Was she destined to do the same? Take her life in the name of a God that was unheard of to most?

She tipped her head, leaving the tray beside me and backed away.

I focused back on Duncan who ran a large hand through his dark wet hair until it no longer obscured his face. His skin glistened from the remaining beads of water. He ran the towel up and down his arms, the sleeveless shirt he wore exposing the strength beneath his carved muscles.

For a monster, he's undeniably beautiful.

The thought was only brief and lasted no more than a second before guilt sunk talons into my chest. A vision of Erix filled my mind, and by the time I looked back to Duncan it was with a gaze of dull and muted tones.

"Eat and bathe if you desire. Tomorrow will be our final day in Finstock before a long journey to Lockinge. I cannot promise comforts outside of these walls so enjoy it while it lasts."

The veiled woman lingered at the door as if waiting for Duncan's confirmation to leave.

"Is this not your room?" I asked.

"It is, on other nights, but tonight I have no use for it."

"I cannot work you out, Duncan," I said, feeling a swell within my chest.

Perhaps my honesty was paying off, making him trust me. If this was what was required of me, to get close to The Hand, then I would keep up this illusion for as long as required.

Duncan moved towards the woman by the door, replying proudly as though his words were meant for all to hear, "I am not a puzzle to be pieced together."

I went to reply when I caught a flash of silver and the scratch of metal against flesh. The woman, shadowed behind Duncan's back, shifted her weight before he had the chance to act.

"I always thought you were fickle, but moving on so quickly, and with a Hunter no less, how... scandalous."

The knife was held to Duncan's throat, edge pressed into skin, leaving a trail of red. The veiled figure did not shake as she gripped the man, relying on the knife to keep him still and in place.

"Sister... release me," Duncan warned, hissing through his teeth.

He could have broken free from her grasp with ease, until I realised that her other hand, hidden behind his back, also held a knife, its sharp tip pressed against his spine. One wrong move and he would be left for dead, or immobile.

What caused me fear was not seeing him die before me. I was used to seeing death up close and personal. But it was the voice, the familiar tone that had haunted the dark shadows of night for days after my abduction from Farrador.

"Briar."

I prayed to whatever God would listen for me to be proven wrong, until I remembered that they

cared little for me.

The voice I had wished to never hear again replied, "Miss me?"

uncan kept his face void of emotion as though two knives were not pressed into his skin. He regarded me from the door, forest-green stare intense and unblinking, and I wished to share his calmness. My heart thundered in my chest, each beat threatening to snap my ribs in half.

"Is the cutlery truly necessary?" Duncan asked, peering down his sharp nose at the blade.

"You tell me, Hunter. Are you going to behave whilst I complete my hit?"

I almost expected him to refuse her, to fight on my behalf. But it never came. He retreated into silence as he studied my entire body, my anxiety taking over.

"How did you find me?" I asked her, watching for any slight movement. I was powerless and clumsy compared to Briar, a trained assassin initiated into the guild known as the Children of Asp. I had hoped that I had seen the last of her since her benefactor was dead, but it seemed I'd never be that lucky.

"I have always been watching you, Robin," Briar replied, veil fluttering with each breathy word she spoke. "It is what I do. Wait and watch until the time is right, and I had a hunch I would be called to this task again. Call it... intuition."

"Doran sent you."

Duncan laughed, breaking the tension with his misplaced chortle. "The King sends a single person after you, Robin? Unlike your stance on him, he does not see you as a threat."

I scowled, stomach churning as I finally realised, I was truly alone in this room. It was my own form of intuition, but I trusted that Duncan would do little to help me if—when—Briar was ready to strike.

However, Duncan laughing in response to Briar's comments pissed her off.

"You laugh freely as though I do not hold a blade at your back and throat," Briar hissed. "I would happily break my code and kill someone separate to my hit. Someone would want your head, General Rackley. There would be coin to collect for your life."

"Believe me, girl, you do not scare me."

He should be scared. When someone asked me what my greatest fear was, I had replied the dark, as if I were a child holding onto a pathetic horror. Now my answer was different. I feared the girl who stood before me. Briar was horror in the flesh, a real-life monster with unlimited potential to kill.

Duncan was a fool to ignore that.

I blinked and saw a vision of Duncan's naked body and the scars scattered across his skin. No wonder he did not flinch at the presence of her blades; he clearly had experienced far worse.

"I do not care for fear, Hunter. I care for coin. And this time..." Her head turned back in my

direction, face still covered by the veil. "...I will finish the task."

I stepped forward, bravery burning in my heart. The feeling was sudden, perhaps conjured by the feeling of having my back pressed up against a wall with no possibility to get away. If Duncan was not prepared to aid me, then I would have to do it myself.

"What have I ever done to you, Briar?"

The question hung in the air between us.

Briar slowly lifted the knife from Duncan's back and used the sharp tip to remove the veil from her face. That opened the opportunity for Duncan to make his move, but he didn't. He kept still and comfortable, as though he enjoyed witnessing what was occurring, even with a blade to his throat.

Finally, I could see her. Dark, jade eyes brimming with arrogance. Her hair, still short and cut close to her head, had been slicked back from the veil she had worn. Her soft pixie-like features had not changed, still the same trusting face that had fooled us all, Althea more so than anyone.

"Nothing," Briar answered, grin lifting her pretty peach lips at both sides. "It is purely business." "All for the right price?"

She nodded, returning the second blade to Duncan's back without glancing away from me. "Except, between the three of us, I made a rather large discount this time round. King Doran believed the death of his son was fair trade for a discounted price. Of course, I was happy to oblige, just for the chance to *personally* watch the life drain from your face. It is frowned upon for an Asp to let a hit slip from the net, so to say, and you certainly are one slippery fucker, Robin."

"And what would Althea say if she heard you speaking in such a way?" I questioned, hoping to see some sort of reaction. And there it was. The slight flinch of her stare and faltering smile. "I trust you already know she is here," I said, taking the moment of her distraction to look for something, anything, to use as a weapon against her. "It must have taken true restraint to come for me before visiting her... although I can confirm she does not share the same eagerness to see you."

Duncan's eyes widened as he filed that piece of information away, silently connecting the dots.

"When I am finished with you, I will visit her. It will be a reward," Briar replied, gaze unseeing as she slipped into a daydream. It only lasted a moment before she shook herself out of her thoughts and regarded me with a snarl once again.

"Your quarrel is with him, and I see no need spilling unrequired blood. Why don't you let me go?" Duncan murmured.

Briar agreed quickly, "You can go then."

As simple as that Briar stepped away from Duncan and lowered the daggers to her sides. He stood still, smiling, as he clicked his neck from one side to the other. "And you trust I will not walk out of this room and bring back my soldiers? You are fey, after all. They would love one to toy with that is not under my protection."

"By the time you return," Briar replied, hardly sparing him a glance, "The deed will be done."

Duncan tipped his head in a strange bow. "If there is room for requests, I ask that you try to keep his death as... tidy as possible. Not that it matters, but it would save the clean-up."

"Go," Briar growled.

"Duncan?" I spluttered as his hand reached for the doorknob. I had become invisible to him once again. He looked up at me as though he had completely forgotten my existence. Winking, he mouthed, *good luck*, before slipping out the door and closing it behind him.

Then it was the two of us, just like it had been in my room before she drugged me, and in the dark pit that I had become prisoner in. Briar and I were alone, but this time felt different.

I was confident it would be the last time.

My lack of hope dropped in my stomach like a rock. If this was the end, I would drag it out for all its worth.

"Since we last saw each other it has become painfully obvious that you have a way with losing the men you spend time with. Tarron, well we both know how that turned out. That Hunter left the room without much effort. And Erix, oh yes, I heard all about him. What a terrible thing to lose your last living relative to the same hands which had been all over you. There is something both tragic and poetic about it."

Bile crept up my throat, burning with every inch. "If you are here to point out my terrible taste in men then I fear you are not getting paid enough."

"Oh believe me, the price offered for you is handsome. Doran is keen to see you dead."

"A sentiment we share," I said. "Go on, tell me how much I am worth to him. I admit I am flattered to know it is enough for you to give this your best go again. Did you know I am a King myself now? I could rustle up some coin, perhaps even best his price, and turn the hit back on Doran."

"Everyone in Wychwood does not doubt your status, but you are a King of barren lands and empty homes. Icethorn sits vacant even after all this time since your Claiming of it. You are wealthy in loneliness, that is all. Even you turned your back on your destiny and wandered into the hands of Hunters. There is nothing you could offer me to stop the inevitable from happening."

Guilt tried to rear its ugly head within the storm of emotions riling through me. However, it was the easiest of my feelings to handle. How could I feel guilty for turning my back on a place that I had no personal ties to? No family or connections beside the whisper of my mother and her rule.

"Briar the snake, queen of giving up on all who love her. What is it you rule over beside the hunger for coin?"

She smiled, twirling the daggers in her hands. "Pity, you have *such* a way with words. Shame you will not be speaking them much longer. Any last words whilst the opportunity presents itself?"

"Fuck you," I spat.

A sudden, grounding calm rushed over me, dousing the flames of my anxiety with a blanket of cold ice. If this was the end, I was that much closer to seeing my father again. Would he be waiting for me in the realm of peace I longed for him to be? Standing beside my mother as though they had never parted sides.

"It is almost a shame that I will not get the credit for killing you. An army races towards this..." She pulled a face of disgust as she regarded the room. "...place and when they come, they will blame the Hunters for your death; but I suppose I can live with that knowing my pockets are full and you are no longer a thorn in my side. Then they will kill everyone here and return Althea and her guard back to their home. And in time you will be forgotten."

"Must be a sad life, being the paid pet of those with coin to waste."

My comment caused her demeanour to snap. In a blink she was before me, short but powerful as she pressed the blade into my chin. "The Children of Asp belong to no one but their own desires. Doran may fill my pockets, but I owe him nothing. If you are concerned with his pets, then perhaps you should be thinking of the rabid mutt who has been let out on a terrifyingly long leash. I am merely saving him the task."

"Erix..." I knew who she spoke of, even with her vagueness. "He is coming... here?"

"Followed me from Doran's door to this one. Clearly, I was not trusted for the task entirely. I even contemplated letting Erix reach you first, letting him finish the deed but still taking the credit for it. Yet I could not give him such pleasures. Any who, he has a strong will even against the pressing force of his sire. Even I would not get in the way of a Berserker, especially one like him."

Erix had been the one to take my father's life and I should have hated him for it, but he was a puppet at the end of gold strings held by his father. His will was not his own no matter how I longed for it to be different.

"Sad you are going to miss him?"

I shook my head, fighting the urge to release the tears that clung to my lashes.

"When he finds your body, drained and empty, he will likely destroy this entire fortress before the Cedarfall soldiers arrive. I may even stay and watch. Nothing like some entertainment after a kill."

"Get on with it," I groaned, hands flexing at my sides. There was no magic to call upon. Nothing to use against her. Nor did I care to. I was tired. And the promise of peace beside my father and mother was far from frightening.

Briar leaned in close, nose tickling my cheek as she whispered her reply. "T'was good to see you again, Robin."

A shiver raced up my spine and down my arms. I stayed looking at the door, gaze unflinching, as I welcomed the piercing cut of her dagger into the skin beneath my chin.

"Briar," I replied, a faint smile creasing my face. "I hope you burn—"

The door exploded inward. Raining wood, stone and... fire across the room.

In a single moment the world rocked beneath my feet. I felt the slice of a blade but had no time to worry if it was fatal as I tumbled to the ground, slipping from Briar's grip. Shards of rubble rained down upon me; it was all I could feel.

My ears were ringing, screaming, as I tried to shield my head from the debris of the explosion.

When the shards stopped pelting into me, I risked a glance upwards. Standing in the torn hole that had once been the door, amongst rubble and stone that burned with red-hot fire, was Althea. Her face was contorted by the shadows cast upon her by the flames, a Goddess of destruction and hell, eyes pinned to the cowering body of the girl on the floor between us.

"And burn you shall, bitch."

ire licked across the barren, cuffless skin of Althea's neck like jewellery of amber and ruby. It dripped from her, leaving her clothes and skin unmarked, however the floor beneath her hissed and charred as though not worthy of her protection.

"Ever the Goddess I had known," Briar strained, pushing herself from the ground to look at Althea. Her skin was stained with ash, her face red from the reaching flames of heat.

"Robin," Althea commanded, not once taking her eyes from Briar where she cowered on the floor. "Come here."

I did not waste a moment for questions or thought. With haste I moved towards her, careful to dance around the fire and rubble which seemed to litter the room entirely. As I reached the broken entryway, I glanced back at Briar, and a smile of pure relief lifted my lips.

"Seems you have failed again," I said with my head held high. "You should have given up the first time."

Briar hissed, spit flying from her paled lips. But there was nothing for her to say. No words that could harm me now. Not with Althea between us, no longer weakened by iron.

Gyah was waiting in the corridor, eyes narrowed with intent. She spared me a soured glance, both hands curled into fists, then flicked her gaze to the third person. Duncan, leaning against the wall upon one bent knee as though a powerful fey did not ravage his fortress before him.

"You set her free," I said, moving beside him; my legs felt shaky and weak. Propping a hand against the cold stone wall, I felt the need to inhale a deep breath to clear the thick smoke from my lungs; even my eyes begged to be itched.

"Only for a moment," Duncan said, revealing Althea's cuff in his hand and spinning it with his fingers. "Once the threat is dealt with, it will be returned. For now... do not distract the show."

I looked back to the room, where Althea stalked forward, a figure bathed in flames. Her hands were contorted into claws at her sides, encouraging a line of fire to snake towards the outmatched assassin.

Briar choked on the smoke, tears streaming down the soot that covered her face in clear lines. Determination did not wither from her stare as she watched Althea, princess of flame and fury, walk towards her.

"I am glad you were foolish enough to come," Althea began, head titling to the side ever so slightly. "Many moments have been wasted with me thinking of ways to reach you but here you are. So effortless."

"You hate me," Briar groaned, conviction creasing her once trusting face. "And I do not blame you. I would have hoped you would have seen that this is purely business, my darling. Nothing more."

"I am not your anything."

"You were once." Briar was clawing into Althea's emotions. "How have your feelings changed so quickly...? Or perhaps they have not."

Gyah growled at my side, deep and guttural with teeth bared in Briar's direction. Where Althea was free, Gyah still wore the cuff; it was the only thing stopping her from shifting into her beast and devouring Briar.

Down the corridor chaos distracted me as a wave of Hunters with drawn weapons ran into view.

Duncan sighed, pushed himself from his position, and raised a hand towards them. "Stop."

They did, reluctantly, slowing their pace with confusion shared between them. A few carried on, looking between Duncan and us with disgust. "You let one of 'em go free! They'd burn this entire place down before we get some control on them."

"Do you second guess my intelligence, Stamon?" Duncan snarled, lip curling.

The man who had spoken stepped back, head down but eyes looking upward. "No, General."

"Search this fortress for any other intruders before I decide to point the blame on one of you for this cock up. Turn it upside down if you must. Leave these fey to me."

They jumped at the scream that tore from the room. We all did. The Hunters turned on their heels and ran, a luxury I did not have.

Althea glowed a bright amber, skin molten fire and ruby hair shimmering. Her hand was outstretched, holding Briar by the throat where she dangled two feet from the ground, with eyes bulging and lips quivering.

The smell of burnt flesh thickened in my nose; there was no escaping the scent as it crawled down my throat and threatened to turn my stomach inside out.

Briar clapped her hands, smacking them upon Althea as she screamed and pleaded. But there was no stopping the princess, nor the flame that devoured Briar's skin. Briar's hair singed, her clothing melting against skin. Ash fell from her like darkened snow, fluttering gently to the ground below her dangling feet.

The sounds of crackling flesh and the cries of terror would haunt me for a lifetime. Even after Briar became still and soundless, it still echoed within my mind.

Althea released her grip and the body crumpled to the ground in a heap of charred flesh and bone. She stood like that, watching, as the fire died around her until not a lick of flame was left, extinguished with only the memory of smoke curling from the destruction within the room.

Gyah was the first to enter, wrapping her arms around Althea's back like a shield of protection. I stepped forward, stopped by Duncan who put an arm out before me.

"Do you see the destruction of your kind now?"

I could not form an answer, not as Althea's silence turned into sobs that shook her body. Without Gyah to hold her she would have fallen to her knees, I was sure of it.

"Is that why you let her go free?" I asked. "To prove a point?"

"No," Duncan said, slowly lowering his arm. "It was to give you a chance. However, if anyone else asks, you can use your excuse if you prefer."

With that Duncan moved away from me, leaving me to my own confusion, as he wandered into the room with the iron cuff still held in his hands.

It pained me to watch Gyah quietly console Althea who trembled within her hold. The burned remains of Briar still hissed with smoke like the forgotten cinders in a hearth during a winter's morning.

"Impressive," Duncan said, standing before them both. "The Hand truly will be pleased to meet

someone with power such as yours. Now, time to put this back on before my men return."

Gyah glared at him, snarling protectively like a cat over a bowl of fresh cream. Her reaction was wasted for Duncan did not flinch. Instead, he held the collar out with confidence and patience.

Althea looked over her shoulder at him, eyes red-rimmed and cheeks wet. "Do it before I have the chance to change my mind."

Duncan smiled. "Your cooperation is gallant."

"Now is our chance to go, Althea," Gyah said, pleading with wide eyes. "We can leave."

"Now is not the time to be brave," Duncan said slowly, reminding Gyah of whom stood before her.

"Nor do I have the energy," Althea murmured, face pale and limbs shaking. She shifted out of Gyah's hold and extended her neck for Duncan.

I watched from the shadows of the broken doorway as Duncan clipped the iron cuff back in its place. From within his pocket, he withdrew a key, small enough to sit comfortably on the bed of his thumbnail. He slipped it into a hole so small that if you would not have known its location, it would have been impossible to find. Then, with one gentle turn, it was locked.

"Are you okay?" I joined Althea's side, watching as the iron drained the colour from her skin. Even her eyes dulled as though the flame within was snuffed out, leaving her hollow.

"It had to be done. An Asp never gives up on a target and she would have continued looking for you."

"Althea, there would not have been another opportunity for her than this one. If you had not have come for me, she would have completed her task." It was true. We all knew it. Even Duncan, who took the biggest gamble letting Althea free. A risk worth taking in my eyes, considering I had truly believed he had left me to meet my end. There would be time for my thanks but now was not it.

"King Doran sent her for me, but she is not the only one on her way," I told them, trying to stop myself from looking at the smouldering remains.

"Who else?" Gyah asked, voice deep and terrifying.

"Erix."

The silence between the three of us piqued the interest of our captor.

"And who might be the man that can silence the three of you with only a name?"

Gyah straightened to match Duncan in height. "A Berserker, a being capable of destroying this entire place without the requirement of magic and power."

Duncan's brow dipped and his jaw clenched as he regarded her. "And this makes you grin from ear-to-ear because?"

Gyah shrugged, focusing her attention on Althea as she wrapped an arm around her for support. "Can you take us back to our room now, Hunter? I think we should sit this visit out."

Annoyed, Duncan waved his hand towards the corridor in guidance. "After you. Your *room* awaits."

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"How the tides have turned," Duncan said after I told him the rest of my tragic tale, pressing his fingers to his head as he pinched his eyes closed. "If Erix was the one who killed your father, why would you go through all of this to petition the King's death?"

"I do not expect you to understand."

"And I don't." Duncan studied Finstock, its surroundings cloaked in night and flaming sconces. "So you loved this... man?"

The question made warmth flood my cheeks. "I cared for him enough to know that his actions were not actually his own."

"Because he is a Berserker?"

I nodded, focusing on pressing down the sickening worry that had embedded itself in my stomach. Briar was a person I had not wanted to see, for many reasons. But Erix... I would have rather taken Briar's blade than see him again. "His actions are not his own, forced by something I don't quite understand due to his blood tie to King Doran. If he comes here, it will not be as simple as unleashing one of our powers to stop him. We run or face the unexpected."

"I get the impression you would rather carry out the running part, but I am afraid that is not a possibility. I do not run from your kind. We will wait and greet him upon his arrival. Unless he is here already..."

My skin crawled at the thought. "Do you wish to cause me discomfort?"

"Is it that obvious?" he replied with a grin.

It was hard to discern what smile of his was genuine or forced. My mind screamed that Duncan was not to be trusted, but without him, I would have already been dead. I got the impression, to a point, he needed me alive.

"Then let me go back to the room and wait out this storm with Althea and Gyah."

Duncan turned to face me, back haloed by the silver glow of the moon that dominated the sky behind him. He toyed with the loose strings of his navy tunic which still had not been pulled tight during the rush of the assassination attempt. His stare was heavy, I felt it on every inch of me, as though he studied the tones of my hair, the depth of my eyes.

"I have personally delivered many of your kind to The Hand, but never one as intriguing as you," he purred, eyes racing up and down me.

"Is that supposed to make me feel special?" I asked, frowning. "Because all it does is remind me that you are as much of a monster as I had first believed you to be."

"Then I am not the only one with conflicting views. Do not get me wrong, I do not like you. Far from it in fact but being in your company is a thrill and one I have not had in a while. Your conversation is far more interesting than the Faithful that still search Finstock for another *Asp* or whatever that little stalker referred to herself as. Perhaps my interest has something to do with the fact that you can hold my stare, an equal match. I have been so used to having those around me do as I say all without catching my stare for longer than required... Whereas you... you demand it."

I wanted nothing more than to look away. But instead, I fought to hold his gaze, not wanting to prove him wrong.

"I want you to know that I do not care what you think of me. Your thoughts do not affect me, nor change what I require from this agreement."

"Agreement?" Duncan laughed. "Do not get comfortable. You are still my prisoner, and we have no agreement. I am delivering you to The Hand because that is what I do. It is my job. It just so happens that our motives align with one another's."

No longer caring to be in his presence, I turned to the darkened corridor, facing the door in which my friends dwelled behind. "Erix is not the only one coming for me. Briar warned of an army, tipped off about Althea's location. If you refuse to leave because of one man, perhaps you would heed my warning and take our leave before that army arrives. Otherwise, neither of us will be reaching The

Hand, not alive anyhow."

"And you warn me because?"

I peered back at him, watching his lips purse in contemplation. The scar that ran down from his eye only enhanced his expression of deep wonder. The winter winds beyond the fortress walls ripped into the corridor, bringing with it the scent of Duncan. It was welcome, his smell, covering that of Briar's burned flesh and my own stench from days without a wash.

It was pleasant.

"There will come a time you will learn to trust me. I only hope it is before everything burns around us because I am going to need you alive to get what I want."

Duncan watched as I reached for the door of our prison of comforts. Then he replied, voice echoing down the hallway and leaving its cold kiss upon the back of my neck, "I get the impression you are simply using me, Robin."

"Something we share in common," I replied slyly. "I just have not worked out what it is you want from me yet."

"If we make it to Lockinge you will find out."

There was no room for complaints as I lowered myself into the muddied water of the bath. By the time it was ready for me the water was almost black with grime, a concoction of blood and ash swirling in the lukewarm liquid. It was a relief, nonetheless, lowering my aching limbs into the belly of water. It was no wonder why Althea had taken so long when she had gone first. Gyah had to go in and check on her only to find her curled in a ball crying over her actions that day.

Whilst it was Gyah's turn to wash her despair away, it left me to console Althea whose silence spoke volumes of her want to be left alone. Thankfully, the time Althea had without the iron cuff allowed her healing to accelerate. She no longer looked to be in pain, besides the mental war she currently fought.

I slipped beneath the water, still catching the faint scent of lavender blended within the less pleasant smells that left my body to join the gore of my friends. Only when my head was submerged and the sounds of Finstock was muted did I truly feel relaxed, even with the constricting iron cuff still locked around my neck.

I laid like that for as long as my lungs allowed, entirely submerged, as I willed the lapping of water to soak off the blood, ash and unpleasant grime that had clung to me since leaving Wychwood,

convincing myself that if I stayed here then the worries of the world beyond would not matter. But then I remembered Briar's threat of Erix which urged me out of the bath.

It was stone cold by the time I was finished. Only the heat from the many melted candles provided me comfort in the empty room and even their effort was pathetic. With winter devouring Durmain's expanse beyond Finstock's walls everything was tirelessly cold.

I dressed quickly, back into the dark-clad clothes that I had worn upon my arrival. We had comforts as Duncan's prisoners, but not luxuries, and a set of clean clothing was not an option.

As I entered back into the joining room Althea and Gyah immediately stopped whispering.

"Should I turn back and leave you both?" I asked, too exhausted to care for niceties. "I do not want to interrupt anything."

Althea looked to Gyah and shook her head slightly, stifling whatever comment was about to come out.

"Go on," I insisted, running a hand through my wet hair which dampened the collar of my shirt. "Clearly you do not trust me enough to speak openly."

"Tell him," Gyah encouraged, lips pulled thin.

Althea stood, hands folded before her. The skin around her eyes was red and swollen, pale lashes clumped together from all her crying, yet she still presented herself with the air of command, back straight and red-eyes full of authority. "There is no saying what Erix will do when he reaches us, and

I cannot afford the risk of waiting and finding out. It will be the perfect time to escape, and we did not discuss it with you because we know your stance. That is all."

"And I was beginning to think you did not trust me."

Gyah muttered quietly, "You do seem to be fraternising with the enemy."

"That," Althea said quickly, flashing Gyah a telling look, "has nothing to do with our secrecy. If you need the Hunter to trust you, then it is best our plan is kept from you. It would not be a wise decision to be involving you if it could affect your treatment once we are gone."

It was a lonely feeling, knowing your only friends had plans to leave you. Even though the plan had never involved them in the first place, I had grown accustomed to their closeness.

"If I can help, I will."

"Next time he comes to visit I recommend you are not here." Gyah's knuckles clicked as she stretched them out before her.

"There are not exactly many options for me to go..." I replied. "Doors are locked unless he opens them. Finstock is crawling with Hunters who would stop you even if you made it past him."

"Your lack of confidence is not exactly helping." Althea paced towards me, resting a hand upon my shoulder and squeezing. "Briar... she made it within this place without another even sparing much of a glance. The Hunters are not exactly observant. It is Duncan who is the concern."

I looked down to my feet, an unwanted sadness twisting in my gut.

"If you ask me to stay, I will," Althea murmured.

"Althea..." Gyah warned.

"I will not ask anything more of you," I managed to utter. "You have faced enough, more than what was required if you had not been caught up in this at all. But why not wait for your people to arrive for you? If the promise of Cedarfall soldiers is true, then they would submerge Finstock with ease. It would just be a case of waiting."

"The easy way out is never the smartest." Althea's smile did not reach her eyes. "There is no telling what will happen when Erix arrives. There is a chance he would arrive late, and my people have already been and gone. But I doubt that. I know his determination, even when not fuelled by his controlled state."

"I can help you," I insisted. "Tell me what I need to do, and I will try. Let me take the risk of knowing your plans, please, you can trust me."

This was my fault. Althea being forced to kill Briar, to both of their captures. It was all my fault. There must be a chance for me to put it right.

Althea looked to Gyah, sharing a moment of tense silence as though they spoke through their minds.

"Stay out of the way," Gyah finally said, taking over from Althea who seemed to revert into the shadows of the darkened room. "Play innocent. Because when we leave, and you are left to face Erix alone, you will need Duncan on your side. He has proven his desire to keep you alive. Let us not ruin what already balances on a taut, frayed piece of string."

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There was no warning before the chaos arrived. Finstock slept without sound, all but the gentle whistle of wind that caressed the fortress walls. I would have even described it as peaceful, which aided with falling into sleep.

But then the door slammed open, wood crashing into the stone wall.

Heavy footsteps followed.

I did not have time to push myself to sitting before hands were on me, snatching me from bed and pulling me to the floor. In the noise of rushed, urgent shouts I could hear Gyah's angered cries. I could not hear Althea but imagined she would not show her panic with screams and shouts.

Hunters surrounded us, sharing commands which I could not make out.

"What are you doing?" I said, heart a lump in my throat.

No one replied. There was nothing I could do but let them take me, my feet dragging helplessly across the floor. *Focus*. I remembered the night I had first been taken by Hunters. Pressing my panic down, I tried to study the details of what was happening. If no one would tell me, then I would have to piece the puzzle together myself.

It was dawn, that much was clear from the glance I had down the corridor beyond the room, the sky beyond a pale plum colour with wisps of thin clouds. I was tired, but nothing was new there; the sleep I had been snatched from must have only been a couple of hours at most.

What was different to my first abduction was these Hunters were not calm or smug. No, something panicked them. Their hold on me was harsh and rushed, their movements quickened by something that I had not yet figured out.

We were out in the open, the courtyard a mess of Hunters running across the straw-covered ground towards the rising stone platforms around the fortress's edge. They held large hunting bows almost the same height as them. Swords dangled from hips. Cloaks billowed out behind them.

I looked up at the shrill call that filled the sky with song. Large, fearless creatures cut through the skies, dancing through the air with precision. Messenger hawks. I recognised them as I had seen the birds of prey many times before.

We were dragged towards a familiar wheeled cage. Its iron bars caught the morning rays as it waited in the heart of the courtyard for us. Duncan stood beside it, his voice booming over the crowd as he shouted commands with haste. It was the expression across his face, grooved lines across his forehead and neck tense, that encouraged my panic to take hold again.

He noticed our arrival, waving us forward as though the Hunters did not pull us along fast enough. Another Hunter I did not recognise stood close beside him. He was tall, but not as towering as Duncan. Pale, ginger curls cut close around a youthful but handsome face. Bright azure eyes were framed by his serious expression. But it was the hawk resting upon his shoulder that entranced me, how it chirped in his ear, whispering secrets of the skies.

Duncan knew this man in a different way to the Hunters who dragged and manhandled us now. I had not seen Duncan having conversations with anyone, usually barking commands or asserting his dominance as their general. But with this amber-haired man, they spoke as equals, Duncan even going so far as to listen intently before formulating a response.

"What is happening?" I called, trying to pull out of the many hands that held me. It was wasted effort.

Duncan spared me a glance, flicking his stare between the man whom he spoke with, and me. "It would seem we have a *few* unannounced guests on their way. Get them in the cage. We leave in two."

Gyah continuously shouted about the horrors she would unleash upon the men and women who touched her. It was a surprise they did not let her go just from the pure, haunting terror she promised them.

"Who?" I asked, passing before him, begging for him to spare me another glance.

Perhaps it was the company, or the person who stood as his shadow, but the usual smile was not

upon his face. This version of Duncan was serious and stoic. "Your Berserker has given up on you and instead marches with a horde of fey warriors. One man we could take, but an army, my Faithful are not prepared for that. It takes a clever man to know when to run and when to fight."

"And run we shall," the ginger-haired boy spoke, his hawk squawking in agreement.

"Kayne, help secure them."

I latched onto the stranger's name as the Hunters hoisted me past him, pushing me up into the cage which rocked with my added weight, and I took note of our surroundings. There were clearly more Hunters around Finstock; they must have arrived with Kayne, bringing warning of the pending fey army's arrival.

"Has our time apart from one another made you forget, Duncan?" Kayne asked, long fingers gripped around the wolf-shaped hilt of the sword at his waist. "It has been many years since you commanded me."

Duncan huffed, rolling his dark-forest eyes as though he spoke with a sibling, one who both impressed him and equally annoyed him. "Then get your Faithful prepared. We will get the head start and wait for you at our chosen checkpoint."

Both men clasped hands, holding each other away by the width of an arm as they embraced. "It was always me who stayed back to fight whilst you looked for shelter," Kayne observed.

"That is because my name is far more important than yours, brother."

"Now that depends on who you ask."

Gyah tumbled into the cage beside me, a mess of reaching hands and screams. Those who had a hold of her were more than ready to release her, likely afraid of what her nails and teeth could do, even in this form. One of them had already figured that out as they stepped back from the cage with a hand pressed over a cheek; beneath their fingers I could see four fresh scratch marks.

By the time I looked back Kayne was already racing off, pointing towards the armed Hunters who stationed themselves upon the fortress's outer walls.

Duncan offered a hand for Althea who now walked towards the cage unaided. She was calm but her expression was thunderous. "After you, *Princess*."

"You will not outrun my people," Althea warned, ignoring the hand which Duncan offered. He did not lower it as he regarded her. "They will follow, and your soldiers will fail. Would it not be best to leave us here? Give us up now and they will stop following you."

Duncan responded, but not in the manner I expected. "It is rather a stretch to call this rabble soldiers."

Althea gripped Duncan's hand now, squeezing tight. "Heed my warning, Hunter. If they have found us, you will not stand a chance."

"I like a challenge," Duncan replied, putting strength behind his arm and urging Althea to step into the cage. "Also, what is stopping you from following after me if I do leave you behind? I have seen what you can do, the death you cause. It would be foolish for me to let you go free."

With that he closed the cage door right in Althea's face. She stood, hardly flinching as metal slammed into metal and the click of a lock finalised our imprisonment.

"Do not do this, Hunter."

His smile returned now as he gazed at Althea, subdued by the cuff, without any trace of fear. I hardly imagined he would hold such confidence if iron didn't stand between them. "How about we discuss this further a bit later," he mocked, "there will be plenty of time for conversation between you and I."

Duncan left swiftly, moving into the fringes of his Hunters as they clambered onto the prison cart's

horses.

Althea slumped to her knees, gripping onto the bars as she stared out at the Hunters. Gyah was beside her in moments, hand on her shoulder. "Another chance will come."

"I would not rule this one out yet." Althea turned towards us, determination ablaze within her. "Many a time have I led a party toward Hunters' camps and strongholds. I know the plans. They would not come in at one side, but many. It is time we put some faith in them."

The cart moved, jolting forward as we lost our footing. It was guided out of Finstock from a narrow path at the back of the towering building. Duncan had waved a hand towards Kayne who returned his gesture with a nod. There was no sign of a Cedarfall army arriving, at least nothing we could see. Now with the fortress between us, blocking the view of what we left behind, I could only imagine what had caused our sudden departure. For Althea and Gyah's sake, I hoped her comments of the soldier's plans were right and we would be intercepted. But regardless, I could not go with them.

Our party moved with haste, the cage violently rocking as the horses cantered forward. We had to grip onto the bars to stop ourselves being thrown like children's unwanted toys.

This part of Durmain was endless, fields and valleys stretching as far as the eye could see. We only slowed when the terrain changed and the horses' struggled to tug us uphill. The dirt path had been worn in from years of travel, feet, hooves and wheels etching veins into the earth.

It did not take long for Finstock to become no more than a smudge of dark stone behind us.

Unlike the party of Hunters who had taken us from Grove, this one was small. Around ten Hunters on horseback followed in a halo around us, Duncan at the lead alongside the two who pulled the cart forward.

By midday the weather changed. Cold sheets of rain fell upon us, drenching our clothes and soaking into our bones. It made the landscape almost impossible to see.

It was almost a shock when the cage began to slow. Duncan shouted a sharp, barked command and the Hunters each withdrew weapons in a song of steel against leather.

"Something is happening," I said, pushing myself to the front of the cage to try and get a better look.

"My people," Althea gasped, pure glee radiating in her voice. "I told you they would come. Gyah, get ready."

"No," I breathed, squinting through the sheets of rain and the frantic moving bodies of Duncan and his Hunters as they positioned themselves ahead of us.

I caught a glance of the figure's darkened outline a league before our party, standing in the middle of the dirt path, cloaked and head bowed, twin swords in their hands that dug into the ground.

This was not Cedarfall soldiers, but a single person.

"What do you mean no...?" Gyah said, pushing beside me with a hand raised to shield her eyes from the rain. "Fuck."

I caught movement from the Hunters. It was Duncan, turning over his shoulder as he looked directly at me. His face dripped with rainwater, hair sodden and plastered to the sides of his head.

"He found me," I breathed, reading the warning in Duncan's eyes.

"Fuck, fuck!" Gyah growled, slamming a palm into the cage.

I knew it was *him* before the cloak's hood was lowered from his head. It was his outline, one I had studied with my eyes, my hands; I would have recognised it no matter the conditions, time or place.

Erix.

Sheets of cold rain slapped down across the world around me. I was wet to the bone, gripping onto the cage bars as though they would break beneath my hold. My grip intensified by the horror of seeing Erix.

Gyah and Althea were huddled close to my side. It was clear that we all shared in the panic conjured by Erix's presence.

An intense shiver had begun, one I could do little to prevent. It prickled across my skin, chattering my teeth as it sent my jaw into a never-ending spasm, encouraged by the anxiety that had seemed to replace the blood in my veins. It pumped around me with vigour, causing a shooting pain to caress my heart as though a hand gripped and squeezed it relentlessly.

"Both of you," Duncan shouted above the pounding of hooves in muddy ground. "Deal with this straggler."

The two Hunters Duncan spoke to jumped from their horses. Feet squelching in the muddy ground, they pulled swords from their scabbards and approached Erix with confident strides. I winced as one almost slipped on their arse; lack of coordination wouldn't help them when they reached Erix.

"Duncan," I shouted, pressing my face between the bars. "Duncan, look at me!"

Reluctantly he turned, squinting through the rain with a displeased snarl. With my eyes alone I tried to display my honest concern. It was not that I cared if the Hunters were slain, but I needed Duncan to get free and escape the impending slaughter and make it to Lockinge. Doing it with a general at my side would be simple.

"We will be moving shortly," Duncan shouted through the sleet. "Sit back and relax."

My hair was plastered to my face and head, encouraging a constant stream of water to fall into my line of sight. Blinking it away I shouted, unable to hide the frustration within my tone. "It is *him!* Your Hunters will not stand a chance, Duncan. Erix will kill us all, believe me, I have witnessed the twisted determination of his will."

"He is one man," Duncan replied, dropping my stare and turning back to face the doom before him. "Allow me to do you the favour of dealing with him. It would be my pleasure."

"Fucking listen to me!"

Gyah gripped my shoulder, strong fingers anchoring me and chasing away the panic. "Let them face their end, Robin. Let us only hope Doran's control on Erix spares us."

It was not a risk I was willing to take. "Free us, Duncan. You are going to need us."

Duncan did not look back, but his deep laugh still reached me.

I couldn't catch my breath. My chest heaved and my hands grew numb. My legs would've given out beneath me if I hadn't been strangling the cage's bars.

The two foolish men that Duncan had commanded were close to Erix now. Erix had hardly moved a muscle since we had first seen him. Swords still at his sides, stabbing into the muddy ground as he waited patiently.

All I could do was watch the final moments of their lives unfold before me. Perhaps they followed blindly because no matter if they died, they would have the promise of meeting their God, Duwar. Did they believe he was watching even now?

They reached Erix and stood before him with blades raised. I could not hear what they said, but it was clear they spoke with him, the conversation one way. Erix simply looked past them as though they did not exist. His attention was entrapped elsewhere. On another.

On me.

Frustrated, the Hunters released a battle cry and lunged forward. Erix joined their dance gladly. He moved forward, slipping between the Hunters before their blades had a chance to arch down towards him. His footing was confident, sliding across the wet, muddy bed and turning his body back to face them. As he did, his own swords followed. In a clean slice, one that severed through the rain itself, his blades passed through flesh and bone with ease.

Duncan did not react as he watched his two Hunters die, their heads tumbling from their necks and splatting onto the ground. Their bodies followed, as though pushed by an unseen force. Blood sprayed out of the severed necks, a fountain of gore. He just stood there and watched, calculating how two lives had been taken so quickly, all in a blink of a moment.

Whilst Duncan was a prisoner to his thoughts, Erix kept moving, leaving the dead behind him as he began his approach towards his true goal. His blood-soaked swords made the metal appear as though they were forged by death.

"All of you. Go. Stop him." Duncan pulled forth his own sword, using the flat side of it to hit the backs of the remaining Hunters. "In Duwar's name, kill this man. For sustenance."

"Sustenance," the Hunters cried in return. There was nothing confident about their cries. They were timid. Pathetic.

I knew we were doomed as the remaining Hunters rushed forward to meet the Berserker. I could do nothing but watch as Erix cut his way through the men and women; it was rare to see another's blade intercept his.

The closer he got the clearer I could see him. Shadows hung beneath his lightning, blue eyes. His black leathers were drenched in mud and gore, the silver edges of his tunic and sleeves as sharp as the two swords he swung. He was striking, in both horror and power. And he was looking right at me, hardly paying any attention to the humans he cut down. They stood no chance against him, yet they did slow him down.

"This is it," I said quietly, voice buried beneath the cries of dying Hunters. "All this for nothing. Doran has won again."

Althea was at my right, Gyah to my left. Caged like animals, we were as useless as the human's whose blood now fed the earth.

"Do not give up yet," Althea said, "We are safe within the cage. If... when Erix is finished with the Hunters he will have to take us out. In here, surrounded by the iron, it will nullify his natural abilities. We can take him."

Gyah barked a laugh, one that sang of relief. "Althea, I could kiss you! Your mind is truly brilliant, do you know that?"

Althea blushed, rain darkening the reds of her hair as they hung in wet strands across her shoulders.

"It will be an even playing field. Let him come for I have something I would like to say to him." Althea watched, unblinking and fearless, as Erix faced the remaining Hunters.

"Robin, can you do this? Can you face the man who killed your father and provide him the relief from Doran that he requires?" I could not work out who asked. Perhaps it was neither of my friends, but instead my own conscience as I came to terms with the truth that Erix would reach us.

I couldn't answer. Seeing Erix had taken me back to the helpless feeling I had experienced when my father had been killed before me. Even then I had refused to believe he was the one responsible, even though it was his hands that stole my father from me.

In my mind I had worked hard to convince myself that it was Doran at blame. He had ripped Erix's will from him and replaced it with his own. The Erix I had come to know would never have hurt me.

No.

Yet seeing him now, without his puppet master, I could not help but wish to take out my pain on him.

"Yes," I replied through gritted teeth, jaw aching beneath the pressure. "I am ready."

"Sorry to interrupt," Duncan said, snatching our attention to the back of the cage. Neither of us had noticed him, our focus demanded by Erix and the death he left in his wake. "I think I will take you up on your offer after all."

"I am afraid that offer has been retracted," Gyah said through a grin. Her dark skin was slick with rain, her golden eyes narrowed as she glared at Duncan. "Good luck out there, Hunter."

Duncan peered around the cage, wincing as the final Hunter died at the end of Erix's blade. His stare was calculating; I could almost hear the wheels turning in his mind.

"Run," I said suddenly. "Get out of here and go whilst you can. He will not follow you. It is me he wants."

Duncan sighed, reaching into the inner pocket of his jacket and pulling out a closed fist. "Unfortunately, I am going to need you alive, Robin. You are my bounty."

He pulled back his fist and then threw it through the bars. Fingers opening wide at the last moment, I watched as a silver cord flew within the cage; it fell onto the wet floor, sliding toward my boot. It was not the cord, but the key attached to the end that shocked me. I reached down, plucking it from the floor, and held it up before me.

"Free yourself and fight. Or are you going to let this Berserker ruin your only chance of avenging your father?"

Duncan tore the cloak from his shoulders, leaving it in the mud at his feet. He spared me a final glance, lips pulled tight, and shoulders squared, his question hanging between us. Then he left, stalking around the cage to greet Erix.

I wasted no time.

Althea gasped as I took her by the shoulder and turned her away from me. "The second you are out of this cage, you run. Both of you. This is the chance you have waited for. There is no need to wait for Erix to reach us."

The key slipped into the cuff around Althea's neck with ease. Even with the violent shaking of my hands I managed to turn it and the cuff snapped open. It fell to the ground; the echo of metal against wood was beautiful, the sound of freedom.

"Come with us," Althea pleaded, wet hair stuck to the curves of her face. "There are other ways of getting what you desire than going with the Hunter. Let Erix deal with him. I promise we will find another option. "

I couldn't hold her gaze, instead turning to Gyah who was ready to be freed. "Gyah, you know what you need to do."

"I do indeed," Gyah replied, practically ripping the iron cuff from her neck and throwing it to the ground just as I pulled the key free again. Her hand wrapped around mine and squeezed, golden eyes brimming with her power. "Good luck."

I smiled, letting her take the key from my fingers and turning me around.

"There is no persuading you, is there?" Althea studied me with wide, unblinking eyes. It was hard to tell if she cried, or if it was droplets of rain rather than tears that cascaded down her cheeks. "I will say you have been abducted. If my family or the other Courts catch wind of your plan you will become as much the enemy as the Hunters you are running towards."

My chin lowered, the sudden release of weight from around my neck a shock. "You do not need to lie for me."

Althea put a hand on my shoulder, Gyah another upon my lower back. "There will come a time when I will require the same from you. Remember that."

I forced a smile, cringing at Duncan's sudden shouts of anguish. "I hope so."

For a moment, as we left the cuffs upon the floor and reached the locked door, I almost believed we had hit a dead end in our plan, but the key Duncan had given us slipped into the cage's lock with ease. We clambered out of the iron cage and the feeling of power returned within a single breath. I almost lost my footing at the rush. My magic had returned, no longer imprisoned by the iron cage, or the cuff around my neck.

It was clear Althea and Gyah felt the same, but there was no time to enjoy the feeling.

"You've come all this way for him," Duncan's shout reached us. I looked in his direction, Gyah shifting forms in a twisting of flesh, wings and talons. "Not that my opinion matters of course, but do you not think that behaviour is rather... creepy?"

"What is he doing?" Althea shouted, eyes ablaze with the fire that had been smothered until now; rain hissed upon impact with her boiling aura.

I shook my head, no longer registering the cold of the rain. Nor the cold of anything. My resistance had returned in full force.

"Goading him. Buying himself some time," I replied. "Go!"

Gyah growled, snapping her elongated snout, relishing her Eldrae form.

"And are you ready to face him?" Althea asked.

The question hung between us. "Now or never, right?"

She nodded, understanding my refusal to answer clearly; it was not out of rudeness but the fact that I did not have any courage to reply honestly. I watched, heart thundering in my chest, as my friend climbed onto Gyah's scaled back.

Hardly a moment after Althea took her seat, Gyah extended her wings and pounded them furiously. Her urgency was to prevent Althea from changing her mind and refusing to leave me. I watched them both fly away with one thought screaming louder than any other across my mind.

I am not ready.

Running was not a luxury I had. I had to face Erix. The time would have always come around; I had only hoped it would not have been this soon.

I walked around the perimeter of the cage to greet him.

"Nothing to say?" Duncan shouted. Bodies of the Hunters littered the ground, the horses they had ridden no longer in sight, fled from fear most likely. "All this way, all this effort and you cannot even spare me a word. Come on..."

Duncan held a sword before him, broad shoulders blocking out Erix who stood before him. His confidence was palpable, almost foolish and misplaced. Mud was splattered across his boots, his clothes drenched through. He must have sensed my presence for he stopped bouncing from foot to foot and spared a quick glance over his shoulder, not an ounce of worry creasing his focused, stoic face.

But Duncan was not the only one to see me.

The sting of Erix's eyes itched across my skin. I stilled, unable to take another step, feeling like I had only moments before locked within the cage, absolutely powerless.

"Hello," Erix said, lifting one of his swords and pointing it towards me, "little bird."

"I never liked that name," I snarled, heart thudding in my ears. "Even more so now."

Duncan stepped aside as I strode past him. My legs seemed to move without command, fuelled by the sudden urge to close in on Erix and cause him pain. However, even with the pounding fury that overwhelmed me, I could still recognise a slither of sadness coiled beneath it; it was nothing more than an ember, fighting to keep warm during a wild storm, never having a chance to catch.

"It is one of the reasons I used it," Erix replied, lowering his weapon slightly. "When I used it your eyes pinch and your nose wrinkles. Your discomfort made me feel a sense of... excitement."

"You should have never come here. Why don't we cut the shit and get to the point where you tell me what it is you want?"

There was something forced about his posture, the way his shoulders were pulled back as though held up by a string. It was not the only disturbing feature. Besides the splattering of human blood washing from his face in the rain, it was the faint dark lines surrounding his unblinking eyes that caught my breath.

"I want you, Robin."

"Unfortunately," Duncan interrupted, his narrowed stare not once leaving Erix as though he would pounce at any given moment, "the feeling is not mutual."

"You allow this..." Erix spared Duncan a glance, one riddled with disgust. "...scum to speak on your behalf? Does it not feel like yesterday that I came in and saved you from a party of Hunters?"

"Look around you, Erix. Look what Doran has made you do." It was impossible to know if I stood in a puddle of blood or rain. One of the Hunters groaned, skin pale and eyes closed, grasping onto the slippery edge of living and death.

"This," Erix swept his eyes across the pile of bodies, "is all me. What I am to do with you... well, that is a command too sweet to refuse."

"Are you really going to make me fight for the life of a fey?" Duncan asked.

Erix snapped his attention to Duncan, spinning the twin blades without much thought. "We will finish our conversation once I have dealt with this one, little bir—"

I snapped, "That is not my name."

My fury was no longer contained as though the name alone encouraged it to claim its freedom. I did not flinch as the rain turned to hail. The frozen beads slammed into my head, my shoulders, stinging across my exposed skin, but the pain was hardly an echo in comparison to what stormed within me.

"I know that you are not in control of yourself," I said, sharpening the rain into arrows of ice with my will. "Doran has you under his control and you are simply following his command, but I am not

going with you."

Erix sighed, lips tugging down into a frown. "Do you not miss my company?"

"I miss the Erix I knew, but he died alongside my father."

Duncan stepped close to me. I sensed his presence like a shadow at my side. Erix noticed too, erupting with a guttural growl as though I was a bone, and he was the mutt. "Keep your distance, Hunter. He is not yours."

"In fact," Duncan replied, "he *is* mine. Now, are you prepared to make your next move, or do you expect me to begin? I am more than happy to start if you have performance issues."

A deep scarlet crept into Erix's handsome but tormented face. His eyes widened, the deep, dark veins beneath them more prominent than they had been before. He looked back to me, spitting his next words as anger took over. It almost looked like he was struggling against something we could not see, fighting as he twitched and jerked his limbs. "You truly are the vision of your mother, Robin. And like her, it will be your downfall."

There was no chance to decipher what he meant before he jolted forward, swords raised. Metal clashed with metal as Duncan intercepted the attack. I felt the vibration, the swords' edges painfully close to my face. I would have thrown myself back, but the idea of dying was not as frightening as it had been before. Instead, I reached out for Erix, wishing to touch him; it would be a pleasure to let my magic turn his skin to glass just to watch him shatter. I barely clipped a nail as Erix swung out of reach.

"Get back!" Duncan shouted, pushing me with such force it threw me off balance. I splashed in puddles of rain and gore, soaking my dirtied clothes with the stench of copper. Power poured from my hands, turning the ground where I laid to ice.

Duncan and Erix were locked in battle, grunts breaking past snarled teeth as they clashed sword into sword. Erix had met his match, at least for now. I got the impression that he toyed with Duncan, leading him into a state of false confidence. But it was clear that Erix should not underestimate Duncan's skill. They moved with precision, jabbing and moving as though it was rehearsed. Whereas Erix swung his arms in circular, slicing motions, Duncan seemed to hack back at him, both hands wrapped tightly around his broad sword.

Two deadly soldiers, each cut from differing cloth.

Kings would pay good coin to watch them duel. Shame my pockets were as empty as my patience.

Duncan was tiring, his movements growing sluggish. If Erix was not controlled by a mad king's will, then perhaps he would have been too. I saw Duncan's mistake a moment before Erix caught eye of it, a slip of a footing as he slid in muddied blood. Instinct took over. I threw out my hands, focusing on the moisture that wet Erix's boots and the ground beneath it. One simple thought and it hardened to ice as a gust of frozen winds washed over it. Foot frozen to the ground, it gave Duncan the moment he needed to regain his composure and arc his sword upward towards Erix's torso. The blade sliced through his clothing, cutting into skin. Erix threw back his head with a roar so mighty I was almost certain Gyah had returned to feast on the bones of the dead Hunters around us.

I kept him immobile, encouraging the ice to spread to his other boot before he was able to take a step forward. Even with the scarlet gore dripping down his chest and the cry of pain, Erix did not let up, swinging his arms with such vigorous power he hammered his blades down upon Duncan one by one.

"Finish this," Duncan called, straining through gritted teeth. It was close to impossible to hear him over Erix's angered shouts.

All it took was a thought, a single command to urge the ice to creep up from Erix's boots across

his legs. He hardly noticed, too enraged as he swung his swords. Sparks flew as the blades clashed. Even with my power keeping Erix in place, his strength only intensified as the fury took over.

Duncan was forced to his knee, arms shaking with the broadsword held above his head. "I can't hold him."

Erix was no longer the person I had met all those weeks ago, that much had been clear when he had revealed himself alongside Doran. But now, with his eyes almost black and skin ashen and colourless, he looked like a monster.

He was lost to the Berserker, a curse running through his blood from his sire.

Even with the hardening ice spreading across his chest, down his arms until his swords slowed their attack, Erix did everything in his power to fight against my power. Until I stole his control.

Duncan dropped to his arse, sword clattering to the ground. His chest heaved with each breath as though he could not quite hold onto one. Sweat joined the droplets of rain, running down his chiselled face.

"How long... how long will he hold?" Duncan asked above the screams and cries of Erix's anguish. I had retreated my magic before it spread above his neck; it was the only limb still able to thrash.

I reached for a bloodied blade of a murdered Hunter. My fingers were numb as I gripped its hilt and raised it before me. "As long as I allow."

Erix spat with each snarl, snapping teeth as though he was more beast than fey. Veins exposed themselves across his neck and forehead, deep and red, as though they promised to break at any moment.

"Are you watching, Doran?" I asked, stepping closer to Erix without flinching as he flashed teeth at me. "Is that how your connection with him works?"

"You are wasting time. Kill him or I will."

I was inches before him, my closeness seeming to calm Erix down. It felt wrong, looking upon someone I had believed to know but seeing a stranger staring back at me. a face covered with fury instead of my hands, my lips.

"Shut up," I murmured to Duncan whilst raising a cautious hand towards Erix's cheek. He snarled, but I did not stop reaching. Not until my cold, wet fingers brushed the stubble that I had grown all too familiar with. "I don't want to hurt you, Erix. Even after what you have done. I know that it was out of your hands. Just like this is not you now."

Duncan groaned as he stood, picking his sword up with him. "You are wasting your time."

"His life is not yours to take," I warned as a freezing cold gale of wind begun to rip at the ground around me. "It is for me to decide."

"Then make the decision before I help it along."

I pushed Duncan's threat to the bottom of my mind and faced Erix once again. Still my hand was pressed to his cheek; Erix hardly curled a lip now. "Give me a sign you are in there. Please, I am not ready to give up on you yet."

It could have been mindless and easy to let my ice devour him as it had with James Campbell and the executioner who had raised the axe above my head before Erix had found me. Instead, I had encased him, keeping him safe within the ice as well as keeping us safe from him.

"Robin..." A hand fell upon my shoulder.

The sudden touch shocked me. Erix reacted to Duncan's hand like a feral creature, hissing and growling as though words were not possible during his animalistic state.

"If you can't do it, allow me. His death will not haunt my conscience as it would yours."

I pulled my hand away from Erix's face, letting it drop back to my side as the other gripped tighter to the hilt of the stolen sword. "Do not underestimate me. Doing so has not ended well for others."

Duncan's breath tickled my neck as he whispered into my ear. "Then do it. Prove to yourself and me that you can take the first step of taking your revenge. It begins with him and ends with Doran."

I couldn't raise the sword, not as I looked at the shell of the man before me. There were many possibilities for me to end this, but they were all just out of reach.

The hilt slipped from my hand, sword splashing into the muddied ground. "I won't do it."

"Won't or can't?" Duncan asked, voice as harsh as the breeze that danced around us.

"Both," I admitted. "If there is a chance Erix could be freed from this... this curse when Doran is dead then I must hold out hope."

Duncan squeezed my shoulder, rain falling upon us with vigour, then let go of me. "He killed your father; Duwar knows if I had the chance to face my parents' killers then I would sell my soul to show them my lack of mercy."

I looked back to Erix, a stabbing pain gripping at my gut. "To you, he is one more fey to kill in the name of that God you preach of. Just as I would not stand in the way of your revenge, you are not permitted to stand in mine."

I turned my back on Erix as he struggled in my conjured prison. "So, we walk away? Unfortunately, this fey has killed my soldiers. Godly men and women who have given their lives for a greater cause than your chase for closure. In their memory alone I cannot leave this fey alive."

Duncan grunted his final word as he threw up his broadsword. Time seemed to slow as the blade careened down towards the helpless and trapped Berserker. Even Erix stilled, closing his darkened eyes, giving his face the expression of peace.

There was no time to shout my refusal, only a brief second act.

Nothing could stop the uncontrolled, raw power of my Court as it ripped across the bloodied ground towards Duncan. It was my own inner Berserker, released into the wild without much of a thought, a beast of wind and ice. And no one could stop it.

uncan and Erix were laid out before me, eyes closed, and bodies buried by a torrent of snow. The force had appeared from nothingness, exploding out from my body as though I was nothing but a vessel for the frozen storm. Ice and snow slashed outwards, leaving a scar across the bloodied, wet earth until everything around me was stained white.

I tried to steady my breathing, focusing through the throbbing pain that careened across my skull. It was a struggle to pull back the power for my emotions were wild.

Both men were unmoving, hardly visible beneath the snow covering them. Erix was closer to me. The encasing of ice had mostly shattered, the only thing that had prevented him from being thrown backwards. Duncan, on the other hand, was further away; I could only just see the glint of his body, cheeks red and skin so pale it was almost blue beneath the cold.

My legs moved without much thought, closing in on the unconscious body of my former guard. My Erix. The bedding of soft, fresh snow eased the blow as my knees hit the ground. With rushed hands I pushed the slush from his neck, pressing my fingers into his skin in search for a pulse. It was faint, a gentle fluttering against my fingertips. Relief warmed my chest. I spluttered a cry, hands shaking as I pulled them back from him.

There was nothing monstrous about Erix's expression. Calm, no different from being asleep. I could have laid my head down upon his chest and it would have been a mirror to the many nights we had spent together.

That would never happen again. The Erix I had known was gone.

Small cuts kissed across Erix's face, marks left as a gift from the ice that had exploded around him. Ribbons of scarlet melted the snow plastered to his cheeks as it dribbled and spread beneath him. Even now his skin was repairing itself, stitching together seamlessly.

He would wake soon, and the moment his eyes opened it would be the monster, not Erix.

"If you can hear me," I began, lower lip trembling as I held his cheek. "Know that I forgive you. Your will is not your own and I know that. Deep down I do. But please do not come looking for me again. Fight him, Erix, do what you can to refuse Doran. Because if I see you again, I cannot guarantee that you will be given another chance to live."

With bated breath, I waited to see if he could hear me, a flutter of an eye, or a twitching lip. But there was no reaction, nothing to suggest my words reached him.

I left Erix where he lay, walking towards the Hunter as I fought the urge to turn back. Each step was a struggle. I had to focus on putting one foot in front of the other, carrying the hope that the deep, velvet voice I had grown all too familiar with would call my name.

By the time I reached Duncan the space behind me was quiet.

"Are you okay?" I said, crouching down beside him. "We need to go."

He did not respond. I did the same as I had with Erix and put my fingers to his neck. The beat was there, strong and rhythmic. Whereas Erix's expression was placid, Duncan's face was pinched in a scowl, even in his unconsciousness.

"Wake up," I snapped, trying to conceal the shake in my voice. "Our opportunity will—"

I pulled my hand back from his neck to slap it across his face. That would wake him. Red dripped from my fingers before I could do anything; it spread down my palm into the sleeve of my drenched shirt.

My heart could have stopped in that moment. Pulling him gently up into my lap, I could see the dark stain of blood across the ground and the mess of dark, matted hair upon the back of his head. Duncan groaned as I held him, a sound that was more beautiful than I could have ever imagined.

"Fuck, Duncan, I am so sorry!"

His hand weakly reached up and gripped my arm, eyes flickering open for a moment, revealing the whites now bloodshot.

Holding Duncan in my arms I looked around, unable to swallow the panic. Not a single horse was left, only the cage remained, and it was impossible to even consider putting Duncan in it and pulling him to the nearest town for aid.

I had no idea where I was, not recognising any landmarks. The overwhelming urge to scream almost took over.

"I am going to get you help," I said, flirting with the idea of leaving him to find someone, *anyone*, to help. But his hand upon my arm squeezed, snatching my attention back down to him.

"Don't.... don't you dare leave me," Duncan warned, hardly able to keep his eyes open. He winced, trying to get himself to sitting but groaning as though his entire body ached.

"Tell me what to do," I said, urgent and panicked.

"There is a village not far from here... look for the church. They will help." His voice weakened; words broken by rhythmless breaths.

"I cannot do this alone. You are going to have to help me. Stay awake, dammit!"

It took a lot strength to pull him from the ground. Duncan was stubborn, enough to keep himself on his feet even as he fought to keep consciousness. I tried not to think about the blood pouring from his head as we began to navigate ourselves away from the macabre scene.

The snow was easing back to sleet as my power retreated like a scorned child. I gritted my teeth, forcing my spine to keep as steady as possible whilst I hobbled forward with Duncan's arm wrapped around my shoulders. All I could do was focus on the darkening road ahead, hoping the promise of a village was true. My legs burned and my body ached, but on I pushed, putting as much space between us and Erix whilst studying the distance for signs of life.

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Ayvbury. The name of the village was carved into a wooden sign that swung in the nightly winds. It was the squeak of the aged hinges that tore me from the strange trance. I had been walking for what felt like an age, half dragging Duncan whose arm clung to my shoulders and his awkward feet dragged across the ground.

All I had thought about was moving my feet, one foot before the other. If it was not for the sound

of the old hinges, I would never have looked up. It took a lot of inner strength not to fall to my knees and shout for help as I realised I had made it. Before me stood darkened buildings, neatly stacked beside one another. Surely someone would hear me and come to help if I shouted. But then the thought of the Berserker we had left behind kept me silent. Onwards I pushed, knees shaking, as I carried on walking.

The dirt path changed. Suddenly the soft ground became hard as cobbled stones spread out beneath me. Stubborn weeds wrapped around each cobble as though the earth tried to claim them back.

Keep going.

Even my internal encouragement sounded tried. But at least it was something to keep me company. Duncan had not made a sound for a long while now. The wound on the back of his head covered his neck in dried streaks of blood.

Guilt kept me walking as much as my desire to put distance between Erix and us. If I had kept some lick of control, then Duncan would not have been in this state. It was my duty to get him the help he needed.

To reach my destination I needed Duncan alive.

It was hard to discern which building was a church. I had never been inside of one, nor had I cared to pay them much mind. Father was not a religious man, perhaps due to his history with the Hunters and what I know had learned to be a group of cultists with their own faith. But there was one detail that caught my attention as I navigated through the empty streets of Ayvbury. There was a towering wooden building, the only one with a candle flame glowing in the uppermost window. Most of the other buildings we passed were darkened within, but this showed some sign of life.

It was not the glow of candlelight that drew me towards the building but the symbol hanging above the arched, black-painted door which had me slowing my step. A wheel, spoked by two crossing lines, one pointing south, east and west, but the northern line passed over the boundary of the circle in an arrow shaped edge. I did not need to be a man of faith to recognise it as the symbol of the Creator. A circle that represented life, the lines pointing in all directions to show the Creator's love always covered the people no matter where they dwelled.

But that northern arrow facing skyward represented the Creator's realm, a kingdom that was believed to dwell in a world above the clouds.

Children's stories. Even now, with the unconscious body of a killer at my side, I thought it.

I kept moving, changing my direction as I passed through the gateless fence towards the main entrance. This had to be it. But why did a Hunter care to be taken to such a place?

The wooden steps leading up to the door groaned as I took my first step upon them. There was nothing steep about them, but it felt as though I climbed the face of a mountain with a boulder attached to my side, ready to pull me backwards without warning.

Never did I believe I would see myself entering such a place, as a fey who was preached to be unwanted by the Creator's followers, alongside a Hunter who praised the belief of another God. But as my shaking arm lifted my knuckles and I rapped them against the door, I could not help but recognise just how different my life had become in such a short time.

Time stretched out and I was confident no one would answer. I knocked again, this time harder with desperation. I almost gave up on hope when I heard shuffling of heavy feet on the other side.

The door was thrown open, the warm glow of orange flame washing across us. "...the Creator never rests, but his servants do. Could this not wait for dawn or do your sins require immediate repentance?"

Haloed in the light stood an ancient, stout man. He was short, belly pressing outwards in the cream, dress-like shawl he wore. His hair was clumped in white, billowy tufts at the side of his head, leaving the top hairless and shiny. He carried a candle within a brass cup, lifting it out towards us as though his eyesight was poor.

I could only imagine what went through the old man's mind, looking out upon a grime-covered fey and a limp, unconscious man who bore the white hand mark of his faith upon a blood-covered jacket.

He clutched at his chest, scrunching the material of his shawl into a ball as though his heart hurt. Amber eyes flickered from me to Duncan and back again, wiry, long-haired brows pinching into a scowl.

Should I have said something? I could not find the words, for I did not know what I was meant to request. I had simply followed Duncan's command which had led me to this door, and he was not able to explain why, to me or to the man before us.

After a tense moment of silence, the man shuffled to the side, moving away from the entrance. "I think it is best you both come inside."

I hesitated, looking into the narrow corridor before me. There was nothing more than candles dripping down the walls and a long, red-carpet runner. Most of the doors I could see were closed, all besides the one at the far end which was left open at an angle.

"He told me to come here," I finally said, feeling the heat of the ancient man's gaze as it skimmed across the points of my ears.

He bowed his head, gesturing with the candle for us to enter. "In. Please, before you are seen."

I took a step, neck straining as I hoisted Duncan's limp body over the threshold.

"It would seem you have both had an eventful evening," the man began, the tone of his voice soft and welcoming. He ushered me out of the way, peeping out into the dark to see if anyone had watched us before shutting the door.

"He is hurt," I muttered, cringing as the door snapped against its frame.

"Duncan always had a way of getting himself in trouble. Come, follow me. I will not profess that I am a man of healing, but I will do what I can to help."

A chill coursed through my body, numbing my arms and legs. I could not move. I stood frozen as the man began to waddle down the corridor.

He must have sensed my hesitation for he turned and glowered at me. "What is the matter?"

"I did not tell you his name," I said through a lump in my throat.

The man smiled, shoulders relaxing as though he was a friend feeling comfortable in another's company. "No, I suppose you didn't. No bother, let us hurry before he bleeds out upon the floor. It would be hard to explain to the morning clergy why there is blood staining the carpets."

I kept still, arm tightening around Duncan's side. "How do you know his name?"

The man did not stop walking. He didn't even turn to face me as he reached the open door at the end of the corridor and replied, "Oh, I never forget a name. Perhaps we can discuss this when his wounds are seen to, and yours."

Thoisted the heavy body of the Hunter up the winding staircase. My legs screamed with pain, my back crying out with just as much agony. There was no denying my body pleaded with me to rest. By the time I had reached the final step I hardly cared for the man I trailed behind. I was more concerned with giving up and dropping Duncan.

Just when I believed the stairs would never end, the floor levelled out into a narrow room with a low ceiling. Each inhale was filled with the thick scent of incense; spicy and strong, there were no signs of smoke. It seemed the smell was absorbed in the walls of the church itself.

"Forgive my choice of room for you," the man said, huffing from the climb. He was doubled over, cheeks flushed with red veins. "It would be best your stay here is kept between us. If the people of Ayvbury find out their trusted priest is harbouring the likes of *your* kind within these walls I would be driven out."

I looked around the attic space of the church, absorbing the details. I almost collapsed at the sight. A room much like the one I had left behind in Grove waited before me. There was a single bed with sun-stained sheets in a bundle upon the mattress. Around it, piles of books and scrolls littered the floor, some in boxes, others in wonky stacks beside them.

A single round window stained with blues, reds and yellows, gave view to the dark night beyond. The man hobbled around the room, lighting many candles with the one he had carried with him. Once the glow spread my eyes were able to make out more details, the most obvious being the large bell which took up the middle of the room with greedy pride. Its presence surprised me. It hung from a rusted chain, a frayed cord waiting at its side. Pulling it would certainly alert the entire town of our arrival.

"Put him upon the bed," the man commanded through shaky breaths. "Then you will find some cloths within the trunk over there. Get some out and bring them to me."

Hesitation thrummed through me entrusting Duncan's care to a stranger, but I was tired and desperate to remove the added weight. Exhausted, the final steps towards the bed were the hardest. I felt as though I had to peel Duncan from my side, our clothes stuck together with blood, dirt and melted snow. Duncan flopped down onto the bed, the glow of the candles highlighting just how pale his skin had become.

"Will he be okay?" I murmured, finally seeing just how terrible he looked.

"Get the cloths, boy, and we will find out."

I did as he said without further hesitation, obtaining the folded material from the trunk as requested, a layer of dust around my fingers; this room was covered in it.

As I got back to Duncan's side, the old man was already waiting, perched on a short stool. He

held the back of his swollen hand to Duncan's head, expression pinched in concentration. "His temperature is rather high which is likely a sign of a possible infection. Praise be that he has a pulse. If you had arrived any later, he may have been far past the point of healing."

The old man took a cloth from my shaking hands without thanks and pulled out an intricate glass jar from the folds of his robes, uncorking it with his teeth. I watched, helpless, as he poured the liquid onto the cloth until it was drenched through.

"Hold him up," he demanded. "Slow and careful."

I nodded, thankful to have something to do. It was impossible just sitting and watching as this stranger helped. Doing as he asked, I tugged at Duncan's arms until he was sitting up, shoulders slumped as he leaned forward on himself.

The sting of strong spirits tickled my nose as the old man raised the cloth upwards and pressed it to the back of Duncan's head. He held it there, mixing the strong concoction with the blood which had already dried within the strands of Duncan's hair.

"This will help clean the area and fight off the infection. There is nothing stronger than the Creator's blessed wine." *Wine*. He expected to heal Duncan with wine! "Now, shall we discuss how this happened, my boy?" He spoke as though we were old friends, discussing mundane matters beside a fire with an ale in hand.

"It would help if I knew whom I was speaking with." My voice was sharp. Distrusting.

The old man sniffed, blinking back tears. "I am glad this wine has found its use. Never did like it, too strong and offensive. The sting alone should wake up dear Duncan here."

"Name?" I asked again, starting to get the impression the old man was not completely present.

As if shaking himself from deep thoughts, he came to. "Abbot Nathanial, but you may call me by the latter as I trust you are not a man of faith."

"Nathanial," I repeated carefully, as though his suggestion was a trick and I was showing him great disrespect by ignoring his title. "How do you know Duncan?"

He looked back, a fatherly hand sweeping the strands of dark, blood-matted hair from Duncan's face. A wave of what could have only been sadness creased his brows, making the lines of age more prominent around his eyes. "Many years ago, Duncan Rackley was a boy who stayed here when he had nowhere else to go. Believe it or not, when I was younger and time was less painful, this church doubled as a housing facility for children without homes of their own. He was one of many who passed through these doors, but one I would never forget. And just as I had told him when he left, he would always find his way back. The most troubled always do."

I looked back to the Hunter; body slumped over my hands as I held him from folding over. "He was an orphan."

"Indeed, he was. The exact reasons as to what caused the cultists to dig their claws into him and take him from me."

The Hand and his Faithful, that was who Nathanial spoke of.

"Which leads me to a question for you. I have always hoped that Duncan would see the truth in their warped beliefs and return to me. But never did I imagine it would be in the arms of the very... thing that he holds such distaste for."

"Do you mean hate?" I asked, arms as numb as my mind. "Believe me, I never saw myself in this situation either."

"The world works in mysterious ways," the abbot said. "Moved by the will of the Creator. Whereas you would see this moment as the outcome of an incident, I like to believe it is merely the Creator walking you down a path without you even realising He holds your hand."

A sour taste filled my mouth, making my jaw tighten. Now was not the time to say the wrong thing, but I was tired and my patience thin. "Apologies if this comes across as rude, but you are truly barking up the wrong tree."

That made the abbot laugh aloud, the sudden sound surprising me. "You *are* a peculiar boy. How could I bark if I am not a dog? If it is my chatter of the Creator that offends you, please do accept my sincerest apologies. I understand your kind hold belief for another but from years of my teachings and preaching's I say my God is truly ingrained within my daily language as though it's no different from pleases and thank yous."

"I do not follow a faith," I said quietly. *But I do believe*. In something at least. That much had been clear when Altar's temple had crumbled around me when Erix had slain my father.

"How interesting," he mused, smiling to himself. "You can lay him back down now. After morning mass, I shall venture into town in search for some better remedies. There will be all manner of herbs from apothecaries that will help aid Duncan in his healing, most of which I have not cared to house within my church since I do not get visitors for such physical ailments. Those who come knocking are usually in need of more spiritual healing, one that herbs, and weeds are useless for. Now, until then, I shall keep the dear boy in my prayers tonight as I have since he left this place all those years ago."

Before Duncan's head had even hit the pillow, the abbot was standing.

"You are just going to leave?" I asked, paling at the idea of being left alone with no clue as how to help him.

"What is the matter, dear boy? Duncan is sleeping as you should too. If there are any problems before dawn you can simply call down for me."

The abbot gave a final look down upon Duncan where he lay, his face softening as a thought overcame him. Then he walked towards me, waddling from side to side as if his legs provided him discomfort with each step. "House rules," he said, voice deepening into a scorning, serious tone. "You do not leave this room unless permission is granted by me. Not all in Ayvbury will be happy knowing both a Hunter and a fey dwell beneath this roof."

I nodded, swallowing what I truly wanted to say and replacing it with something gentler. "Thank you, for your help."

He waved off my thanks, large eyebrows wiggling in jest. "Just as the Creator's arms are always open, so is my church, no matter the vagrant who comes knocking. Wait for me to return tomorrow, then we will organise you both to get washed down and dressed before you offend the noses of the woodlice and mice who frequent this attic."

I flinched as his hand found my head, resting it there ever so gently that it felt more like a whispered breeze. His touch was tender. If I had closed my eyes, it would have been no different to that of a father caressing his son; it instantly calmed me. "Bless you for seeing past his blackened heart to help him. I am sure there is a story of how you have both found your way to my door and I look forward to discussing it..." He looked back to Duncan. "...with the both of you."

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I woke suddenly, room bathed with bright light. It took me a moment and a handful of blinks to see more than just the blur of white. Finally details came into view alongside the realisation of where I was, and more horrifically, why I was here.

Duncan was sitting up in bed, glass bottle of wine to his lips as he tipped it backwards. That was the sound that woke me; rasping, glutinous chugs as he downed the wine. I stood from the dusty, ancient seat that I had curled up upon, my body aching more than the night before.

"Duncan." My voice cracked, thick with sleep. He didn't even look from the wine as he carried on draining the bottle. "You should have woken me."

He tore the bottle from his lips, chin wet with liquid that had also spilt onto the thin sheet I'd covered him with. "If I am not mistaken, you are awake."

"Good morning to you too," I groaned, annoyance curling in my stomach. Perhaps I should have asked how he was, but his thinned, wine-glistening lips and his pinched brows reminded me that he was far from helpless.

He winced, raising a hand to block the sunlight that cut through the dancing clouds of dust that filled the air. "I can't tell what is worse, my head or my back thanks to this bed. Couldn't be more different to the bed that I should have been waking in if your little lover had not killed all my men. And an empty bed at that, how disappointing."

There was so much I could say back to him, but it would have been pointless. Arguing would not make being stuck in this room with him any better.

I could have sworn I heard the bones in my knees creak louder than the floorboards as I crossed the room to him. "I feel as though I should ask how your head is?" I mentioned offhandedly, pulling up the short stool that the abbot had sat on last night.

"If you care, it feels like it's been kicked in by twenty scorned lovers who have hunted me down to wreak hell upon me," Duncan said with one eye pinched closed, and his forehead etched with lines. One hand still grasped the almost empty bottle of holy wine whilst the other reached for the back of his head. He hissed as his fingers encountered the mess of blood and hair. "But instead, it was all you. Powerful little creature you are."

"I preferred you when you were unconscious," I snapped, swiping the bottle from his hands and squeezing my eyes shut as I took a quick swig. The moment the liquid cascaded down my throat, burning every inch of it on the way down, I realised why the abbot had chosen to use it on Duncan's head instead.

It was hard to tell if the desire to vomit was from the sharp taste, or the slosh of it in my very empty stomach.

"Pass it back here if you are not going to appreciate it," Duncan said, flexing his fingers in request. "Strong as I remember. It will rid me of this bastard head pain whilst putting hairs on my chest."

"Has anyone ever told you that you have terrible taste?" I said, smacking the bottle back into his open palm.

Duncan winked; his eyes still bloodshot but brighter than they had been the night prior. "Too many to remember."

I could hear the faint, monotone chat of a deep voice somewhere in the church beneath us. Until now I had been too occupied with Duncan to notice.

"Morning mass," Duncan explained as though reading my thoughts. "The longest ceremonies of the day. Used to dread it. Tried anything to get myself out of joining, whether that was pretending to have come down with sickness or simply ignoring the abbot when he came calling for us at dawn. Never could worm my way out of listening to his drawl."

"He told me you used to live here."

"Live?" Duncan laughed, pulling a face at the now empty bottle as though he could not understand

where the wine had gone. "I would not call my stay here *living*. There was no choice in the matter. I was a child, left orphaned due to—may I remind you—your fellow kind's actions. I existed. Go on, tell me what his reaction was to finding me on his doorstep once again. Was it as smug as I could imagine?"

I shook my head, witnessing as the alcohol seeped its claws into Duncan, turning his words sluggish and emotions slippery. "You speak of the abbot as though he harbours no care for you. The man I had met clearly held a warmer emotion for you than you do him. He was concerned, slightly confused, but he looked at you as though you meant more to him than you make out."

"Ha, don't let the old man fool you!"

"You are drunk," I replied.

"Among other things."

The sound of muffled speaking became the lull of singing far beneath us. From the sheer sound of the voices, I could only imagine how full the mass would have been.

Duncan swung his legs over the edge of the bed, face pinched in a wince.

"What are you doing?"

He swatted away my hand. "Getting up and getting out of here."

Duncan swayed as he stood, arse thumping back down upon the flattened mattress as though his legs knew better than to allow him to move.

"You are in no fit state to be going anywhere, Duncan. Look at you. What do you think will happen when the patrons of this village see a Hunter and a fey walking through the streets? Need I remind you that we are both covered in blood and smell like warmed horse shit."

His dark, full brow raised inquisitively. "It would seem we have both bumped our heads. Need I remind *you* that you are my prisoner still, certainly not in a position to be commanding me as though our roles have reversed."

I raised my wrists, both held together as though an invisible cord of iron bound them. "Would you like me to pretend I am bound to please you?"

Duncan could hardly fight the urge to turn up the corner of his lip. "That does not sound like a terrible idea."

Slapping my hands back down onto my thighs, I sucked my teeth in frustration. "Drunk and infuriating. A terrible mix. Perhaps you should sleep off the wine and concussion and we can discuss our next play when you are of sounder mind."

"Are you sour I did not leave you more?" He shook the empty bottle before me which I snatched from him in a blink.

I held the bottle by its neck, brandishing it like a weapon. "Do not give me a reason to put you back to sleep myself, Duncan. If we are going to be stuck here for a while you need to either drop your sarcastic—and may I add repulsive—attitude or learn to keep quiet around me."

"You find me repulsive?" he asked, leaning forward until his face was close to mine. His jadegreen stare flickered between mine and my pursed lips which made holding my expression of concentration rather difficult.

The question hung between us.

It was I who broke eye contact first, knowing that if I carried on my cheeks would have turned scarlet. "How about we discuss what happens next for us, rather than listening to my list of reasons as to why you are, in fact, repulsive."

"It will not be long before the Faithful expecting our arrival in Lockinge realise that we have been unexpectedly delayed. I give it a few days before a search party is sent out, finds the bodies and notes

that mine is missing among the dead, then they will come looking for me."

"Us?" I asked, hesitantly correcting him.

"Oh, Robin, they would not care for your life as they would a general. But finding you alive, with me, would simply be a bonus."

I scowled, unsure why I expected him to speak of me differently. "Then we are taken to Lockinge and I get my audience with The Hand?"

"I would be more concerned knowing the Berserker is still out there. What is to say he finds us before the Faithful do?"

I paused, swallowing audibly.

"Ah yes," Duncan slurred. "It would have been a lot simpler to have him killed. Instead, you gave him another chance to hunt you down. And I was beginning to think you were stronger. I suppose my view of you was misplaced."

The wooden stool clattered to the ground as I stood, not caring for the noise I created. "I do not care what you think of me."

"Do you not?" he asked. "Because your reaction suggests otherwise."

It was easy to let my magic spill out of me, just a little, but enough to serve as a warning. An unseen breeze melted from my skin, tousling my hair as well as catching the loose papers and parchments along with it. Immediately, Duncan's wine sharp breath thickened in a cloud beyond his lips which stole the smug grin that had been creeping across his face.

"Do not push your luck with me, Hunter," I warned, standing firm before him. "Do not give me an excuse to break you because of your grating attitude. Treat me as an equal, or I will be forced to find another way to Lockinge whilst reminding you of our differences. The scales of power have shifted between us. Remember that."

Duncan tensed his jaw, trying everything to stop his teeth from chattering as the cold breeze left ice spreading across the floor and walls of the attic.

"How peculiar," he mused, lip turned up at the corner.

I called the cold back, returning the magic into my bones. "What?"

"I almost believed you." He kicked his legs back over the bed until he was lying down, arms behind his head. He attempted to act as though he was careless, but I noticed the wince as his hands brushed the wound at the back of his head.

"Not quite, but almost," Duncan continued, eyes closed as though he sleep-talked. "Keep it up and you may even make me fear you one day."

"Do you have any coin?" I said, unable to bite my tongue.

"Never had much care for it, nor need unfortunately."

"That is a shame," I replied. "How else am I going to buy the fucks I am to give?"

Duncan barked a laugh. "Excellent, truly excellent. Who would have known that your kind could be such stimulating company? I have a feeling these next few days are going to pass by in a blur. Don't you?"

Biting down on my bottom lip until copper filled my mouth, I stifled a response. I felt more like a prisoner, stuck in this attic with him, than I had during my time in Finstock.

The silence that followed allowed me to register my own feeling of drunkenness from the short swig I had taken of the holy wine. I would have preferred another mouthful if it meant drowning out Duncan and what he had to say. But before long, the Hunter was snoring, mouth agape whilst the wine dragged him into sleep, leaving me to the chorus of his breathing and the people singing in the church below for company.

I twas incredible how different my perspective of life was after my skin had been cleaned and my belly full of food. Abbot Nathanial had followed through on his vow and then some, returning when the sun was at its highest peak above Ayvbury with the beautiful promise of a bath, clean clothes and a good meal.

We had taken turns to wash, creeping through the empty church towards the abbot's private rooms where the tub of lukewarm water waited.

Duncan had either pretended to be asleep when the abbot had returned for us, or truly was enthralled in his drunken haze because he did not stir. But by the time I had returned to the attic, the bed was empty, and the abbot was waiting beside it, sat upon the stool once again.

Hair still damp, my eyes flicked around the room as though the Hunter hid between towering stacks of books. "Where is he?"

The abbot looked up, eyes fogged with glistening sadness. "It would seem dear Duncan has been harbouring some negative emotions towards me."

"Perhaps I should go and find him," I said, paranoid that his dirt-covered uniform and blood-soaked hair would only draw unwanted attention to us. "I did try and warn him not to leave, not with..."

I silenced myself, swallowing my words thickly. Now was not the time to add the unnecessary concern of the Berserker who hunted us to the old man's shoulders, for they were visibly weighed heavy by unseen worries.

"Duncan was never one to discuss the thoughts that clouded his mind," the abbot said, shoulders hunching with one great exhale. "He never saw the benefit of having the Creator to discuss his mind's demons with. Even as a young lad he believed prayer to be nothing more than wasted time. It is what surprised me most that he was drafted into the rabble of Faithful. What was so different from our God, to theirs, that made them so desirable?"

"You know of their God?" I asked, unsure how a man of the Creator's faith knew of Duwar when it had never been mentioned during teachings.

The abbot's expression changed as quick as a summer storm, downturned expression lifting into a furious snarl. "I do indeed. But the title of God has never been deserving of Duwar."

"What of Altar?" I asked, watching the abbot's expression soften once again.

"I gave my life to the Creator when I was young enough to stand unaided by my parents. I knew my life's purpose as well as my own name, to spread the Creator's teachings to those who listen, and encourage belief in those with space for it. Altar is no different, Father of the fey and recognised deity of your people. But Duwar, that creature has no standing to be titled as a God."

A shadow passed over the old man, hardening his features as though Duwar's name had the power to turn him to stone with hate.

I should have left to search for Duncan already, but the truth the abbot was revealing kept me rooted to the spot. "I do not understand how his name has never been brought up before. How a..." I refrained from using the title God. I opted to use the same title the abbot had said. "How a creature has captured enough people's belief to encourage an entire faith, yet not mentioned in teachings. Even in Wychwood the Hunters and their actions have been a mystery. It was believed the Hunters wanted the fey for their blood. It has all been hearsay up until this point."

"Until you met dear Duncan."

I nodded. "I would not refer to him as dear, but yes. I witnessed what the Faithful do in the name of their... Duwar and it is frightening."

"There have been whispers of what the Faithful desire for many moons. In the recent years, those whispers have become more like muffled shouts. More and more of their kind sweep across the land in the name of The Hand, taking your kind for blood, knowing that the King's seal of approval will stop anyone from interfering. Yet the question I keep asking myself, one that even Duncan has refused to answer, is why? What is it they believe will happen? There was an age of Gods, written about in testaments old. However, that time has long passed and for most is nothing but stories you tell at night to keep naughty children from misbehaving."

"Why now?" I asked, confirming what the abbot was suggesting.

"That is correct," he said, eyes widening in curiosity. "Why now indeed?"

My mind was whirling with questions. It was hard to know which one to pick out first. Perhaps my silence was the abbot's signal that I was finished with our conversation, when in fact, I was never more than ready to find out more.

"Before you go to look for our dear boy Duncan, would you do an old man a favour and answer a question?" the abbot's knees creaked, like worn floorboards in a forgotten home, as he stood, liverspotted hands clasped before his belly as though they held it in from slipping free.

"It would be the least I can do for a man who has let two vagrants into his home without hesitation."

He smiled briefly, wide eyes full of an emotion I could not quite name. "Are you a believer? In the Creator, in Altar, it does not matter to me which."

I paused, feeling the faint tremble of the ground as the memory of Altar's temple falling around me filled my mind and left a bad taste in my mouth.

"Yes," I answered, surprised at how easy it was. "At least I think so. I have learned a lot in a short period of time and witnessed even more. What I have seen makes it hard to turn my back on the potential of higher beings."

"I am glad to hear it," the abbot confirmed, head bowing. "There may come a time when everyone's faith, no matter in whom it is held for, will become necessary in the future to come. I fear something brews, something terrible and close. Having *someone* to fight for is as important as knowing whom you fight beside."

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I found Duncan within a room in the heart of the church. Relief chilled the blush of warmth that my anxiety spread across my skin. He had not left after all, which showed that he was not as stupid as I

was beginning to believe.

The room was both elegant and rich, with colour, stone and decoration that the rest of the church lacked. It reminded me of Altar's temple, crafted from wooden pews and marble columned pillars that stood guard down the sides of the room. Vines and greenery had not claimed this place of worship. The stone walls were covered by draping banners, each depicting scenes of stories that I could not recall.

At the front of the room was an altar, covered in a cream sheet with the sign of the Creator sewn proudly across its hem. A chalice waited upon it, the remnants of red wine drying across its rim. White candles still burned across the altar, dripping wax. The small, amber flames danced in the breezeless room, shifting freely for an unseen audience.

The Creator's symbol, a four-spoked wheel with the arrow pointing northwards, could be seen all around the room. Even the flooring, tiles of black and grey arranged into the shape of the sign, spread out beneath my feet.

A creeping of thick incense crawled into my nose and clung on with desperate claws. I could taste the spice in the clouds of smoke that melted from the hanging, golden burners which moved from side to side, pushed by an unseen hand.

I entered the room on gentle feet, concerned I would shatter the ambience of blissful silence that held the room.

Duncan did not show sign that he sensed my presence, but there was no doubt he was aware. He stayed were he sat, in the middle of a pew facing the altar as though it entrapped his attention completely. Daylight streamed in from the large, stained-glass window that hung proudly at our backs, casting a glow of brilliance across everything. The colours seemed to sway across the floor, interrupted only by the winter clouds that drifted lazily before the sun.

Duncan still had not washed. Hair soaked with blood, and dark clothing coated in grime. If anyone else entered this room they would have seen him and thought that the dead had risen. There was only me and him, plus the promise of the Creator who felt as real as the ground I walked on after the abbot's comments.

"Do you mind if I join you?" I asked, voice a displeasing echo. Even the flames upon the many candles stilled, listening contently.

Duncan didn't take his eyes off the altar as he responded. "It would be rude to refuse."

It was not exactly the yes or no I expected, but not pushing my luck, I moved down the middle aisle and stopped at the edge of the pew he sat upon.

"For a moment I had convinced myself that you had left me here," I admitted, scooting down the pew until I was beside him. Duncan's hand was splayed out upon the seat beside him, fingers claiming the space for his own. Before I took my seat, he removed his claim and put his hand upon his knees in offering. Without question, I sat beside him.

"And yet here I am still, contemplating why I am even here in the first place." His jaw feathered, eyes narrowing in on spot at the front of the room. I kept looking at the chiselled lines of his dirt-covered face, recognising the gleam of grease that clung to his dark hair.

"You told me to come here. Believe me, if there was a reason not to drag you for miles at my side then I would have preferred it."

Duncan was as stiff as a spike of steel at my side. "I was not exactly in my right mind."

"Is that why your thanks has been misplaced? You know, you never did say thank you," I added. "Or does providing recognition to the very beings you have sworn your life to hunt not happen often?"

"You'll get over it." His reply was cold. It was the type of sharp tone that revealed the speaker

did not wish to be spoken to.

Shame. I am not going anywhere.

"Even in the presence of a God you are a rude bastard, Duncan Rackley."

"Is he going to smite me for my disrespect? Come here, right now, and punish me for my lack of belief?" Duncan did not sound as angry as his words suggested, but the tension in his face, his twisting scar, gave the expression of someone in pain. "The answer is no. No, he will not, Robin."

"I sense I have hit a nerve." I flinched as Duncan leaned forward, gripping the edge of the pew until his knuckles were as pale as bone.

"Severed a nerve," Duncan confirmed.

I felt the urge to place a hand upon his back. The comforting thought caught me off guard. I soon realised he would hate it, choosing to place them upon my own lap, useless and unwanted.

"You harbour a lot of hate for this place," I said quietly. "Care to explain what it has done to you to make you feel such a way?"

"It is not this place that I despise, but what it stands for. Praising a God that allows children to be left without parents. Do you not see how unfair that is? What God would see his own creations go without the love of a parent? What made me and the other children left at this doorstep any undeserving of those who dwelled in the homes throughout this village and others?"

Duncan looked at me then. Truly looked at me. Stubble scratched across his jaw, deep, forest-green eyes shining with sadness all without the need for tears. His eyes flickered across my face as though searching for something hidden, lips parted in the promise of an unknown secret that he did not share.

"If you do not believe in a God, then why join the Faithful?" The question haunted the silence between us. "Call me ignorant, but I see no sense in your choice."

Duncan leaned back, blinking heavily, as my question settled over him. He closed his lips, pursed them and then parted them once more with a deep inhale as he prepared himself to answer. "The Creator promised peace, Duwar promised revenge. I chose as any young boy tormented by his parents' death would. Sound familiar to you, Robin?"

I reared back, his words punching me in the gut.

Duncan took my moment of surprised silence to continue. It was his turn to strike a nerve. "We share something in common. What a peculiar thought. I admit when you first demanded your audience with The Hand, I could not help but notice how similar we are. I have never had the time to see your kind as more than just the means for the type of peace I required. Until you."

I wanted to tell him that we were different, list the reasons in which made him the monster, and not me. But I came up short, with not a single reason to give.

"Silence speaks louder than the guilty proclaiming their innocence." Duncan's voice was warm, despite what he was saying.

"I never preached my innocence," I replied, looking down at my hands, fingers fidgeting on my lap.

"And I get the impression you are far from innocent." Duncan stood abruptly.

"Do I scare you?" I asked, standing up beside him to block the way out. "Running away from conversation seems to be a speciality of yours."

Duncan smiled slowly, large hands finding themselves upon the belt around his hips. "I am going to wash myself down, *Duwar* knows I need it. Then we are going to carry on this conversation later. No one is running this time. Not yet at least."

Duncan stepped towards me, hands grasping my shoulders as he swivelled me out the way. His

grip was gentle, yet firm, a knowing touch with the confidence of control over another body. His toes touched mine as he shuffled past, looking down his nose at me as I glared up at him.

I swore, for a single moment, I could not catch a breath.

Once Duncan had passed me and his touch no more than a faint whisper across my arms, he spoke. "I always found this place boring. Days long and nights endless. Do me a favour, if you are up to it. Behind the altar, through the wooden door, is a room filled with wine. Nathanial was always a hermit for the stuff and will have bottles, so many he will not notice if any are missing."

Duncan had a talent, one of distraction. Perhaps that was what set me at ease even after the tense conversation. It was impressive to recognise how Duncan could remove himself from his emotions and mask it.

Perhaps I should have refused, demanded that he sat back down so I could understand him and allow him to understand me. That would have been important if we were meant to use one another to get to Lockinge. But what else was important was a distraction, and it had been far too long since I had one of those last.

"You want me to steal holy wine from beneath the nose of a man who has shown us nothing but welcoming kindness?" I grinned as I spoke, chest warming as though I was a kid enthralled in mischievousness.

"I do indeed." He turned on his heel, walking towards the door with a confidence that demanded attention.

Before his grubby hand reached for the doorknob, I called out a final question. "I know that the older the wine, the more potent it is. Any preference on the age or are you happy with anything?"

"Surprise me," Duncan confirmed. "You seem to be good at doing so."

e drank until time became nothing more than an inconvenience, tipping bottles back as though feather light. There was no requirement for gentle-stemmed glasses or tankards. Candles burned around us, covering the darkened space in a halo of amber and warmth. Not that we were cold with the alcohol roaring like a fire in our bellies.

The burning liquid hazed my mind and made my body sluggish. However, it did little to drown out the chanting of the church far below us. Evening mass had begun some time ago, ensuring Abbot Nathanial was occupied. Just the thought of him finding the missing bottles had small laughs passing my lips alongside rushed hiccups.

Duncan sat upon the bed, leaning elbows on his knees as he swung the half-finished bottle of dark wine before him. His fingers clasped the bottle's neck as though it was a lover, grip as gentle and firm as one would desire. He had washed what felt like hours ago, his chest still shirtless. Duncan had only bothered to pull on trousers, which I was thankful for at the time. But now, with the rush of alcohol present in every vessel of my being, I cared little for where I looked.

And look I did.

When Duncan laughed the muscles across his stomach would ripple like water disturbed by a stone. Hair coated his broad chest, spreading down and thinning as it reached the extremely prominent V-shaped carving at his hips. His hair was still damp, even now. It was at a length that could easily be swept behind ears, all but the two pesky strands that hung at both sides of his face.

Skin cleaned of blood, and half-dressed in the clothes of a common man, Duncan did not look like someone who had it in him to kill.

He looked, dare I say it? Normal.

"Ridiculous," Duncan bellowed, jabbing the bottle at me with one eye squinted. "You are expecting me to believe that your father was a Hunter?"

I swiped the dribble of wine from my lips. "Are you suggesting I am a liar?"

Duncan had shown keen interest in my parentage, firing questions at me whilst we drank, preventing what could have been an awkward silence. But what he did was incredibly smart, hardly allowing me any time to question him.

And I had a lot of questions.

Duncan bit down on his lower lip, head shaking slightly in disbelief. "With everything you say, I uncover more about you."

"How strange. Who would've thought that conversations worked like that?" I replied in jest.

Duncan took a long swig of his bottle, prominent lump in his throat bobbing with each gulp. The

silence was utterly controlled by him. And he knew it. Eyes never leaving me as he drank, he lowered the bottle and then spoke again. "By the time we reach Lockinge it will not surprise me if you reveal yourself to be The Hand with the secrets you keep."

My thumb rubbed around the rim of the bottle, staining my skin red. "Surely you would know. Have you not met The Hand before?"

"A low life like me?" He laughed. "The Hand is an elusive character. My orders come from higher stationed Faithful, whose orders come from those above even them. The Hand is occupied doing what one does when in commune with a God. We merely dance to his tune, and he dances to Duwar's."

If I were a dog, my hackles would have raised. "And if you do not know The Hand personally, how do you expect to grant me my audience!?"

"At last, he asks the question that I would have deemed most important above others." Duncan sat back, stomach flexing and arms bulging. "The Hand will want to see you, even I know that. Son of one of the four fey Courts, your presence will be most interesting to him. Likely The Hand knows of you even now, expecting your arrival in which we will be terribly ate for."

"This sounds more like a hunch than fact."

He winked, the dark pupils of his eyes taking up most of their colour. "A strong one I must add."

It was my time to drink, doing as he had and not taking my stare off him. I took my time, enjoying the gentle burn as the liquid raced down into my belly, warming me from the inside out.

"Reading between the lines it would seem that I do not need you," I said, watching as his brows furrowed ever so slightly. "If you believe The Hand is expecting me then surely, I could leave you here and still make it to my destination without issue. Am I right in thinking that?"

"Indeed, you are," Duncan replied, scar deepening as he smiled. "It still does not mean I am not going to be by your side as we reach Lockinge."

"And why is that?"

"Because I need you."

I scoffed, almost choking. "Need me?"

"Fey King, son to a Hunter and a parrot. I admit I have never had company so interesting."

"You mock me for a man who needs me more than I need him. I could freeze your skin, harden your bones until they were no different to shards of fragile glass. Leave you within this attic all without much effort at all. Tell me, Duncan Rackley, why should I bring *you* with me?"

A cloud passed over Duncan's expression, narrowing his eyes and pursing his lips into a line so straight they paled. If my hearing was keener, I may have heard the wheels in his mind turning as he conjured an answer or decided to make his response truthful or not.

I waited, watching as Duncan finished the dregs of his bottle. Once empty he discarded it on the floor and reached for the next. Lifting the new bottle to his mouth, he pinched his teeth around the cork and pulled, the pop shattering the quiet between us.

"I require an audience with The Hand as well."

"Pardon?" I said, unsure if I had heard him correctly.

"Have I not expressed that we share similarities?" Duncan said, his grin faltering.

"And here I had been left to wonder why you became so involved with helping me. Even freeing Althea to stop Briar. Standing against Erix when he had come for me. You need me, far more than I need you."

"Well, if you say it like that, then yes. Tell me, Robin, what are you going to do with this information? The power is quite literally in your hands. The choice is all yours."

I sat up straight, uncrossing my legs in the chair and rooting them back on the floor of the attic. It was impossible to discern if the room spun because of what I had uncovered, or if it was the bottle of wine I had downed. "Is The Hand truly mysterious, so much so that a general of his Faithful cannot even request his time?"

Duncan shrugged, clicking his tongue across teeth. "You say it as though I have not already thought about or tried that approach too many times to count."

"You know my reasoning. Is it not fair that I know yours if you have been plotting to use me this entire time?"

"Oh, Robin." Duncan pouted, gaze trailing me from head to toe. "Has my deceit hurt you? All this time you forget who I am, and what you are. Do not grow comfortable that enemies break bread and drink from the same cup. They both do so with poison painted across their lips."

"Stop doing that," I groaned.

"What?"

"Changing the subject when it does not proceed down a path you are comfortable with." I stood from the chair, bottle tight in my hand and legs swaying as though the church was built upon wild seas. "Just answer the question, Duncan."

If I was honest with myself, I never believed he would have told me. In the short time I had come to know him I was prepared for the subject to change, or him to choose silence over truth.

He did the opposite, speaking a truth which cut deep like a blade.

"Names. Names only The Hand has access to. Dangled over my head from the moment I left Abbot Nathanial until now. A promise of the names of those who stole the lives of my parents. Names I would do anything to get," Duncan revealed, voice gritty with tempered emotion. "That is what I need from you."

Perhaps it was the wine that made me take steps towards him, forcing me to cross the candle-lit room with nothing but the want to provide Duncan with some form of ease. He shivered with the feeling that haunted him, not sadness or anger, but something guttural and wild. Desperation. A scorching desire that would have made him do anything to appease it. A feeling I knew all too well.

Duncan watched me with large, wide eyes. He didn't even flinch as my hand reached the side of his face. The tips of my fingers met his skin first, melting upon him until his cheek rested in my palm. His skin was warm. The scent of him freshly washed was as beautiful as a breath of fresh, winter air.

"What are you doing?" he asked, allowing me to step between his legs which he parted with a shuffle of his feet.

I peered down at him, feeling a lump form in my throat as I replied. "You are right, we do have many similarities. I wish it was different circumstances for the both of us, but here we are, products of the world around us. How can I look at you any different for what you desire when I wish the same for another?"

Duncan discarded the bottle, careless of the wine that spilt across his sheets. With straight, strong arms, he pushed himself upwards, face coming to meet mine with nothing but a slither of distance between us.

I didn't move back, but the momentum caused my hand to fall from the side of his face like the tears he fought so hard to hold from spilling.

"After everything I have done to you, to your friends, to the fey, what do you see when you look at me?"

"I see you," I replied, voice no more than a whisper. "I see a boy with unseen scars, looking for a remedy to ease their discomfort. I see you, Duncan."

His expression softened, the creases around his eyes dissolving into nothingness. For a moment I obtained a peek at the boy he would have been before, free from haunting torment and twisted desire for vengeance.

Duncan's face grew closer until the tips of our noses tickled one another. Spiced grape washed over me as he exhaled through slightly parted lips. "Do you care to know what I see when I look at you, Robin?"

I was fearful to know his answer but nodded anyway.

"Mercy."

Somewhere, far beneath the room, Abbot Nathanial preached the teachings of his faith, telling those who cared to listen stories of the Creator through word and song, all without knowing that, within the attic, something strange occurred. A Hunter ran gentle, knowing hands up the arms of his enemy—at least that was what his enemy should have looked like; pointed ears and powers unknown to humans.

The Hunter's eyes asked permission, flicking between lips and the wide, unblinking stare of a fey. And silently, his permission was granted, the fey lifting onto toes until lips met in a clashing of flesh and desire.

houghts were useless as our lips crashed together, senses exploding.

Duncan held me to him, hands grasping upon my arms as though I would disappear if he let go. My own hands wove up his chest, fingers catching the bristly hairs as I combed through them, up to his neck.

Everything about him was hard, like warmed stone against the coldness of my touch. I felt him tense beneath me, our bodies pressed together with no want or need for distance.

Duncan kissed like a starved man with coins finally filling his pockets. Desperate and hungry. He moved with that desperation yet still demanded full control in the way his lips pressed atop mine.

I could have pulled away from him if I so desired. But I didn't desire such things, no. I desired him with a want as ravenous as the passion he laid upon me.

Noses clashed as our faces turned, shifting to allow for fluidity. I tasted him, sharp as wine. The kiss deepened quickly, his tongue joining the dance and parting my lips with ease, coaxing my own until they both twisted like snakes encouraged by their charmer.

I was lost to the dark of my closed eyes, allowing Duncan to guide me. He was the captain, I merely followed his physical command.

He urged me down upon the bed, leaning backwards, and tugging me atop him. The bed creaked as my weight was added, aged wood screaming in resistance. But we ignored it, along with many other things.

I clambered upon his lap, legs overlapping his until I was kneeling above him. Duncan's head rested upon the wall of the attic, hands now grasping the sides of my face as he refused to break his lips from mine. He moved with confidence gained only from experience. The thought alone made my cheeks bloom red and my insides warm with excitement.

It was Duncan who pulled away first, holding me at arm's reach. His breathing was laboured, as was mine. Without his kiss, I was aware of everything. How his legs felt firm beneath me, and the subtle movement of his hips as though we stood on a ship rocking above calm seas.

"Are we...?" His question tapered off, lips red and glistening wet. Fingers now gripped my lower back, squeezing into my skin where he held me.

"I want to," I assured him.

He didn't smile, at least not with his mouth. Duncan's eyes lit up from within, brows raising as he exhaled a long, toughened sigh. "Say it to me again."

I tensed, nails shifting down the hardened lumps of his stomach until goosebumps were left in their wake. "Take me, Duncan. Distract me..."

My hands fell limp as the image of Erix flooded my mind. Distract me. That was how it had

started in the destroyed home within Berrow, sharing a bed as winter ripped at the outer walls with desperation to enter and watch us.

"Robin?" Duncan said, fingers reaching to my chin. I snapped back to the room, attention shifting from the haunting memory and the bad taste it left in my mouth. "This can stop before it starts. Blame this simply as a moment of drunken boredom and never discuss it again. I will do as you wish."

I pondered his offer, forcing a smile as I blinked away unwanted thoughts.

"I know what I want, Duncan, and it is this," I murmured, eyes racing over him with honest wanting. "Take me as I know you want to."

Duncan gasped softly as my hand wove down beneath my arse and gripped the hard cock that pressed into me. Even beneath his leathers, I could feel its thick, warm and pulsing desire.

"Music to my ears," Duncan replied, a growl rumbling in his throat. He grinned now, flashing teeth and tongue. "I do not doubt your experience or lack thereof, but I must warn you. You would have never been with someone like me."

My stomach jolted, but not from fear.

"Care to explain?" I asked.

He shook his head, dark hair shifting as though a breeze infiltrated the room. "No. I'd rather show you."

I gulped. It was all I could do as Duncan looked upon me like prey.

"Remove your shirt," he commanded. "Now."

I did not wait, tugging the clothing from my back with clumsy, nervous hands. Discarding it upon the floor I felt somewhat self-conscious, a feeling I was not familiar with. Duncan was built like a man, thick and strong in every sense of the words. Etchings of muscles covered my body, but I was slimmer and shorter.

Duncan took his time, eyes drifting over my hardened nipples and taut stomach. Wherever his eyes dusted across, I felt them like a whisper of an unseen touch. He lifted a finger, running the coarse tip of it across the scar upon my chest. Twisted skin, left from the burn of Althea's touch as she had cauterised the stab wound Tarron had given me. I waited for him to say something, ask what had caused it. Shivers ran across my arms, the silence taut as I waited for his next command.

"If only I could taste you," Duncan groaned, touch becoming rough as he gripped the sides of my waist. "Delicious, irrefusable, Robin."

"You can..." My voice was small as I replied. I began rolling my hips, not caring for the ache in my knees or the moaning of the bed beneath us. All I cared for was the lump of flesh that I rode atop and the way it widened Duncan's eyes and quickened his breathing.

"Careful, Robin," he warned.

"Of what?" I asked, gasping as his hands tightened and he looked down to my hips with burning hunger.

Mouth parted, he watched in a strange trance as I rocked upon his cock, enjoying the feeling of it pressed beneath me, a reminder of the power I held.

Duncan snapped his stare to mine, low lip caught between his teeth. Then he spoke, replied with a single word that set my skin ablaze. "Me."

I was feather-light in his hold, ripped from my seat upon him and twisted with ease until my back was laid out across the bed. Duncan leaned over me, arms pinning me down from either side. There was no time to gasp before his mouth was back upon mine. Urgency fuelled the kiss.

My legs wrapped around his hips, and I pulled him down upon me. Nipping, biting, sucking at his lips and tongue to prove my own hunger for him. I was frantic, hands rushing up his bare, hard back. I

got to his hair, grasping a handful and pulling. He was mine.

Duncan removed a hand, balancing on one, as he fumbled with the belt upon his trousers. Silently I encouraged him, internally cheering as the belt smacked the ground and the thump of his trousers followed. By the time he broke away, bruised lips a faint blue, he was left with nothing but his cock standing proud between his legs. He was large, in every sense that mattered. In the glow of orange flame, shadows were cast across his scarred body. Muscles etched proudly, like mountains upon his skin. Dark hairs messy from the urgent spreading of my hands. And his cock. It looked at me as I looked at it. I wanted to reach for it, wrap my fingers around its warmth and pull him back to me. Instead, I studied him like a painter studied a landscape, memorising the curves, shapes and hardness of his body.

My mouth filled with moisture, cheeks prickling, hands damp; my mind raced to decide what I was going to do first.

Then he spoke, commanding the room as his own like the general he had work so hard to become. "Suck me," he demanded, hand grasping the base of his cock where he shook it with a tight fist. "Let me feel the mouth of a King and fill it entirely."

I did as he asked. There was no way I could have fit it all in, but I was not going to stop myself from trying. Duncan stood up as I pushed myself from the bed and lowered myself down onto my knees before him.

"Have you ever had a King kneel for you?" I asked, brushing my hands up his ankles towards the warmth of his inner thighs.

"Ask me when the sun rises, and I will answer with honesty."

Duncan undressed me, hands tugging off my trousers with urgency. The sooner I was without clothes, the quicker I would enjoy him.

As skin touched skin it felt like lightning. I felt alive.

Duncan stood watch above me. His hand worked in circles, up and down, the shaft held in his hand. I felt as though I was his sculpture, and he studied me for imperfections to smooth. I could not help but wonder what Duncan thought, watching me as he did.

I could have listed the parts of myself I hated. The parts I wished to keep hidden. The way the bones of my hips pushed out through skin, or the fact my chest seemed to never have the ability to grow hair of others my age.

I pushed myself towards him, reaching forward with needy hands. "May I?"

"Wait," Duncan said quickly, pulling his cock from my reach. "Until I give you the command, you wait like the good boy I know you can be."

A nervous laugh bubbled out of me. With Erix I had always felt in control, but now... This was different, thrilling and exciting in equal measures.

Duncan tore his gaze from me, looked downwards, and pursed lips as he spat upon himself. The line of spit dribbled until it graced the pink curve of his cock's end. With a thumb he caught it from dripping to the floor, rubbing it around the tip until it glistened in the candlelight.

He then reached forward, took my jaw in his hand and pulled me until my mouth was full.

"Hands to yourself," Duncan commanded as he begun to move, in and out, slow and gentle. "I want your mouth only."

Beside my desire to, I could not get the entire length inside. Duncan revelled in that fact. Tears streamed my cheeks, cleared by Duncan's thumbs, but I would try harder to accomplish that impossible task just to witness his reaction.

He moaned like an animal, head knocked back as I worked at him. The sounds he made

encouraged me, the hand at the back of my head guiding the rhythm of my kiss.

Before the ache in my jaw turned from song to scream, Duncan pulled me from him, picked me up from beneath my armpits until I practically dangled from the floor. Duncan did not care for the spittle around my mouth, coating my chin and cheeks, as our mouth crashed back together. I lost myself to him, allowing myself to be moved around as though I did not control my own limbs.

Soon enough the world was tilted, and I was laid back down on my back.

"You will never fail to surprise me with your talents," Duncan murmured, fingers leaving red lines in the skin of my legs as he dragged them upwards. "Do you know what restraint it has taken for me not to finish within your delightful mouth? Do you?"

I shook my head, gasping as his fingers tickled beneath my thighs. We held each other's gaze as he trailed his touch all the way to the sensitive part of my arse.

"There is it," he groaned, pressing the tip of his finger in ever so slightly, enough to make my body quiver.

I reached for his hand, desperation taking over. "Do it, please, do it."

Duncan smiled in response to my begging. "May I fuck you, King?"

*King*. Such a funny title. I hardly felt like a King, now even more so. On my back for a man who had sworn his life to hunt others like me. Oh how the tables had turned. No, the tables had been completed flipped over, smashing into lots of tiny pieces.

With one hand, Duncan ran circles around the sensitive heart of my arse. With the other, he lapped his tongue up his fingers, spitting upon them until they dripped.

"Yes," I breathed.

"I will give you a throne worthy of sitting upon." I closed my eyes as bliss overcame me. Duncan rubbed his wetness upon my sensitive entrance, the tip of his finger slipping inside of me as a promise for what was to come. "I will ride within you like a stead worthy of royalty."

Blinking through the haze, everything in the world disappeared until it was only us. I was so completely focused on Duncan that the shadows around us swallowed the room entirely.

"Do you want me, Robin?"

"I do," I moaned as his finger slipped further into me.

"You do?" he asked, voice prickling with intrigue.

"Fuck me, Duncan. Take me for yours and do as you will."

He released a long, laboured breath. "Oh, Robin, you will come to wish you never gave me permission. It is men like me who will ruin your life."

"Then shatter it," I replied, peeling back every layer or wall that I had built up around him. "Destroy it. Duncan. Ruin me... entirely."

And so he did, without pain or discomfort.

Duncan eased his length into me, a look of pure focus peppered across his brow. He watched himself slowly enter me, paying mind not to cause me pain, each breath allowing him to work further into me, shaft wet with his own excitement and spit.

Soon enough he built into a rhythm, each stroke sending bursts of pleasure up my spine. I closed my eyes, witnessing the explosions of colour that filled my mind. And my power... It crept out from me, cooling the sweat that laced my skin all without going too far. It held some restraint from breaking completely free and turning the world to ice.

This was divinity. Losing myself to a man whom, in return, lost himself to me.

We were at it for an age. Fucking. Dancing.

Duncan surprised me most when he lifted my foot to his mouth, tongue twisting around my toes,

sucking and nipping. At first the feeling stunned me, but soon I melted into it, enjoying every flick of his tongue and every graze of his teeth.

I never wanted it to end. But all good things stop eventually.

Duncan came to his end suddenly, moans building into a crescendo. I had finished moments before, hand assisting my climax. His fingers gripped into my leg as he cried out, lost in his relief. I watched him with pride, knowing I had done that. With all the power I held, everything I could do, this... this was what gave me a sense of satisfaction with myself.

He slowed his thrusting, panting and chest heaving.

When he opened his eyes to look at me, ringed with tiredness and hair sticky with sweat, he grinned. "You are magnificent, Robin."

I gulped as he pulled his cock from me, the phantom feeling of it still lingering within even moments after he had turned his broad back to me and began cleaning himself down with the discarded tunic I had taken off.

"The feeling is mutual," I replied, rolling onto my side and curling into myself. All I had done was lay myself down, presenting my body like food upon a platter of gold for Duncan to feast on, yet still I felt deeply exhausted. "That was not how I envisioned the evening going."

It was sobering. My mind was crystal clear as though I had not touched a drop of alcohol at all.

"I do hope that is not regret I hear in your voice?"

I looked up, concern pinching Duncan's brow into a scowl. "Not at all, merely surprise."

Duncan stepped towards the bed, cock still hard between his legs. "May I join you before my legs give out? Exerting so much... energy after my head injury has left me feeling like I am standing on a boat."

I patted the bed, chest warming at the idea of sharing such a small space with him.

We both lay, naked, facing each other. My back was pressed to the wall, the bed mostly taken up by Duncan's large, demanding build. He ran his fingers up and down my bare arm, tickling over the bumps that had spread across my skin.

"When the wine wares off, and we wake tomorrow, you may think differently of what has happened tonight."

"You are wrong," I told him, head as clear as summer skies, not an ounce of wine left to haunt me. Perhaps Duncan had fucked the drunkenness out of me. "But you might. When realisation of what I am, what you are, catches up to you. By morning you will remember."

Duncan pressed a kiss to my lips, gentle as snowflakes falling upon skin. He pulled back, eyes blinking. "It would seem it is *my* turn to tell you that you are wrong, Robin. Tomorrow we will wake, still in the attic of a church which has been defiled by our actions."

That spurred a small chuckle from me.

"Let us hope the Creator, Duwar and Altar have taken the night off and won't judge us for our sins."

No longer could I hear the congregation of chanting beneath us. I only hoped that Abbot Nathanial had retired, and that his ears didn't work well. I could hardly remember if we made a ruckus whilst we fucked and the idea of the old man hearing us turned my stomach in knots.

"What happens next?" I asked Duncan.

The question dangled between us on fine string, ready to snap at any given moment.

"I can't answer that, Robin," Duncan replied, allowing me to tuck a strand of dark hair away from his eyes. The scar across his face flickered as his jaw feathered with tension. "Not yet. But I promise, if you are willing, we will face what tomorrow brings together."

Together. A Hunter and a fey. A general and a King. A killer and a killer.

e grew complacent, days passing in a blur of laughter, sex and connection. Duncan and I made a world for ourselves, hidden away from our responsibilities within the church's walls. The attic became our haven. In that room we were nothing but two men, no past or future, only now.

There was no talk about what was to come when we left these walls. Or *when* that time would be. I didn't bring it up, nor did he. In truth, during the time when Nathanial left us to his duties, we would clamber upon one another, limbs twisted, and lips wet.

A flurry of snow had settled upon Ayvbury overnight, turning roofs white and hiding the roads beneath. We had watched from the window as fewer occupants joined for morning mass. With my hand pressed to the thin glass, I could sense just how cold it was outside. It had even invaded the room, affecting Duncan more than it did me. The chill felt like welcoming arms, wrapping around me and holding tight. Duncan did not feel the same, instead swearing through chattering teeth, the tip of his nose as red as his cheeks.

Abbot Nathanial had called for our help later that morning, promising that some good, honest labour would help warm Duncan from the inside out. Not that I needed it, but I was happy to help the old man.

Our task was simple. We moved through the church, collecting religious tomes and tidying the many items left from the morning service. For people who respected the Creator, they certainly didn't respect his place of worship. It did not bother Duncan as I believed it would. In such a short time, something had changed within him. His patience no longer waned. Even now he was captured in quiet conversation with Nathanial, helping the man as they discussed memories of his childhood. The tension that had been strung out between them no longer lingered, cut clean by time and old wounds healed.

"Strange happenings indeed," Nathanial chortled, patting Duncan upon the shoulder as he passed with tomes piled in his hands. "One will have to send word for soldiers to find the thief!"

"It could be the mice," Duncan replied. "Thirsty little beasts. And I hear they have a liking for old, over-stewed wine. A cat would be more effective than a soldier for that matter."

"Hmm. Mice you say? How odd. Those same mice must have left with you all those years ago and seem to return to my door the very same day as you. Do you play the pipe, Duncan Rackley? For they follow you, I am sure of it."

My cheeks warmed as Duncan winked across the pews at me. "What a mystery. I do hope you get to the bottom of it. Thieves or mice, the disappearing wine is a serious matter. Before long you will be without bottles."

All it would take was for Nathanial to saunter up into the attic to see the pile of green, brown and deep maroon empty bottles. But he didn't need to see them to know that we took them. Nor did he mind. It even seemed the old man enjoyed the banter, or perhaps it was just the smile across Duncan's lips that made the Abbot content.

"What do you say about the matter, Robin? Your silence is deafening."

I looked up, my own hands full of lose, torn scrolls that outlined the morning's service. "If it is mice, I am sure they are more than thankful. Nothing warms a belly better than wine."

Nathanial looked between Duncan and I, smile beaming. "Then we shall let them enjoy themselves until their tastes move onto stronger spirits."

The abbot slipped into the backroom of the church, clinking among stacks of books and cases of disappearing wine, his chortle still audible as he went about his business.

Duncan prowled over to me, arms straining against the dark, leather jacket the abbot had obtained from the market the day prior. "You know, if you feel tired, I can tell the old man to finish the task alone. There is a bed waiting for you upstairs which I am certain requires warming."

I rolled my eyes, fighting the grin by looking to the books in my hands. "I would be careful of how loud your mind is, Duncan. I wouldn't want the Creator punishing you for the dark thoughts you harbour."

"My thoughts will not be the reason he smites me down." He leaned down, pressing a kiss to my cheek that lingered for a moment longer than it should have. As he pulled back, he whispered, breath tickling my ear. "Are you going to make me wait? We could do it here. Quickly, before Nathanial hobbles back out."

I thumped the books into his arms, driving the wind from him. "You're a demon, Duncan. Have you ever been told that?"

"Many times," he replied, face twisted in both a scowl and a grin.

A shadow passed over Duncan's face. He looked up, focusing upon the large, stained-glass window behind me.

"That is one big bird," he said, brows furrowed.

It happened again. Another shadow, fast and large, cutting through the sky beyond the church. Then another. And another.

Then the screaming began, high pitched cries that clawed at my skin. I blinked, flashes of sharp teeth and blood-stained talons filling my mind.

"Duncan!" Abbot Nathanial shouted, bursting through the doors back into the room. "What is going on?"

Books clattered to the ground, spreading across the tiles in a pile of broken spines and bent pages. Duncan had dropped them, hand instinctively reaching for a sword that did not wait at his hip. "I want both of you to stay here and wait for me."

I did not need Duncan to investigate. I knew these clawing screams as well as I knew my own name. My hand shot out, gripping Duncan by the jacket with a fistful of leather.

"Gryvern," I said, breathless from horror.

Confusion deepened the scar down Duncan's face as he grimaced. "He has sent them for you, hasn't he?"

I swallowed, magic curling in my stomach. "It is the likely answer."

I had told him the story of my parents' death during one of our long nights. How Doran had plotted to end the line of the Icethorn Court to encourage war against the humans for the abduction of his wife

and child, using twisted creatures to slay them and putting the blame on the humans.

Duncan had explained in all his years within the ranks of Faithful he had never heard nor seen a Gryvern before. It just went to show how easily the fey were manipulated with false propaganda. The humans had never been to blame for the monsters.

Duncan took a hold of me by my arms, fingers holding on tight. "You are not going anywhere. Not with the Gryvern, nor whoever is sent next to retrieve you. We should have left days ago and been ahead of them. Fuck! This is my fault."

"Stop that," I spluttered, reaching for his face with a gentle touch. "Calm yourself. I have dealt with the creatures before and will not let them best me. Abbot." I turned my attention to the old man where he stood. There was something strong about his stance, legs apart and arms in fists at his side. I could imagine that he had faced horrors before just from the expression of readiness. "We need weapons."

"A man of God is never unprepared to face his foe," he replied, feet thundering as he moved with haste from the room.

The screams beyond the church no longer belonged solely to the creatures. Humans cried, in horror or pain I could not see from our haven. A horde of the beasts flew beyond the window, shapes no more than dark outlines that blotted out the light as they passed beyond. Glass shattered and wood snapped. But from all the sounds that scratched at my soul, it was those curdling screams of the humans that set fire to the anger within me.

"This needs to end," I said, flinching as something heavy crashed into the church wall. "Doran will not stop coming for me. His infatuation with my line has gone too far."

I was furious, sick to death of being chased by a man who had already taken so much. There was nothing else for him to hurt me with, nothing more for him to take.

"Then we end it. Together," Duncan replied as Abbot Nathanial burst back into the room.

Held in his shaking hands was a sheathed sword, bound in brown hide and a cream strip of material. Much like the weapon Duncan had left in the ruins of our party, it was broad and long, one that would require two hands to wield it.

"It has been many a year since the blade last saw light." Duncan took it from Nathanial, testing the weight of it in his hands. "But a blade is a blade, to do with it what you must—"

The window shattered, glass cutting skin as it rained down upon us. I whipped my head to the side, throwing a hand up to save myself from the slicing agony. It happened quickly, too fast to act. Wind pulled at my hair, drifts of snow falling within the broken wall of the church. Blocking the chaos outside was a Gryvern, shards of coloured glasses embedded into its paled, grotesque skin. A stench so vile, pungent like rotting flesh, wafted through the church with each beat of the creature's leathery wings.

Abbot Nathanial hung within its gasp, feet kicking at open air. His mouth was split open in a scream, but no noise came out beside a raspy breath, tears streaming down his terrified face. Scarlet blood dripped from the wounds upon his arms, the Gryvern's talons cutting deep, through flesh and muscle. I was certain I had heard a bone snap.

Duncan was screaming beside me, aged and blunt sword free from its sheath.

His cries were useless.

We watched, helpless, as the Gryvern tore Nathanial's limbs apart with ease. The sound of flesh ripping had this morning's food spilling out across the books and glass strewn over the ground. The wet smack of his body against tiles echoed, torn, bloodied arms following as the Gryvern discarded them. He was dead before his skull cracked against the ground, eyes wide, skin ashen.

All I saw was red, blood and anger joining as one. My ears thundered with the pounding of emotion as I studied the broken, ripped and shattered body of the abbot.

Duncan rushed forward, sword raised and shouting. The Gryvern lunged to greet him. Steel passed through skin until black gore rained down upon Duncan who slid beneath the attacking beast. Severed, the Gryvern crashed into the altar, cracking its warped bones against the marble. Candles fell, flames catching within an instant against the dry walls of the church. In seconds the flames demanded control. This was their place of worship, scorching fingers crawling as it spread itself hungrily across the skin of the Gryvern and the building around it.

"We need to go!" I shouted over the chaos, Gryvern circling through the air in response to my cry. I could see them past the shattered window, maws bloodied and talons full of human meat.

Duncan was hunched over the abbot's body, as still as a guarding statue. When he looked to me, skin sticky with Gryvern blood, his eyes burned red. He looked as much the monster as the creature he had slaughtered.

"I'll kill every fucking one of them," he seethed, spit flying through his mouth, expression softening only when he looked back to the body of the abbot at his feet. "No mercy. They all die."

"Together," I repeated the sentiment he had shared before hell was unleashed upon us. I could not look at Abbot Nathanial. I did everything in my power to look away; ignoring his broken, bloodied body was the only thing keeping me safe from the guilt.

Another death because of me.

Wasted life.

Duncan took the hand I offered, his fingers slicked with dark gore from the Gryvern. I had to urge him to his feet, coaxing him with a song of his name to look at me.

"I didn't get a chance to tell him I was sorry," Duncan said, voice a muted whisper.

"He knew," I said, still fighting the urge to look at the body as the fire continued to devour the church.

"I should have said it to him. I had the fucking chance!"

Duncan pulled back against my hand, but I held firm as a cracking filled my chest. "We will avenge him. That is your apology."

My words snapped some sense into Duncan who no longer pulled against me. He stood straight, face contorting with sadness.

We left the burning church as one, magic readied and sword raised. There was not a moment to look back as we ran out, not as the flames licked up the walls, ready to devour our haven we had claimed.

A stabbing pain shot through my chest as I realised that I had been wrong earlier. I had more to lose to Doran, something to fight for. Looking to Duncan, winds blowing his dark hair from his face as he roared like a warrior of old legends, sword raised to the sky in warning to the Gryvern, I knew what I was ready to fight for.

And this time, Doran would understand what failure felt like.

he streets of Ayvbury were stained scarlet. Dark blood splashed across the snow-covered ground as though the skies had bled over us. Gryvern circled the air, dropping human body parts as they finished gnawing on bones and flesh.

We left the church, unleashing a battle cry across the village, which did little to drown out the screaming of the humans still alive.

"Get into your homes!" Duncan shouted, blade raised proudly, gryvern blood running down across the hilt, covering his hands in a glove of black.

Red, red, red.

Even as I blinked it was all I saw.

Humans scattered, bodies running into the shadowed doorways of buildings. Taking advantage of the Gryverns' distraction, they did not waste a moment in following Duncan's command.

I stood, frigid winds whipping around me as magic pooled from my consciousness. Glancing up, I saw every pair of black-beady eyes pinned to me as though I shone like gold in a world of endless night. Then, as one, they shot toward me.

Duncan's cry disappeared, buried beneath the lashings of wild, frozen air that I conjured. It exploded outwards, a wall of unpassable force that raced up to greet the demons. It tore at the ground like unseen claws, catching debris, stone and snow. I felt them as the monsters collided with the barrier of wind and ice, no more than whispers of contact, like bugs crashing into glass as they tried to get to the sweet fruit on the other side.

I was the fruit and they wanted me. And all I could think about was getting them as far away from the humans as possible.

Duncan was beside me, eyes wide with wonder, dark hair tousled and swept back from his face, revealing every inch of his handsome splendour. And like the Gryvern, his entire attention was on me, pale lips slack with shock. He looked at me as though I was his God, blinking heavily to see if the image of me and my power would dissipate.

I revelled in his reaction. It alone urged the winds to push stronger, keeping the Gryvern at bay.

"I need to get them out of Ayvbury," I said. "They want me, and they will follow me out. You need to check on the harmed. Kill any Gryvern who straggle behind."

"No." His face pulled into sharp lines of disagreement. "We stick together. You can't take them alone."

I found my lips pinching upwards in a pout, brows raising as my eyes flicked between the wall of silver winds and the crackling of ice that turned my fingers blue. "I no longer underestimate myself. Don't underestimate me, Duncan."

His expression was hardened steel. I waited for him to refuse, but instead he held his blade firm and nodded. "I will follow after you."

"Are you ready?" I asked.

He looked back towards my barrier, eyes narrowed as he readied his stance. "Just come back to me, Robin."

I smirked, chest warming even as winter tore around us. "It will take more than this to keep us apart. I need you, remember that, Hunter. How else do I get my audience with The Hand?"

Duncan smirked and with that I pushed out with my power, sending that barrier racing outwards.

We both moved, Duncan into the village, and me towards the path that led outwards.

My legs rushed forward, boots smacking across the ground, arms pumping at my sides, my entire focus on the stretch of ground beyond the village's outer homes. Inhuman screeches followed me, the flapping of wings, the monstrous howls as they shadowed me. There was no opportunity to look back, but I only hoped that they all followed and left the remaining villagers alone.

The Gryvern caught up with me quickly, bodies slick as they cut through the sky, wings more forceful than my mundane limbs. I turned, throwing my hands up to touch the creature that reached me first. My goal was not to remove myself from its line of attack, but to greet it. Power pooled around my hands, crackling and frozen. As soon as my fingers gripped the mangled, bone-thin limbs of the creature's arm the paled skin hardened to ice. All it took was a touch. A thought.

I threw myself sideways, watching the blue-tinged glint of my ice as it completely devoured the flying creature. Before it hit the ground there was not an ounce of soft flesh left. The Gryvern cracked on impact, body exploding in splinters of frozen blood, flesh and bone.

I had not a moment to marvel at the destruction I had caused before the next Gryvern was on me. But at the back of my mind, I felt satisfied knowing I had taken one down alone, killed yet another one of Doran's puppets, all without releasing the full storm within me.

I ran onwards, putting as much distance between Ayvbury and I.

I got a few steps before more reaching talons clawed at my back. Skidding to a stop, I turned to face the horde. Gryvern clambered over one another as they flew towards me, fighting each other as though they were starved, fighting for the last piece of meat to fill their bellies.

I greeted them with a smile, breath coming out in misty clouds. "Come and get me."

Then I threw my hands skyward. It was easier controlling my power with a physical movement, like a horse being controlled by reins, I held onto my control with a firm grip.

Blades of jagged, mountainous ice speared up from the frozen ground. The earth split as the knifeedged talons reached for the Gryvern who flew above. They had no time to act, not as I impaled them like pigs over a fire, others crashing into the ice without a chance to move out of the way. Many died in a split second, blood hissing as it dribbled down the spikes of ice. Others were, trying to break free to no avail, wings ripped, bodies impaled.

So, you feel pain. The thought was dark and terrible. Suffer.

The horde was more than halved now, the remaining beasts forced to change course to careen around the death between us.

I didn't want to look away from the scene. It was glorious to watch. Each Gryvern flew with the face of Doran, as twisted and hideous as the fey King's soul. And seeing them captured in death was a beautiful thing. If only Doran was here to witness it. Unlike Erix, I would not let a single one return to him. Their absence would tell Doran what I needed him to know.

That he failed.

I picked the Gryvern off one by one, toying with them as I ran, then stopped as I unleashed a

frozen horror upon them. I left a trail of bodies in my wake, providing me a clear path back to the village without the need for a map or compass.

Each one I killed I did it for Abbot Nathanial. For the humans whom I did not know, the ones the Gryvern had slaughtered in search for me. This was for them.

And more than anything, it was for me.

There was no requirement for a weapon made of metal, for I was one created from flesh. I released the full extent of my magic, sharpening flakes of snow to tear at leathered skin and turning any Gryvern foolish enough to reach for me to glass. I fought hard, delirious with power, that I hardly noticed when their advances stopped.

Blinking, I looked before me to see nothing but empty skies. Unlike Ayvbury's red stained streets, the ground here was stained black, the smell of death pungent in the winds that coiled around me. Gryvern littered the space, limbs not even twitching as a fresh layering of snow fell upon their stiffening bodies like a blanket.

I called the magic back, willing its return into every corner of my being. The world seemed to calm before me, whereas the thumping of tension in my head persisted, the feeling melting from one of pleasure to discomfort after using so much magic.

Blinking, I saw the devastation before me from a different view, one no longer fuelled by power and fury. I looked to my hands, clean of blood and evidence of the horror I had caused; then I looked back to the bodies which caused a clawing of dread to slice through me.

I caught movement out the corner of my eye, a Gryvern splayed out across the ground, body covered in cuts and gashes that spilled blood in a pool beneath it. One of its wings was ripped from its back, lying at an angle to its side. Its chest heaved with rasping breaths, blood splashing from the creature's mouth. I stepped up to it, the tip of my boots an inch away. Those wide, endless eyes flicked towards me as the creature weakly snapped its jaws in my direction. Unlike the others this creature seemed bigger.

Despite the many I had battled against, I had not had the opportunity to study one up close in a long while, and there was something glaringly different to this Gryvern than the one Althea had skewered to the chamber room door back in Aurelia all those weeks ago. It was its ears. Much like my own they ended in pointed tips, not the round, human-like curves I had seen on the others. My mind raced, flicking through memories for some hint that I had noticed such a thing before. No memory aided me.

I left the dying Gryvern, moving between the bodies as I searched for a reason to believe myself crazy. But my exploration only caused the dread to tighten in my gut. Many of the dead Gryvern had the pointed ear tips, much like myself and the fey King who had sent them, but others had the curved edges of a human. I knew little of the pack-driven creatures beside their want for fey blood and the truth of Doran's control over them.

But I had believed their origins to be linked to the humans in some way.

I was wrong.



With the back of my blood-stained hand, I cleared clumps of ash as they clung hatefully to my eyelashes. At first it had disgusted me, knowing that each flake of ash was caused by the burning of flesh as a great fire devoured the bodies of the Gryvern beyond the village. But the thought alone was not as horrific as the smell. It clawed at the back of my throat, stung my eyes and twisted my gut into knots.

Ayvbury was silent for the most part, all but the sudden wails of humans as they uncovered their loved ones beneath the mounds of snow and ash. It set me on edge.

"There is nothing more to be done here," Duncan said, voice full of emotion as he studied the hell before us. "It has been made clear enough that our help is no longer required. We should leave before their grief sharpens and turns its focus on us."

Duncan was right. I had felt the human's disdain towards us the moment I had run back to find him, hateful, burning looks of those who studied us as I fought for some control over the dismay that had occurred. And I couldn't blame them. My presence had brought this to their homes. There was nothing I could have done or said to return life to the bodies that they mourned over. Homes destroyed. Streets littered with dark stains of blood.

"How far is Lockinge?" I asked.

"By horse," Duncan replied quietly, fussing over the bloodied blade he still clung to, "two days. By foot, close to a week. Taking a horse from them would not go unnoticed—"

"I will not give them another reason to hate me. Stealing their livestock is not an option, Duncan. We go by foot if that is the case."

I couldn't do it, couldn't take something from these people that didn't belong to me, after I had been the cause of so much loss already. Part of me wanted to beg for them to understand, to sympathise with what I had lost, turn their hate towards the enemy beyond the Wychwood border, to Doran. But this was not the time.

"This is not your doing, Robin. These people may not see it now, but one day they will."

I huffed a chuckle, one that caused my chest discomfort. "Such wise words wasted. We should have left days ago when we had the chance. Instead, I chose to give into this stupid little story that has done nothing but distract me from *my* goal."

Duncan inhaled sharply, breathing through his clenched teeth as though my words had stabbed him in the chest. I would have felt the pang of guilt, if the feeling was not already consuming me. He was quiet for a moment, watching the humans intently who regarded us with just as much fear as the Gryvern who had attacked them.

When he finally spoke, it was with a tone I had not heard from him in days; short and sharp, like any useful knife, he replied, "There is a long journey ahead, Robin, far too long to wallow in self-pity."

With that he turned on his heel, pacing back towards the church.

I bit down on my lip, holding back the urge to apologise for my brashness. Then, looking back at the scene of destruction, I lost all ability to worry about Duncan and his feelings. I punished myself by glancing at every human I could see, studying their faces, remembering them. To imprint them each in my mind so when the time came to killing Doran it was for them as much as me. It was the least I could do.

ays seemed longer when they were consumed with silence.

Duncan worked hard to keep a gruelling pace as we travelled through Durmain's landscape. I could not speak on behalf of his body, but my feet were numb, my limbs aching to the point of feeling as though they had given up on me. Not once did he slow. Even if I picked up my pace, gritting teeth against the discomfort, he always stayed ahead.

Nights were the worst. We were curled into balls with nothing but the jackets upon our backs for warmth and he didn't speak. I desired to say something to him, to spark a conversation just for the chance to hear his voice; the thought of it was all-consuming. But as time went on, it made it more difficult to know what to say.

Duncan was stubborn, which only pulled the string of tension between us tauter. I could recognise that we also shared that in common. Father had once referred to me as mule; thinking back on it I had the urge to smile. His nickname at the time was a way of mocking my childish, stubborn abilities; now the memory warmed my chest. *Stubborn as a mule*, he would say through fits of laughter. I wished I laughed alongside him. I would have given anything to hear him say it again.

Thus far, the weather had stayed mild; clear skies, but the chill of winter was persistent. Although the cold it did not bother me, I watched it causing Duncan discomfort. A if the crisp winds chipped away at him slowly.

We had stayed clear of any villages or towns we had come close to. With the threat of more Gryvern, or Erix, it was best we did not bring them to the doors of humans who were unknowing and undeserving. Which meant food was limited from the little that Duncan had brought with him in the pack draped across his back.

Even when he had offered me something to eat or drink, it had been without words, just an extended hand, held out long enough for me to silently take his offering. In hindsight they were perfect opportunities for me to say something to him.

To thank him at least.

I kept quiet and so did he.

The third day had been particularly full of persistent walking. Most of the terrain had been through woodland, rarely opening up to a rolling hillside that looked over Lockinge miles away. The previous two nights of short, broken sleep had at least been under the comfort of trees which gave some protection from the weather.

As night fell upon us it was clear our luck had run out. I had been kept awake, from both the howling winds that tore over the exposed landscape and the rasping breaths that came from Duncan who was buried beneath his jacket in hopes for some protection. I felt his physical discomfort to the

exposed elements as my own internal uneasiness that had haunted me through the long days.

I crawled across the frost-claimed grassland and placed myself neatly behind Duncan. He was far taller than me, but I nestled my crotch into his behind and wrapped my arms around his side. Even through his leather jacket and thick tunic I could feel the violent shivers that overcame him.

He stirred. It was a wonder how he even slept in such conditions without magic riling through his body.

His deep voice broke the night and shattered me into countless pieces. "Finally."

I held onto him tighter, fingers gripping into his chest as I clung to him as though the winds would simply tear him away from me. "You are so cold."

"I have never f-felt better," Duncan rasped, teeth chattering. His own hands, cold as ice, laced within my fingers and held me close. "Don't you dare l-let me go, Robin."

Pressing my face into his back, my smile tugged at his leather jacket, relief warming my insides

"Tell me... You do not see me with the same hate those in Ayvbury did, right?" I questioned, having convinced myself that was why Duncan had not spoken to me for this long.

He groaned, pulling himself free of my hold as he rolled over to face me. Even in the dark I could see his features. Deep, forest-green eyes. Scarred, handsome face. I laid my arm over him as he snuggled so close to me that his nose was inches from mine.

"Is that what this has all been about? Your distance. Your attempts of pushing me away? Something you need to learn about me, Robin, and fast, is that only I can decide what lingers in my mind. And hate for you is not a possibility."

It was at that moment when I realised that Duncan had believed I had been ignoring him. Instead of facing the tension, we had let it consume our minds and fill them with negative thoughts about one another.

"But you should hate me. You *have* hated me. I represent the very people who took everything from you, just as I had been the cause of destruction in Ayvbury. Why look at me any differently now?"

Our noses touched as he leaned into me, sleep narrowing his eyes into slits. "I see you. Not how you see yourself in the reflection of those who do not know you. You are gentle. You are concerned. In all my years I have never come across a person able to shift my mind and beliefs, but here I lay in the arms of a fey. Your arms. Robin, you are no more a monster than those who you believe label you as such. Remember that."

I lowered my gaze, shocked by the fingers that found my chin to hold it in place as I tried to break eye contact.

"Do not look away from me, Robin. See the truth in my eyes. Go on, I dare you to look beyond what you think people see and what they actually see. What I see."

My entire soul quivered beneath his touch. A touch I had fought hard to stop thinking about these past few days.

"Can you do that for me?" Duncan said, holding my chin in place. "Tell me what bothers you? What fills that mind and punishes you? Let us face your inner demons together. You may fear them, so allow me to be fearless for you."

I paused, the intake of breath shuddering as I readied myself to reveal my truth. And slowly I let it out, one terrifying word at a time; it didn't hurt as much as I believed it would. "When I am with you, I feel close to them," I said, voice buried beneath the winter winds that raced across us.

"Who?"

"My father and mother. There is so much of their story I do not know nor will have the chance to

ever understand. But he, like you, fell for someone they had been taught to hunt and hate. You both changed your way of thinking. Being with you makes me feel as though I understand them more than I would have if my father had the chance to explain it to me more."

"You think I have fallen for you?" Duncan asked, making my cheeks burn red. His forefinger and thumb still gripped my chin, touch gentle and caressing.

"By the sounds of it I do not wish to know the answer to that question," I retorted, wanting nothing more than to change the subject for fear of hearing how wrong I was.

I was in the midst of punishing myself internally when Duncan leaned in. He pressed a kiss upon my lips, and I melted instantly. They were dry and chapped, but the connection was nothing more than pleasurable. I closed my eyes, enjoying every second of his touch. His fingers let go of my chin and instead cupped my cheek as he held me close.

When he finally pulled back, I could have cried out in frustration.

"If I admit that I am falling for you, then I almost accept that the ground I am to meet will be terrible and unforgiving. But yes, Robin Icethorn, I have fallen. For you. All of you, despite the inner voice that screams in protest. I know better now than to ignore it for you are far superior to anyone I could have ever imagined."

My stomach jolted at his revelation.

Duncan's gaze darted across my face, eyes searching my reaction with keen interest.

"Say something Robin," he begged, fingers tracing my cold cheek. "Anything..."

I could not fight the smile that tugged at my cheeks, or how my chest warmed as his words still spun through my mind like an unrelating hurricane. "And what is it you wish for me to say?"

"Well." Duncan traced his thumb down my face until his touch ran across my lip. "If there was any time to tell me how you felt then there would be no better opportunity. Are you afraid to bare yourself to me, Robin? There is no one listening. Just me. And you."

"It is not that I fear what I have to tell you, but what will certainly happen afterwards. Are you too blind to see what happens to those I care for? Think harder as you will then understand why I keep my thoughts to myself. I do not wish to see another person I care for used as a weapon against me."

Duncan laid there, fingers still upon my face as I spoke, brows raised above his dark, all-seeing gaze; he hardly blinked for fear of missing the way my face changed during my confession. "You do care for me?"

"Nothing gets past you, does it?" I said softly.

"Not a detail. Robin, stop fearing what could be, and enjoy what is. Doran, Erix, they are simply names you can forget in time. I am not as expendable as you may be used to. I will never allow myself to be used to cause you harm or pain."

"You say that now." I doubted Erix would have ever believed he could be used against me. I certainly never saw it as a possibility, until his hands took the life of my father, controlled by the bidding of a crazed man. "Time will tell what will become of you and me. We are both equally foolish to keep pretending that our... whatever this is, will carry on when we reach Lockinge. Even Father had the chance to tell me how terrible it is for a Hunter and a fey to fall for one another. He gave up his life, his appearance, who he was just for the chance of being with my mother. And look where they both ended up."

I shivered—and not from the cold—from the honest and scary fact that our feelings were nothing but trouble. This would never last.

It was Duncan's turn to be lost for words. He let go of my face, hands falling beside him. I laid still as he turned onto his back, staring up at the dark skies. I was ready to hear him agree with me, to

tell me that I was right and this stupid, childish relationship we had found ourselves entangled within would have to stop before it ended in death.

But he didn't.

Instead, Duncan did what he did best and surprised me with what he had to say. "I never had anything to lose. No family. No friends beyond the ones I had used to get the position I am in today. Then in days, all that changed. I cannot speak for how you feel or how you wish to guard yourself from the world. I know, with every ounce of my being, that I would do anything not to risk losing the one thing of importance to me." Duncan turned his head, dark hair falling across his cheeks but not enough to obscure the glimmer of tears in his eyes. "If you tell me you want this to end, then it ends. Here and now. No matter how it will hurt, I will do it for you. But if you are brave and wish to face the risk ahead by my side, then I will do it too."

I couldn't deny him, nor myself; even if my mind told me to refuse him, my heart demanded the opposite. "Do we have a plan then?" I asked, voice meek.

Duncan exhaled through a smile, tongue tampering with his lower lip as he rolled back over to face me. "We?"

I nodded slightly, wanting nothing more than to take him right here, right now, with the winter frost sprinkling over us. "A wise man once told me that having someone to fight beside is as great as having something to fight for. You are that someone. So, about that plan?"

Duncan's lips crashed into mine, his cold touch frantic and desperate. He rolled me onto my back, strong arm holding himself up above me. "We have time for that. For now, I want you."

I giggled, hardly caring for how exposed we were, or the clear discomfort the cold had put upon Duncan. "Now?"

"Let the stars watch. I will give them a show, one they have never seen before."

He dipped back down, body brushing my own as he kissed me deeply, my mouth spread open by his tongue, his hands rubbing up my sides, tugging my jacket upwards.

I found my own hands moving without command, gripping long, dark strands of hair, fingers buried through them. My legs wrapped around his waist as he bore down on me, pressing me into the damp earth we rested upon. Breaking away, I gasped for breath with tender and wet lips.

Duncan pressed his forehead to mine, equally flustered and breathless. "Roll onto your front." Duncan's voice was full of command; he could have controlled the stars themselves.

I did as he asked, welcoming the return of his monstrous power which I had craved since our last encounter back at the church. His expression was smooth as he watched me turn over. When our gaze finally broke apart, I felt a fiery thrill course through me. With my cheek pressed to the crisp, grassland beneath me I could not see him, only *feel* him. "Is this what you do? Pour your heart out and then fuck?" I asked, voice muffled by the ground.

Duncan's greedy hands ran up my legs, gripping into my skin through my trousers as he reached my arse. "I fucked those who meant nothing to me. You deserve far more than that. I will worship you with every inch of me. Devour you entirely. But first you must tell me, Robin... do you want me?"

I raised my arse upwards, pressing it into his crotch, his hard cock greeting me instantly upon contact.

"I will take that as a yes."

I writhed beneath him, rubbing myself across the hard length restrained within his trousers. It dragged a tempered groan from him, one that gave me nothing but pleasure. There was an enjoyment to be had, knowing the reaction I could conjure in him.

Duncan took me with nothing but the night for cover. Tearing my trousers off, his cold fingers

shocked my bare skin as they brushed across it. His actions spoke of his hunger for me, the way one hand pressed down on the back of my head, whilst the other hand wet the sensitive part of me with spit laced across his fingers.

"Speak to me," Duncan moaned as the tip of his finger pressed deep within me. "I want to hear you."

I opened my mouth and my own groan of pleasure spilled into the quiet night, the prolonged sound joining the winds that danced around us. "Wha-what is it you wish to hear?"

At once his finger pushed deeper. He leaned into me, teeth grazing my ear as he replied, "There would be no fun in telling you what I wish to hear."

Another finger joined the first, slick with his spit. There was the unmistakeable pop of buttons as Duncan worked his cock free. He was excited, rushed and quick-handed as though he did not want the moment to end before it truly begun.

"I-I want to feel you entirely."

A warmth spread up my spine as the wet, soft head of his cock replaced his fingers all within a sudden moment. He held himself, with wonderous restraint, hard cock on the verge of entering me. "You wish for me to devour you? Here and now."

"Yes," I moaned, pushing my arse back upon him with desperation.

"Do you lack manners, Robin?" His hand gripped my shoulder and squeezed, the feeling of his hold a thrill of lightning through my body. "Beg me."

And beg I did. My mouth dripped with lust and want, cheeks prickling with excitement at the thought of pleasing him; for when Duncan become this version of himself, I wished nothing but to please him. "Give me all of you, Duncan." The stars were a witness to my shouts. There was nothing but empty rolling hills and endless landscape around us. I took full advantage of our lack of surroundings and opened myself up to the primal desire that made me want to scream to the heavens for the man who mounted me.

Duncan entered me with a slow, gentle stroke of his cock. The sound he made as he pushed every inch of himself inside could have torn the ground in two. "Robin," he groaned, pushing my lower back downwards. "You are divinity. Pure, honest, bliss."

It was the last thing he spoke to me, for we let our bodies converse without use of words.

Duncan fucked me, thrusting with surprising, sudden changes of his movements. For the most part I simply lost myself to the feeling, until I felt him wane with energy and I took over, throwing myself back upon his length until my arse clapped into the leathers of his folded down breeches.

It was a miracle the entirety of Durmain's realm did not hear us.

"I do not want this to end," Duncan called, hands gripping my hips as he worked within me. Faster. Harder.

The pitch of his deep voice told me he was close. And that power it made me feel had me working harder for him. I had not once felt the need to pleasure myself as he fucked me. It had not even crossed my mind for it was too occupied with riding the storm of pleasure and indulgence his sex gave me.

Duncan finished, climaxing with gripping hands and laboured breaths. The moment was so sudden. He rode within me, his pace slowing as his guttural cry of pleasure filled the night sky. When he was done, I could have sworn I felt his legs shake.

I slumped to the ground, my own brow drenched with beads of sweat, no matter the frozen chill of the world around us. Here, in his place, we had carved our own world and I was not ready to leave it. Duncan fell beside me, eyes closed and hands blindly fumbling to pull his trousers over the throbbing shaft lying across his lower stomach. He finally tucked it away, the imprint still more than a memory in my mind.

"Better?" I asked, rolling on my side. Duncan's tired eyes studied the indent the grass left upon the side of my face.

Duncan nodded, mouth agape as he still gasped for breath. "Better does not even cut it. I do not believe there is a word available to use to describe how I feel right now."

He raised an arm, welcoming me to snuggle into the crook of him. I too lifted my trousers, hardly caring for the dampness that still coated my skin from his sex.

Effortlessly, he ran his fingers up and down my arm all without opening his eyes. "Forgive me, Robin, but I must do what a terrible shag does best and give into this tiredness."

I laughed, the sound so terribly loud, even compared to the ruckus we had both just created. "It is a well-deserved rest and far from terrible shag."

"I feel as though my work is not done. A man would not sleep until he saw his partner satisfied."

"Duncan," I breathed, nestling into his body and inhaling deeply. "With you beside me there is no need to discuss satisfaction. Just hold me tonight and do not let me go. That is enough."

He turned his face, pressing a kiss into my hairline. Duncan pulled back slightly, whispering for only me to hear, his words far too precious for the star-filled night to witness. "My love, you are my weakness. I could not possibly ever let you go. I am many things, but a fool is not one of them. Not when it comes to you."

Everything about what he told me was melodic to my ears. But the one word that stood out amongst the rest could have shattered my reality entirely. It was frightening, giving into the giddy and wonderous feeling that overcame me in that moment, yet there was no stopping the current as it swept me from my feet.

Love.

And never seen so many Hunters. There was a sea of them, a stain of leather-clad bodies passing across Durmain's landscape. They snaked in an organised path, one smudge of darkness which paraded along the ground towards the glint of a city in the distance.

The ledge in which we had made camp upon jutting over the landscape, gave a perfect view for miles upon miles. Duncan had promised we were close to Lockinge as we had stopped here the night prior. In the belly of darkness, it was impossible to see anything for proof.

Now, in the fringes of dawn when the sky was blushed with pinks and deep orange tones, I could see it, a faint, smudge of grey among the notoriously flat landscape. Lockinge. Capital of Durmain. A place I had never been allowed to venture even remotely close to as per my father's warnings. Of course, back then, I had not understood why he had wished to keep me from this place. Now knowing what I did, it made perfect sense. Lockinge was not a safe place, not with The Hand's grip upon it, not for the likes of me.

Shrouded in thinning woodland, Duncan had felt it was the perfect place to sleep, until the heavy thumping sounded, waking us up to the horror of the army that moved in the distance. And that was what they were, an army of countless bodies marching across the ground below with only the heavy pounding of their feet to warn us that they were close.

It was impossible to shake the exhaustion that had made a home in my bones from the days of travel and lack of food. I had not seen my reflection in days, but if Duncan's shadowed eyes and heavy features were anything to go by, I looked as terrible as I felt.

"Is this normal?" I asked, cautious to whisper even though we were leagues from any Hunter to hear us.

Duncan pursed his lips, eyes scanning the snaking shadow of Hunters as he too tried to make sense of what we were seeing. "The Faithful are in an abundance around Lockinge, but never have so many been seen close to the capital at the same time. It is as though they have been called back for reasons unknown. Previous commands from those above me have been to ensure my legion is spread. The further we are from one another the higher the chance of taking the bounty we need. But this... I can't explain it."

It set me at unease, seeing so many who would wish me harm; and peppered among the large army were cages. I couldn't count them on both hands how many I could see; each one stuffed full of figures. *Fey*. Being carted towards their final destination. They did not scream, nor fight, because there was no need. Those locked within the cages had given up; even from our distance I could feel it.

"And you still think you can get what you need from them?"

We had drafted a plan, one that required thievery. I was truly confident it would have worked but

seeing the numbers below had stabbed doubt within me.

"Regardless, it is our only option. If we are to enter Lockinge together, it is with you at the end of an iron chain. Without it you will be cut down before stepping foot through the city's outer suburbs. Birkhill is known for being the Faithful's final checkpoint. The busier the town is, the less I will be noticed."

The idea of Duncan separating from me was not my first choice, but it certainly was the only option. We had planned for him to visit Birkhill, a town shadowed beneath the city. He would retrieve an iron cuff and return, alongside a horse if he could take one. It would give us entry to Lockinge without stirring much interest, and the iron cuff would certainly play into the story we had put together as to what had happened after the attack on our party all those days ago.

"There must be another way," I pleaded, already knowing the answer as well as the lines upon my palms.

Duncan raised a finger and pointed to the dark shapes that flew over the army. "Those hawks mean that trackers are among the numbers. If you are seen by those before we get a cuff back around your neck, you will draw the attention of that entire army. I know their kind. Kayne, someone I feel as though I am as close to trusting as any other, is one. They grow complacent that fey will not be roaming free this close to Lockinge, but one wrong step will ruin everything. Capturing their attention unprepared will not be wise."

Kayne. He was the red-haired man I had seen back in Finstock speaking to Duncan. I remembered the hawk, perched across his broad shoulder, and now put everything together about the creature's purpose.

"Could he be down there now? Kayne?" I asked.

"I would hope so. If something goes wrong tonight, then he would assist. I do not doubt his loyalty to me as a brother, more than a fellow Faithful. But even he cannot know about you. About us. Even brothers turn on each other when they go against a shared belief. I am not ready to test our friendship, not under these circumstances. If I am recognised, I am merely a lucky fucker who survived the attack on the party." He gestured to his unkempt appearance. "I certainly look the part."

"In and out," I echoed something he had said to me the night prior.

"Indeed," he replied, the sultry smile returning to his face. "And am I not an expert of that already? Trust in me, Robin. I go at dusk and will be back before the sun reveals itself tomorrow."

"And if not?" I asked, the words no more than a whisper.

Duncan placed his hand upon my cheek, letting me melt into his touch. We cared little for the dirt and grime that had caked our bodies from the lack of washing. "If I am not to return, then I forbid you to come looking for me. Turn back. Return home. I cannot guarantee your safety and would not wish for you to risk going to Lockinge alone."

"So I am expected to sit here and wait for you like a good little pup? I still think you are a fool to not let me come and help. I have the skills."

"And walk you into a town full of Faithful who do not see you as a King, but as a blood bag ready for draining? No. Put your trust in me. And if I am the one to fail, then you turn away. Understand?"

It took a moment to reply, and I couldn't do it with words. Instead, I nodded, hating how difficult it was to lie to him.

"No more talk of this, okay?" Duncan said, placing a kiss between my brows. "We should rest whilst we can. Both of us can't afford to expend any unnecessary energy whilst being this close to Lockinge."

Duncan was right. We did need to rest. But I wanted nothing more than to rain down my power

across the army beneath us. Watching those cages being carted towards the city did not sit right with me. It turned my stomach into knots, discomfort repeatedly stabbing into my chest.

For all we had planned, nothing prepared me for when we'd finally enter Lockinge. Duncan would return to his act of general and me as a captured fey. Then what? We relied on his title, and mine, to get us through the doors. Duncan was still confident my presence as King of a fey Court would be enough to get The Hand's attention.

That did little to keep my anxieties at bay. What if he refused my request? Or worse, what if I no longer required it? Time between my father's death and everything that had occurred before had not changed what I desired, but how I obtained it.

However, I was not stupid enough to know my options were still limited.

I missed Althea and Gyah. More times than I cared to count I would lose myself to wondering what ifs and maybes. What if I had returned to Wychwood with them? Then I remembered what waited for me beyond the border.

Nothing.

An empty, abandoned Court. No family. No Erix.

Just cold, endless, nothingness.

At least here, with Duncan, there was warmth. His body close to mine, his promise ringing loud and true in my head.

Out of all the days, this was by far the quickest to pass. All we could do was watch as the seemingly endless army finally moved on until it was nothing but a dot on the horizon. We did so in silence. No matter how I willed for the day to slow, for Duncan's hold on me to carry on without any need to stop, dusk finally came and with it his departure.

"Until dawn, then you forget me and return home."

Home. What a strange concept. It was a word I felt had no meaning to me anymore.

I gripped a hold of his cold, calloused hands and squeezed. "Promise me. Do not leave me until you promise you will come back."

"I will if you also promise not to come looking for me if I do not return."

He caught me there, lip tugging up at its side as I kept quiet.

I looked up at him through my dark lashes. "I can't help but feel as though this is a goodbye."

Duncan leaned forward, pressing his brow to mine. "It is merely a see you soon, Robin."

My hands felt strange as he let go of them. They seemed to hover in the space they had been as he turned away, straightening his jacket as he faced the dark path still visible through the tree line before us.

I waited, wrapped in the chill from the dropping evening temperature as Duncan took his first steps away from me. Just as he was to be engulfed in shadows Duncan paused, looking back at me with eyes glinting and lips upturned. "I have not even left and already long to return to you, Robin."

I exhaled all the tension that had built within my chest. Smiling back at him, I clung to the hope that this plan would work, stealing his confidence. "Then get on with it and hurry back to me. Who knows, perhaps my bed will not be cold tonight after all."

Twoke abruptly to the thud of feet upon the ground. The sound tore me from my light slumber from a dreamless state that unnerved me more than one filled with night terrors. Sitting up, mind heavy and body grasped in panic, I combed the dark woods for what could have caused it. That was when I felt intense eyes upon me, a trail of discomforting prickles spreading across my face.

A figure peeled itself away from the dark outline of trees ahead of me. I scorned myself for falling asleep in the first place.

"Duncan?" I called, ice already spreading beneath my palms across the moss-covered floor.

"In such a short period of time you already have another man's name filling your mouth," the figure replied, voice gruff as though he spoke through blunt knives embedded within his throat. "What has he got that I cannot give you, little bird?"

Before the figure stepped into the faded, silver moonlight, I threw my hands forward, commanding the ice to follow. It crackled, a wave of deep, ominous blue as it tore across the ground toward him.

Toward Erix.

He did the impossible, pouncing into the air as though he weighed no more than a feather. Two, strange-shaped limbs exploded from either side of him, keeping him afloat for a moment, before gently falling back to the ground on light toes.

"Can we not just talk?"

My magic retracted as my mind made sense of what I saw. Perhaps this was a bad dream, the impossible blend of reality and fiction.

"Step into the light," I said to him, slowly pushing myself to standing for a better stance. "Let me see you."

"No," he snapped, voice sounding as though three people spoke at once. Erix took a breath, those strange limbs flexing back down to his sides as they folded in on him. "I desire to know something first."

"You are in no position to be asking questions. Last time you came for me you were lucky I left you breathing. You are a fucking fool to think tonight will end the same. I warned you, Erix."

I looked to the outline of Erix's hands as he flexed them at his side. His fingers seemed longer. Sharper. I blinked, wishing the vision was wrong.

"Do you remember when you told me of your fears? How is it you can stay alone, in the dark, with your Hunter so far away? There would have been a time when you could not have slept without a candle being lit by your side. Now look at you."

A chill of wind danced between my hands, tugging my dark hair away from my face and wrapping around me protectively; magic spilled from my skin. "I have learned that monsters are not unique to

dark places, but all places. Why would I fear the dark when what is revealed in the light is far more frightening?"

"Is that so?"

"Step into the light and let me prove it." I had to see him, to know what caused his body's outline to be different, his voice to sharpen and mutate. Whatever stood in the shadows before me was not Erix, at least not the one I had known.

"I am in need of something from you."

"No," I shouted. "Your needs are not important anymore. Everything you do is for Doran. I will be the first to remind you of that."

"Listen to me, little bird," he snapped, a guttural growl of frustration building within him.

"My name is Robin!" I stormed across the ground, closing the space between us as my cold winds spread its freezing embrace around me. A prickle of tears stung my eyes, from both sadness and desperation. "Even that name shouldn't dare cross your lips after what you have done to me."

His response stopped me dead in my tracks. "I know." Erix raised his hands before him. "*Please*, just wait." His pleading seemed forced, but not false, as though it hurt him to say the word, but he desired to say it no matter how hard it was to physically get out of him.

I was steps away from seeing the truth that hid in the shadows. This close I could see torn bits of material flapping as my cold winds reached him. Whatever Erix wore was ripped, hanging of his frame in tatters.

"Who do I speak with?" I asked, breathing laboured. "Do you feel Doran's control now? Go on, tell me what he wants you to do with me."

"I feel nothing but agony," Erix replied, voice tortured with sadness. "Yes, I can sense my father, but his voice is quieter than it had been before. A whisper that is easier to ignore at most times. These moments do not last long so please, I beg that you hear me out before you do what it is you require."

I shouldn't believe him. Now was the time to act and deal with Erix as I had promised myself I would the last time I saw him. But that small, kindling of hope that the person before me was in fact the Erix I had known made me hesitate.

"You are expecting me to believe that he does not command you now?" I asked, nails cutting half-moons into my palms. "I find it hard to see the benefit in letting you roam freely."

Erix's outline shifted. He raised a contorted hand and pressed it to the side of his face. "I am changing. I *have* changed."

"Step forward, Erix. I will not ask again."

This time he did, slowly moving from the shadows of the forest until he was bathed in the silvered light of the moon.

My breathing faltered. Gasping, I tried to claw back some air which the horror before me had stolen.

Erix had indeed changed. His limbs were longer, fingers ending in sharp, bloodied points. His skin no longer held the colour of life but was washed out and grey like a dead body. Wings hung limp at his sides, one larger than the other by a noticeable amount. As his outline had suggested, his clothes hung from him in tatters, as though the impossible growth had overwhelmed him in such quick and surprising power. But it was his face that shocked me most, hardly a whisper of what it had been before. Cheekbones stood out, pushing through skin to the point of breaking. His mouth was full of jagged teeth, overlapping lips I had known as well as my own.

And his eyes, once as gold as the Aurelian leaves, far brighter than any jewel those with coin could afford, were no more. Pits of pure darkness surrounded by some softness, as though there was

some humanity left amongst his monstrous appearance.

As I studied him something clicked within my mind. A truth of what stood before me.

Not Erix. Not a Berserker.

He was neither.

"Gryvern," I muttered, voice faint beneath the rushing winter winds. "That is what happens to Doran's children, isn't it? Why he can control the creatures to do as he wishes? Because they are simply his children doing anything to please their sire."

Erix bowed his head in confirmation, wings twitching irritably. "Metamorphosis, from one monster to another."

It made sense, more than anything else in that moment. Why the Gryvern I had killed outside of Ayvbury had both the curved points of human ears and the points of the fey. They were Doran's creations, what happened when a Berserker followed the silent control of their sire and mutated.

"My father was a man with greedy tastes. And look where it led him. Now you can understand why Tarron was so precious to him. The perfect boy, not afflicted by this disease that Doran passed to the rest of his offspring. But why would he stop? The more his seed spreads, the further his control spreads. Humans, fey, it did not matter to him."

"Why are you telling me this?" My chest ached as I looked upon him; all hope for the Erix I had wished to return was gone. Although his mind, right now, seemed his own, his body was not. Erix stood on the precipice, looking into the abyss at the pending monster he was going to become.

"So you know all you need to take him down," he said. The winds picked up as I willed them, air thick with ice that made each breath hard and full of prickling discomfort. "I understand I am not in the best of positions to be putting forward requests to you. Not after wha—what I have done. But there is something I feel you deserve as much as what I need."

I stood, unblinking, as I waited for Erix to reveal what caused him such torment. "Speak what you have to say. Nothing you can do or say would relieve the pain you have already caused me."

Erix looked up at me with those dark eyes filled with desperation. I searched them for some spark of gold, something to tell me that it truly was him, free from Doran's control, speaking with me.

"I want you to kill me." That was when he shattered my reality, any hope of helping him gone in a single moment. "Save me from being used by him. These moments of peace, moments of reprieve from Doran's control will not last long, and even now I can sense him trying to claw back into my mind. I do not want more blood on my hands, blood I am not aware I am spilling."

Erix begged, talon-like fingers clasping one another in a signal of prayer. I could sense his legs quiver as though he was moments from falling to his knees. And I shared in that moment of weakness, my own body numbing as his request settled over me.

"Do not ask that of me, Erix." Hot tears stung my eyes; my magic retreating like a scorned dog. "How dare you come here and say such things. Do you truly believe you are in any position to ask me even the simplest request, let alone that?"

Erix took a single step forward, and I retreated two. I could see the discomfort my repulsion caused him.

"Stay away from me, Erix," I shouted, cringing as my voice echoed between us.

"You are disgusted in me. Yet I remember not long ago when you would look at me how you do with the Hunter. You have no problem doing as he desires when he asks."

I scowled, forehead pinching into countless lines. "You've been watching us."

It was not a question, but a statement, one he did not deny.

"Not by choice."

A sour taste filled my mouth. I hardly cared to know what Erix had seen and what he had not because the idea of him watching no matter the action churned my stomach. "I hardly feel as though I speak with the Erix I knew. I felt sadness for him, then pity. Now I look at you with only disdain."

"Good," he muttered. "Then killing me would be easy, would it not?"

He tried to trick me into a corner, force me to feel anger for him to ensure that his command for me would be complete.

"Gone are the days I am manipulated by puppets of tormented men. No matter what you become, no matter what you do, what you are, I will not be made to take a life. Especially not yours. That, Erix Oakstorm, is your punishment."

He staggered back as the slamming of his full true name crashed over him.

Erix dropped to his knees, hands pawing at the ground as he wailed. "I would never have done it by choice. You do not understand what it is like having the mind of Doran within your own. I watched, from a dark room, as he manipulated my body to cause you pain. Never would I have done that out of choice."

His wings jolted at his sides, moonlight washing out the little colour of life he had from his greying skin.

"You left me that night, a mistake that if changed then perhaps we would not be in this place discussing such matters. I hate you for what you have been made to do, but not enough to take your life. It is not as easy as that."

I longed for nothing more than to flee, turn my back on the creature before me and forget him forever. In truth, I felt the memory of Erix slipping as this new version of himself stood before me.

"If you do not end this then Doran will gain his eternal control and you know what will become of me. I will be used to hunt you down until you are forced to take my life. Save yourself the time. Please, do it. For yourself if not for me."

"Get up!" The cry tore out of me. If my hands were not shaking so violently, I would have gripped my chest as a twisting agony filled it. "Turn your back and leave me."

"I promised I never would." His reply was as urgent as my own words.

"You broke that promise many days ago and there is nothing that will fix it again. Leave. Do not come back searching for death because you will not find it from me."

A deep growl rumbled from the pits of Erix's mutated body. He threw his head back, wings spreading wide when an inhuman scream of pure brokenness tore from his throat. His boiling desperation devoured the night; the sound was so haunting, it ripped at my skin, making the very night shiver in response as though it recoiled from him.

I would never forget it.

I stood there, body trembling and rooted to the spot as I listened to his endless cry. I spoke only when Erix finally caved in on himself, forehead pressed to the ground, silent and exhausted. "I am sorry I cannot offer you the relief you desire. I am sorry this ended the way it did. And more than anything I am sorry I gave up on you."

My teeth ground together in response to the tearing sound of clawed hands scratching through the dirt. Erix's back heaved, as though his laboured breaths did nothing to satisfy his body.

"Then this is where it ends for us," he finally spoke, voice rough as jagged stone. When he looked up, dark, muddy tears coursed down his gaunt cheeks. They dripped to the frost tainted ground and hissed. He winced as though his entire being was gripped in physical agony. "You are right, little bird, I do not deserve your aid. Not after what I have done to you. But know, after this day and forward, my actions are not mine and will never be. As I leave you, I need you to know that the

person you had known is no more. Never forget how sorry I am. Because even when this monster takes over, I will not allow myself to forget. I could never forget you, but I do wish for you to forget me."

I couldn't stop the tears from falling. No matter with how much pity and discomfort I looked upon Erix with, I cried with grief, feeling as though yet another person had been taken from me. Killed. By Doran all the same, even if Erix's heart still beat as he left me, it was no longer the tune of his own soul.

"Do not remember me as the man who tore your life in two, but the person who would have given his life to see you thrive."

Words failed me as my chest was wracked with deep sobs. I could hardly catch a breath as I watched Erix stand, his dark tears drying upon his ashen skin. He held my gaze, blinked, and for a moment I saw the warmth of his golden eyes as though they shone through the shadows of Doran's hate.

"Thank you," I called as he turned from me. He paused, face still to the side for me to see the stretched points of his ears flicker in recognition of my voice. "Thank you for holding my hand whilst I discovered myself."

He smiled, serrated teeth flashing in his brief grin.

I waited for him to reply, but instead Erix walked away with his stretched leather wings dragging across the ground behind him. And with each step he took away I knew that I would never see even a flicker of the Erix I had known again.

Standing alone in the clearing of the forest, night bathing the world in shadows, I remembered why I had travelled such a way from Wychwood. All concern or doubt about my end goal evaporated. I needed The Hand and the army he had to offer now more than ever.

Killing Doran was a necessity, one I desired more than anything after learning several ugly truths. He'd die slowly for what he'd done. It was time to make him pay for his latest sin...

For the death of the man I had first begun to love.

rix's visit was a distant memory when dawn arrived without Duncan's return. I paced the forest, mind whirling with what to do. His warning not to follow him was no more than a whisper, and one I knew I had no choice but to ignore.

It was a crisp and cloudless day. The winds had retreated, giving room for the tension of his absence to roar around me in its stead. Even with my usual comfort during the colder weather, a shiver was present across my skin.

Each moment dragged into an eternity. I found myself scanning the distance begging for him to return, holding out hope that he'd only be minutes away from finding his way back to me. *Perhaps he was lost*. That was the first thought I had which soon perished by the realisation that Duncan was a man who knew himself as well as his surroundings. Losing himself on a path back to me would not have been an option. The wave of what ifs that followed grew darker and more horrific with every hour that he did not return.

Soon the sky was bright blue, not a single smudge of pink dawn tones across it. The sun was reaching its apex above me, rays no more than cold beams across the landscape.

Lockinge was clearer than yesterday, the outline of the castle upon the hill nothing more than a dark mark against the flattened land before me. A city sprawled beneath, clustered in its shadow. From such a distance I could not make out any important details of it, but I could understand its size without uncertainty.

I chewed on my nails as I watched Lockinge helplessly. My eyes followed the city downward, snaking across the grey-stone path that cut across the landscape, the very one the Hunter's had paraded upon. And there, no more than a faint marking of buildings, was their final checkpoint.

Duncan.

He had to be there. And regardless, I had to pass through there to get to the city's only main entrance. Duncan had explained the toll for entering Lockinge, a single payment for travellers to make in tax towards the kingdom. Coin, preferably, unless you adorned the mark of The Hand, then entry was free.

I left our makeshift camp, focusing on putting one foot in front of the other before I changed my mind. The only way into Lockinge was with Duncan. Regardless, something was wrong. He would not have left me for longer than he had planned. It was that reason why I swallowed my anxiety and began my journey to Lockinge's outskirts.

I thought of nothing but finding him. The small hope that we would simply bump into one another upon the road to Lockinge dwindled within me. Yet the closer I grew the more I let that thought slip through my fingers.

In the place that hope had lived soon hollowed and filled with rage. The feeling was hideous and overwhelming. It caused my teeth to grind together, and my hands to clench into hardened fists at my sides.

At first, I walked alone, cutting down the middle of the dirt path with not even a bird to witness my journey. Then I recognised the closeness of humans, hardly caring or noticing as they passed me on wagons or by foot. Soon I felt their eyes on me, registered the gasps of disbelief. All I could do was focus on the way to Duncan, not even sparing a glance at the gawping people I passed. Horses moved carts out of my way, humans literally pouncing away like frightened cats and watched me stalk forward.

Then I heard the squawks of birds. Large, winged creatures circled above me and cried out in warning to whomever listened. They were not ordinary birds but hawks, brave little fuckers who dived as though to peck the hair from my head. *Tracker's companions*. The Hunters were close.

I did not need to wave the birds off, a single thought brought on the frozen chill of winter as I finally loosed my power. I watched the birds with a sense of pride as they flew back towards the looming outskirts of the final checkpoint. My eyes tracked their flight until my attention landed upon a wooden wall, spiked and towering, which came into focus ahead of me.

People stood upon the wooden barracks as I walked towards them. Hunters. I knew it for certain as the hawks landed upon outstretched arms. Those without a bird to greet them held up crossbows, sun catching the sharpened points of the bolts readied and loaded across them.

I could have stopped, thrown forward the storm that twisted within my bones, my blood. There was no doubt in the power within me. Although still new to me, I trusted in the ability to become a force to be reckoned with.

I kept up pace, each footstep leaving a scar of ice across the dirt path, as I closed in on the checkpoint. I had left my ability to think clearly at the camp, perhaps even further behind on my journey. Now was only action. Only anger and power.

Only madness, a whisper confirmed.

"Halt!" someone unseen shouted from the barracks. I did not care for who. More Hunters raced out through the open gates, each wielding an unsheathed blade or a different weapon of choice, each one raised in honour for my arrival.

Power crackled in the palm of my hands, the sound as melodic as a mother's lullaby. It echoed the frantic beat of my heart, thundering faster as I grew closer to the Hunters.

"Give him to me," I called, voice filling the space before me. "Return what you took from me."

Silence replied. Not a single one denied me, nor responded in confusion. It was unspoken what they had taken from me, and their hush told me my deepest worries were real.

A red-haired man stood forward from the line, hawk perched upon his broad shoulder and hands free of a weapon. His expression was placid and void of emotion, all beside the slight crease of skin around the sides of his eyes.

"There is no need for fanning feathers to prove your magic. Even with your power there is one of you and many of us. It is best you listen before someone gets hurt."

"Kayne," I muttered, rejoicing as he winced, hating that I knew his name. "Where is he?"

"Paying penance for his sins," he replied, teeth gritted in turmoil. "He was a fool to return and even more a fool for not ending you when he had the chance."

"And what sins are those?" I replied, toying with the idea of conjuring powerful, ice-kissed winds to freeze each and every one of these twisted fuckers.

"I hardly imagine you would like me to repeat his crimes for all those to hear."

The laugh that tore out of me was ugly and sharp. The beastly hawk upon Kayne's shoulder flared its wings, releasing a shrill cry through its snapping beak. "Do not mock me. Do not underestimate what I care to hear or do not. I will not leave this place without Duncan so let the choice be yours. You either return him to me willingly, or you will see what a King will do for those he cares for."

"Your threats are wasted, fey. King or not, Duwar protects us. Before you raise your power against us you will find a bolt in your chest followed by a noose around the neck of the man you've bewitched. Tread carefully."

I could not lose another person. Duncan was mine. I claimed him. "Give. Him. To. Me."

There was an emotion across Kayne's face that I could not place. He chewed subtly on his lower lip, eyes heavy as he studied me at our distance. My breath caught as he closed, he eyes, his forehead creased in whatever silent torment overwhelmed him, and turned away from me.

"Bring him out for the fey to see that our threats are not empty like his," Kayne shouted, raising a fist in the air beside him. "If the *fey* wants to see what has become of those requiring repentance, then we shall show him."

I followed the commotion behind Kayne, eyes scanning the line that shifted to make room for a huddle of three people to be clearly seen. *Duncan*. His name screamed throughout my very being. He was shirtless, the expanse of skin peppered in silver whispers of past scars were now mostly hidden behind the bleeding gashes that covered them, countless lines of dried and angry welts. His head hung, chin to his bare chest, dark curtains of hair hanging limp and greasy before him.

Duncan limped ahead, urged on by the sharp points of swords held at his back. If he faltered the tips would catch his skin and tear new cuts. I blinked, wishing to rub my eyes and rid myself of the scene before me.

"His fate will be far different to yours," Kayne called, voice breaking slightly as he did everything in his power to not look at Duncan. "Duwar does not look favourably upon sinners. They must pay for their immoralities with blood. Only when the poison leaves them will He decide to bless them with renewed purpose. And as you now understand, Duncan has had many chances before."

Numb and lost to the roaring in my mind, I took a step forward. Only one. The air screamed in warning, a screeching whistle as a bolt shot towards me. It missed on purpose, the dirt beside my foot ripped up in a cloud of dust as the projectile stabbed into the ground.

"The next one will not be as kind."

Perhaps it was Kayne who spoke. I didn't care for anyone else now as Duncan finally raised his head, veins of struggle protruding from his neck, and looked at me. His eyes were narrowed with haunting determination. Even now he bled, ruby droplets crashing into the ground and pooling beneath him for all to see.

The magic I clung to disappeared in a moment, retreating into the pits of my soul as Duncan's weakened voice broke over the crowd. "I-I told you to lea-leave me." It took everything in Duncan's power to speak through his agonising pain, spitting as he forced the words out as though someone held a knife at his throat.

I shook my head, tears tumbling down my cheeks without the need to blink them free. "You should have known I was a liar."

Duncan loosed a raspy breath. He looked to Kayne who stood rigid and stiff. I caught the prickling of discomfort across the tracker who Duncan had called a friend. Not once had he looked Duncan's way, his gaze kept upon me. Was it out of carelessness or fear for what Kayne would see if he looked upon the wounded, bleeding Duncan?

Hunters started prowling towards me with caution.

"No matter my disgust, I am not in a position to judge your fate," Kayne said. "Duncan will be tried before Duwar as his judge, but you... You have turned many eyes upon you. The Hand has waited for you to arrive and wishes to discuss matters with you directly."

I dropped to my knees, legs giving out beneath me. My hands slammed into the ground and no matter how I wished to push my power across it, the magic would not aid me.

"Do not hurt him," I begged, watching as Duncan also wanted to fall to the floor but was kept standing by a blade that sliced a new cut across his chest. I sobbed as I watched fresh blood spill down his torso, staining the dark material of his ruined trousers. "You are supposed to be his friend. Duncan trusts you. Please, Kayne! Do not do this."

"Duncan... he has only hurt himself with his own actions. Going against his faith, his purpose. That was his doing."

"You," I growled as Hunters reached me, hands gripping my arms and twisting them behind my back. I did not fight them off, for I had no strength left. "He trusted you."

Kayne rocked back an inch, enough for me to know my words caused him discomfort. He then turned away from me, calling his command for those who would listen. "Take them both. We leave for Lockinge immediately." And with the uncaring swish of his cloak and a cry of the hawk upon his shoulder, Kayne turned his back on me and walked through the line of Hunters all without glancing towards Duncan.

Iron clasped around my wrists, nullifying a power that had also turned its back on me. Another cold kiss of it strangled my throat, pinching my skin and squeezing tight.

I was hoisted from the ground by chains. They were connected between my neck and wrists and held in the grasp of a boulder-like man as though I was a dog at the end of a leash. All the while I watched Duncan, begging for him to look at me, praying to whatever God would listen to keep him alive long enough for me to petition for his safety. If there was one voice strong enough to end his suffering, it was The Hand.

And I now had my invitation to meet with him.

But at what cost?

The streets were crammed with people. They watched, leering and spitting, as I was dragged like cattle before them; I was tugged, kicked and pushed by my captor. There was nothing I could do to shield myself from the hateful shouts of humans, or the stones and other unseen objects that were thrown at me. From the moment I had passed into the city I felt nothing but hate around me. It was demoralising.

Even though my legs burned, and my feet felt broken, I was not allowed to stop.

Something had cut the skin beneath my eye. It happened so fast I didn't see what had been thrown, but it hurt, nonetheless. I tasted the sharp tang of blood as it dribbled into my mouth; it coated my teeth, splattering onto the cobbled street as I spat it out. With the iron cuff strangling my neck there was no healing ability that would help me.

Lockinge was built upon a natural incline of land. It felt that every street we walked leaned upwards, each leading towards the haunting castle that waited ahead of us. The dark-grey stone towered above the city like a crown atop a King's head. Although it was harsh and ugly against the cloudless sky, it blocked out the winter sun and bathed a chill across me that prickled at my skin.

I focused on the castle, drowning out the screams from the humans as they spat their detestation at me. It was all I could do. Chin held high I tried everything in my limited power to not let their words hurt me.

Fey scum. False King. Demon. Freak.

There was something deadly about words. I feared them more than a blade or arrow. Words spat with hate may not spill blood, but they left deeper scars that were harder to heal. And in that moment, I felt as though my soul had no room left for pain. It was already riddled with it.

Duncan was somewhere in the crowd behind me. I heard the humans scream at him too.

Traitor. Sinner. Unclean.

That hurt me deeper than anything they could have done or said to me. Because I had been the cause of those names. I had done this to him.

I wondered if The Hand watched now, peering out one of the castle's dark and lightless windows as I walked through the city to greet him. It was clear his poison had spread like wildfire. Buildings I passed held his banner, the white hand symbol stitched onto an array of materials. I could not see any marker of the Creator and his faith, only The Hand, as though he was a God and not the strange promise of Duwar.

What had happened here? What had allowed such twisted hate to spread through the people of this city and leak into the world of Durmain beyond? I had been so lucky and untouched in Grove for most of my life, and it was clear why Father had kept me there, far away from Lockinge's poison.

The incline to the castle worsened the closer we got to it. The crowds of humans thinned which gave me some reprieve. Lockinge was not a city surrounded by walls, but the castle was, as though whomever dwelled within it was granted protection but those who lived in its shadows did not. As we entered beneath its gates, I recognised the glint of sun against metal. Guards watched from positions within the walls and upon turrets. They were not garbed in the markings of The Hand but held billowing cloaks of deep scarlet and pointed helmets that could have been used as weapons. Kingsmen, a rarity, weapons jewelled and decorative, a perfect symbol for what they were now. Decoration. No longer required as the true army of soldiers now entered the castles grounds.

My legs shook violently as we came to a stop. The Hunters fanned out across the courtyard we had entered, a wave of bodies that stomped feet and called out to one another with excitement. There was a buzz here. I could sense it.

I caught a blur of red hair and spotted Kayne at the front of the crowds. He spoke with the decorated Kingsman, then he pointed towards me. I felt every eye upon me until the soldiers moved towards the main doors of the building before us and disappeared within.

Kayne cut across the courtyard towards me, his gaze on mine as he muttered something to the hawk that still perched across his shoulder. He finished sharing whatever secrets to the bird before he reached me, and it threw open its wings and flew off.

"I will take him," Kayne said to the large Hunter who still held my chained leash. "Join your fellows and prepare for the evening's celebrations."

Unlike Duncan, Kayne did not have a natural command about his tone. It almost felt forced. From the hesitation of the Hunter behind me handing over the chains, I could recognise that he felt it too. But alas, the chains were handed over and I had a new owner.

"You do not understand what you have done," Kayne muttered out the corner of his mouth. He watched the crowd around us, as though he did not want a single one of them to hear him. "Duncan did not deserve this. He has suffered enough."

"Why are you telling me this?" I said, shoulders crying in agony as my hands had been held clasped behind my back for such a long time.

"If he dies because of you, I will personally make sure you suffer the same fate. No matter if your life is protected by the command of The Hand, I will kill you."

It was not a threat, but a promise.

"If you care for his wellbeing then do something," I seethed, not caring who heard me. "Help him."

Kayne panicked and tugged on the chains, hissing through the side of his mouth. "Watch your words. They will personally seal Duncan's fate before he has had the chance to survive the night. I have spent years trying to help him so do not speak on something you do not understand. Even I must know when he is beyond saving, no matter how painful that is."

Kayne suddenly straightened his posture in response to the three new figures who exited the castle and walked towards us. It ceased the little conversation we had between us. One was the silver-clad Kingsman who did not wear a single hint of The Hand's symbol. Beside him, garbed in gowns that practically dripped with wealth, were two women.

Fey women.

Their long hair was pulled free from their shoulders, piled upon their heads in woven curls. From a distance it looked like crowns. The noticeable similarity between them both were the iron collars around their necks—similar to the one I wore—except theirs presented more like elaborate necklaces than a shackle to drain power.

Fey, walking free and without leashes.

I felt the crowd of Hunters stiffen. Some sneered and others spat at the ground at their feet. But the women did not flinch. Their unblinking, vacant stares were kept forward without showing much realisation that anything happened around them.

"The Hand welcomes you, Robin Icethorn."

The blood drained from my face, every muscle in my body hardening into stone as I listened to them both speak in unison. It was up close that I could see the blue stains of bruises that hid beneath the necklaces and the purple-dark shadows that hung proudly beneath their wide eyes.

I looked to Kayne who showed no sign that the scene before me was not an illusion of some kind.

"You must be hungry. Please, follow and we will take you to your rooms. Food awaits you. A wash if you desire."

Even if I wanted to follow, I couldn't. My feet were rooted to the cobbled stone ground.

One of the fey women held out a hand for Kayne who welcomingly handed over my leash. She did not tear her eyes from me, not even when the chain was placed within her grip.

"Wait," I spluttered, straining as I turned back to Kayne who started to walk off.

He paused, spared me a glance that reached straight into my soul; his eyes burned with such disgust, it had me swallowing my next plea. Kayne disappeared into the crowd of Hunters with the swish of his cloak, leaving me in the hands of strangers.

"It is best we go inside, Robin Icethorn," the women spoke as one again, not a speck of emotion in their voice. "The castle will soon be full of Faithful, and it is best we are kept out of their way."

I could not resist as they began to walk back to the door, pulling gently on the chain.

"What is going to happen?" I said, skipping a step to catch up, all the while searching through the crowds of Hunters for a sign of Duncan. He was nowhere to be seen.

"You will rest, eat and bathe."

My skin shivered as they spoke again, not a syllable or word out of sync.

"I wish to see The Hand," I said, hands grabbing the chain and adding resistance. "I need to see him urgently."

"And you shall," they replied. "The Resurgence is shortly upon us. The Hand will see you soon."

Resurgence? There was something of importance behind the word; it caused the Hunters close to us to react with a childish excitement.

"I don't understand," I replied, neck aching from being pulled along. Desperation burned within me, in the same place my power would have been if the iron was not wrapped around my neck.

"In time you will. We all will."

Something was terribly wrong with the fey who escorted me into the castle's door, that much was clear. There was hardly time to make sense of what was happening as they finally tugged me into the cold, barren corridor of Lockinge castle. As we left the muted light of day behind us and entered the shadows of the castle's innards, I was certain I had spotted something on the feys' arms. A dark mark, right in the exposed crook where their forearms met their elbow. Like their necks, it was covered in bruising, a perfect circle around a small puncture wound that was so fresh that it had hardly scabbed over.

Before I could catch a glimpse again, we were in complete darkness. There was nothing but my heavy breathing and rushed footsteps that echoed around the strange walkway. The floor dropped out into steps, and we began our steep and terrifying descent bathed in shadows.

I felt as though we walked into the deepest pits of the underworld.

The stairs we navigated were endless. For a long while, I had no sense of direction as they guided me through the dark. But soon enough the narrow, steeped corridor glowed with burning torches held in metal frames across the damp walls.

One of the fey women plucked one free then waved it before her as we trudged on. Whereas the other held a firm grip on my chain as though her life truly depended on it.

I wanted to ask for Duncan, to demand where he was and what was happening to him. All I could think about was his slashed and bloodied body. Did he bleed now? Had he given in to the pain his fellow Faithful caused him? I should never have let him leave. If I had refused him then perhaps his skin would have been unmarked by new scars.

I focused on my surroundings for a reprieve from my mind. There was nothing I could do for Duncan, no matter how that fact pained me. I only hoped time was in my favour.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked again, cringing at my voice as it echoed around us. The walls had gone from smooth layered brick to rough edges of rock; moss covered most. Dark splashes of water wet the carved steps beneath our feet, making each step risky, the threat of falling inevitable.

All I knew was that we had entered the castle, but wherever we walked now was far from it.

Far beneath it.

"It is not sufficient for the fey to walk freely above ground. Too many risks. The Hand's influence is strong, but not infinite. Not yet."

They spoke about themselves as though they did not have points at the ends of their ears. "Then where is it you are taking me?"

"The Below, a place in which the fey can be kept safe."

"Wait." I pulled back, gripping the damp wall for security. "What has he done to you both?"

"Given us purpose, as he will give you."

My skin itched as though fire crawled across it, the discomfort caused by the synchronisation both women spoke with. This was all wrong. The Hand petitioned the death of fey. I had seen it with my very eyes. Unless...

"This is where he keeps them all then," I said, feeling the realisation overcome me. "The fey with power, magic in their blood. That is what he needs, isn't it? Keeping them like livestock for whatever he needs to create his powered humans."

"Come, you will see. Everything you have come to know about The Hand may not be true. A short walk to go and your questions will be answered. You will hear them from The Hand himself."

I did not stop again, the urgency of seeing what waited at our destination fuelled me onwards. But what I saw, as the pathway opened up to a balcony of rock that overlooked the scene in the open cave chamber, was nothing that I could have ever imagined.

here were hundreds of fey and not a single one imprisoned, not in the sense I would have first expected. They walked freely among the monstrous cavern, speaking with each other and doing as they pleased. Some sat upon worn wooden stools, drinking from tankards and laughing with one another. Others were laid across cots along the far wall that had been lined up side by side. Like ants in their hill, they scurried amongst each other, dressed in rags and mismatched clothing that made them look more like vagrants than fey.

"The Below is a safe place. A place for you. A place for us. You will dwell here until called to stand before The Hand."

My escorts gestured towards steps that jutted out of the cave wall, leading down to the lower ground. That was when I saw the guards, dressed in the same silver the Kingsmen had been garbed in above ground. There were no Hunters here.

The guards stood before an iron gate that had been welded into the stone wall as though it had always been there. It was clearly the only way into the cavern and the only way out as well. Yet not a single fey below me bothered to break free. No one stood before it nor did they plead with the guards for freedom as I imagined prisoners would have done. For beings that had been forcibly taken from their Courts, these seemed... comfortable.

"Here," the fey women said and the one holding my chain offered it to me. It was a strange exchange, the passing of my chains from my captor to me. "When you go down those guards will take the chain before you enter. There is no requirement for you to keep it on."

I looked back down, hands weakly gripping the draining metal in my hands. "You are both fey. Will you not be coming with me? I get the impression you do not require the same treatment."

They laughed, and for the first time, they did so out of their strange synchronisation. "Goodbye for now, Robin Icethorn. We will see each other soon."

I watched them leave, all without knowing their names. Not that it mattered. They were puppets, their voice no longer their own.

The guards at the bottom of the steps did as the women said they would. With a worn key, they disconnected the chain from the collar around my neck. Without the leash connecting me to the guards, and with silent command, they urged me through the gate they had opened with a terrible screech, before locking it back behind me.

Fey moved before me, like water parting around stone I stood among them. It was obvious I was being ignored. And why would they care for me? I was nothing special. No different to them. Besides dirtier and clearly out of place, not a single one paid me mind.

I walked through the crowd blindly, having no idea what to do and where to go. As I passed

through the cavern it became clearer that these fey, no matter if I believed them to be, were not prisoners. They were happy, speaking in loud, booming voices as they laughed and shared food. This was a community rather than a mass prison.

"Lost?"

To my side sat a girl, leaning back on a chair with her legs up on another stool. Dark midnight hair tumbled over her shoulder, only one shoulder for the other side of her head was shaved down to the scalp. There was nothing pretty about her face, sharp and pointed, her chin and cheekbones protruding through milky skin. But she was striking nonetheless, a face that would catch an eye, even in a crowd, like the glittering of a jewel.

"Unfortunately, not," I replied, stopping and studying her as she too studied me.

"You are new." It was not a question, but a statement.

"Is it that obvious?" I replied.

"You have hardly blinked since walking over this way. That and the fact I saw you being carted by The Hand's faithful servants. The Twins are nasty bitches, like a welcoming party that no one asked for."

I glanced back, spying the balcony that waited far above us. I half expected to see both the women again, but they had left swiftly; the balcony was empty.

The girl leaned forward, the cuff around her neck worn from time. Resting an elbow on her knees, she reached a hand out between us. "Welcome to hell. Where the price for staying is blood and your tenancy never comes to an end. Jesibel, but you can call me Jesi."

It felt wrong to ignore her hand, so I took it, her grip strong.

"Robin," I replied.

She barked, her laugh catching the attention of those around her. "Pretty name for a boy."

I tried to snatch my hand away, but she held firm. Her eyes narrowed as she pushed up my sleeve and surveyed my skin with keen interest. "They have not taken from you yet then?"

"Pardon?"

She dropped my hand without care. With an unimpressive huff Jesibel rolled her own sleeve up, flashing her moon-kissed skin. In the crook of her arm was a fresh, angry wound surrounded with a halo of red stained skin. "Now, what makes you so special? Even the newbies are drained before entry. It is payment for this wonderfully comfortable accommodation we are provided with. Yet here you are, skin unmarked."

"I am sorry, Jesibel—"

"Please, Jesi is fine."

I forced a smile, unable to ignore how I annoyed her. "I saw that same mark on my escorts. The women had it on their arms as well."

Just the memory of the welts made me want to reach out and scratch my own arm.

"Good to know that the Twins are not above paying with their blood like the rest of us then. It has been almost two weeks since I last paid my tithe. And far longer since this fucking iron has been free from my neck. Healing is slower as you will understand, but there is something about the needles they use that hold off the skin's regeneration I am sure of it. Hunch, but a strong one."

So that *was* where the Hunters took the blood from. I believed the extraction to be far deadlier; images of necks sliced, and skin flayed had not been impossible to imagine. But it made sense. Keeping the fey with power alive, taking blood and waiting, giving them time to refill until the next time they were bled for The Hand's gain.

"Do you know what he does with it?" I asked. "Your blood, that is."

Jesi shrugged. "No. Not that it matters. Stuck here until we are bone-dry so what good is thinking about the above world anymore? My advice for you, Robin, is you should put the thoughts of the world you knew behind you. The sooner you give up on it, the easier your future will become. Trust me."

I didn't have the heart to tell her of what I had seen in the Cedarfall Court, how the human had passed through the boundaries and displayed power that should not have belonged to him.

"Listen," I said, the urgency that festered in my chest becoming hard to contain. "I need to get out of here."

"That feeling will pass when you realise that leaving is not an option," Jesi replied, a smirk across her lips but hardly reaching her eyes.

"You don't understand..."

Jesi scrunched her nose, pulling a face of pure disgust as I got close to her. "You smell like shit warmed up, Robin. How about you have a wash before you put me off tonight's dinner of gruel and bread. Wouldn't want my hunger being ruined. If you follow the cavern to the far end, you will come across an area of fresh springs. Beside the springs is an area where you can be given clothes. There will be something in there that will fit you no doubt."

She spoke so fast I could not find a chance to stop her and plead my case.

I followed the direction where she pointed, noticing how the cavern we were in seemed to spread out further than imagined. This place was a system of interconnecting caves, a honeycomb of rock and stone filled with the bodies of fey stolen from their lands.

Jesi gave me a push as she leapt out of her chair. Even with the iron around her neck, she was still naturally strong. "What are you standing around for...? Go and clean yourself."

"But if I go, how will they find me again?"

"Who?"

"Those fey women, they told me they would come for me. You need to understand I have to be ready."

"The Twins said that to you?" She tilted her head, intrigued.

I nodded, wanting nothing more than to return to the gate and demand the guards to take me to The Hand immediately. All I could think about was Duncan and what had happened to him, and what else was in store for him. The thought threatened me with a terrible sickness. It gripped my stomach and would have likely made me vomit if it was full of food.

"I have been promised an audience with The Hand." I felt the need to say it quietly. "And you need to understand that I cannot just wait here for them to get me at their own leisure. I don't have the time to wait."

"And the Twins told you this?" she repeated, as though saying it again would make it easier to believe.

"Yes," I snapped, annoyance itching at my skin. "They said they would come back. I should have refused to come but—"

Jesi was gripping my upper arm and squeezing with a strength I could not fathom. Her face was pinched, brows furrowed; there was a scar across one, slicing the dark lines in half. "The Twins do not lie."

"Let go of me!"

Jesi ignored my plea. "The Twins do not lie because they cannot lie. No one in the Below has ever seen The Hand. All but one. And if what you are saying is true... I think you need to come with me."

She began pulling me towards a pocket of shadows within the rocks that snaked off into another system of caves. "Jesi, get off of me."

We came to a stop, face to face. There was something distrusting about her stare. It was as black as her hair, seemingly blue when the strands caught the flames of the burning lanterns hammered into the walls. "Why would The Hand desire to have an audience with you, Robin?"

I swallowed, heartbeat thundering in my ears. Whatever I had said had caused such a visceral reaction from Jesi, triggering my anxiety to spark and spread like wildfire.

Others listened in now, watching our interaction as though they paid coin for a front row view of the show. I was not prepared to reveal everything about myself. With the reaction I had from the fey in Wychwood I understood first-hand that a good number of them had wished to see me dead. How long had those around me been captured here? They could have shared in the same feeling. But what if their reaction caused the scene I desired? A big enough one would draw the guards' attention and surely remove me. That thought started as a spark in my mind, but soon exploded into an inferno of possibility.

So, I told her.

I spat my truth and title as though it was the easiest thing to say aloud. "I am Robin Icethorn, King of the Icethorn Court, and if you lay your fucking hands on me again you will find yourself without them."

I kept my chin raised, my voice void of discomfort at what I said. There could only be hope that they believed me. And the way Jesi reacted, eyes widening, and lips pulled tight into a white line, I knew she believed my false confidence. My breathing was laboured. I did everything to focus on the girl's surprise, then darted my gaze around and registered the shock of the many who now watched.

Just when I thought Jesi would have thrown her head back and laughed, she surprised me again. She bowed, bending her knees and lowering her back until I could see the top of her head. "The Court lives." Jesi's voice shook as she spoke. When she looked up at me, her dark eyes glistened with thick tears. And that was when I noticed our greatest familiarities. Her hair, her eyes, black as night and skin the colour of fresh fallen snow.

I had no doubt, and required no confirmation, that Jesibel was an Icethorn fey. Like Eroan, the kind-hearted tailor, she was from my families Court. Which meant she must have been here long enough to know that my mother had died. It was as though she looked at a ghost of impossibilities, which also meant she had been captured by the Hunters before ever knowing I existed.

"I can't believe it..." she muttered, shaking her head as though the tears that clung to her dark eyes annoyed her. I watched, trying to hold onto my confidence but wanting nothing more than to break down and overload her with questions about the Court I had claimed, but not yet allowed myself to dwell within.

"It is true."

"How did they take you—" Jesi stopped herself, physically shivering as she reined in her shock. "There is somebody best suited to discuss matters with you, Robin Icethorn. Please," she said through a shaking breath, "follow me."

This time Jesi did not need to take me by gripping my arm. I followed her willingly through the throngs of equally astonished fey towards the unknown destination.

"It makes sense now," she muttered, looking sidelong at me as I caught up to her. "Our magic is not as potent as those from a royal bloodline. The Hand no doubt wants to be the one to see you in person. I cannot speak of what The Hand is like, but there is one person who will answer your questions with a clarity I cannot."

"Another like me?" I asked, tearing through the possibilities of people in my mind.

I could feel her desire to question me just as I wished to. It was evident in the way her mouth would open, pause and close again, as though she thought it would be best not to speak what was on her mind.

"She will not believe you are here, in more ways than you could imagine."

We reached a narrow pathway of jagged rock with a low ceiling. Unlike the rest of the cavern, this place was covered in crystals that glowed in deep blues and gentle lilacs. Large, devouring stalactite formations seemed as though they dripped from the ceiling, solidifying into frozen points above us.

It was a wondrous place, for a prison at least. In any other circumstance, I may have stopped to ponder at the beauty of the place, admiring its natural design and formation. But there was no time, for time was not a luxury I possessed.

The narrow pathway was empty of other fey. It darkened at a point, bathed in shadows as we moved further away from the light of the main cavern's atrium and into this new chamber. Then the crystal formations began to glow, not reflecting light but creating it as a result of some incomprehensible natural magic. A glint of the bluish glow caught across iron bars. The first I had seen since entering through the main gate of the cave. Before us, in a small chamber of stone that gave hardly enough room to navigate freely was a cell. It seemed that the cave had slowly begun to devour the iron bars, swallowing them into their surface.

If it was not for the crystals that gave off their subtle light, I would not have noticed the figure that sat upon the dusty floor of the cell. It was a haunting vision. Hunched and bent, the back of the person was curved in as though the weight of their thin shoulders was far too much to bear.

"Has my time to bleed come again so soon?" the figure called. It was a symphony of light, dulcet tones, a women's voice but one that had roughened around the edges.

"No," Jesi spoke up, voice cracking with nerves I could not imagine she held usually. "Forgive my intrusion but there is someone I believe you would like to meet."

There was a shuffling and the hunched figure pushed themselves from the ground, bones clicking like crickets in summer fields. Stepping into the light, wobbling slightly on numb feet, the woman gripped the iron bars to steady herself.

She was beautiful, it was the first thing I could think of. Old enough that grey hairs mixed with her chestnut curls, but not so ancient that her skin was marked with lines and creases; it was smooth. Her skin was pale from lack of sunlight; I could imagine it once shone with warmth and vivacity, but now looked drained and delicate to the touch.

I stepped closer to her, encouraged by a silent siren call as I drank in the women behind the bars. The closer I got, the more a spark of familiarity burned within me. It was the eyes that gave away the truth eventually. I believed the piercing blue was simply a reflection from the crystal lights; two pools of deep ocean-azure watched me as I closed in on her.

I saw another face as I blinked, one that spurred a fear within me.

The same wild, curly hair and stunning gaze...

The face of Tarron Oakstorm.

stared deeply into the eyes of Elinor Oakstorm, staring at a face which I had never imagined to be possible to look upon, but seeing her now could not determine it to be anyone else.

"It cannot be." The women's voice shook as she spoke; disbelief creased her features. It was as though she clawed the very words from my mind and spoke them aloud.

I stood there, unable to formulate a response that would make sense.

"He said he was..." Jesi began, until the sharp retort of the women cut her off entirely.

"I know who he is." Frail, bony hands reached out of the iron bars towards me. "Never did I think I would look upon the face of an Icethorn again. But here you are, and my, don't you look like Julianna herself."

I kept my hands to my sides, trying to hide the violent shaking as I gripped them into fists. It was impossible not to notice the hurt that pinched her brows into a frown. Slowly and with an air of regret, the woman pulled her offending hands back into her cell. Turning my back on the caged woman, I looked at Jesi with a plea in my eyes. "This is a mistake."

Jesi ignored me, her body almost blocking the pathway back towards the main atrium of the cavern. I had to get away. I would rather have perished than be looked at by those same eyes for a moment longer. *Tarron's eyes*.

"If I have said something to offend you, I apologise. But you must understand, I have not looked upon your family for many years. I am shocked is all."

Looking back to the woman I forced all guilt from my expression. Guilt of knowing what had become of her son Tarron. Guilt for knowing the very reason I was before her in the first place was because of my plot to side with The Hand to ensure her husband's death.

"They are dead," I said, matter-of-factly.

The woman didn't so much as flinch, instead held my stare indefinitely. "I know."

Do you know that they died because of you? Fuelled by Doran's jealousy that you had not been given the freedom my mother had? Those were the questions I silently screamed as I studied the shell of the woman before me.

"But the Court lives," she added, breaking the prolonged moment of silence. "In you. Word of the Icethorn heir came only weeks ago with the recent batch of captured fey. We all believed it to be false. Fake. Made up stories. Yet now, with you standing before me, I do not doubt your lineage for a moment."

I held my chin high, searching for a reason to hate the woman from first impressions; thus far I was empty-handed. "Elinor," I said. "Elinor Oakstorm."

She looked up as though I had spat at her with a string of hideous language. "You know my

name?"

"I was told that you were taken by Hunters alongside my mother. She made it home. You... you didn't."

"Yet I was stolen by the enemy and still live. Julianna's fate was no better off than my own."

My entire body trembled.

"Jesi, thank you for bringing him to me but the matters we have to discuss are not for your ears."

"Noted." Jesi bowed her head, midnight hair falling before part of her face. "Robin, find me if you need."

"Robin," Elinor said when Jesi's footsteps quietened as she departed. "I remember when your mother told me that her next child would be named as such. Never did I believe it would have been the name given to the secret child of her human lover."

"You must be sickened then, stomach turning sour as you look upon me."

A sadness passed behind her dull, tired eyes. "No matter what I think of the scum who dwell in the castle above us, your father was different to them. And your mother loved him. Even I could see that. I look upon you and see nothing but a memory of happiness for me. I see Julianna."

I felt the heavy burning truth of her words. Part of me wished to raise a hand to my cheek, remembering the fleeting memory of my mother in my dreams, dark hair and melodic voice. Many had told me of our resemblance, but there was something about hearing it from Elinor that made it more believable.

I swallowed hard, trying to clear the guilt that had lumped within my throat. "I would have thought you hated her for leaving you."

"Leaving me?" She looked confused, almost taken back by my comment. "Julianna would never have left me if I hadn't demanded she did so."

"I don't understand."

"Sit." Elinor gestured to the dirt ground as though there was a chair of comfort for me to rest upon. "There is much to discuss, and it has been many years since another arrival has merited enough interest in me to speak with. Royalty, no less."

I did as she asked, lowering myself to the ground on quivering knees. "Why would you have told my mother to leave you?"

The question danced between us, flirting with the silence as Elinor prepared her answer. "My home had become unsafe. Your mother wished to help me and that was during a time when help was hard to come by. I was running. Your mother and I had an ironclad plan, or so we had believed. The Hunters found us not more than a day's ride away from the Wychwood border. That is where this story begins."

"What were you running from?" I asked quietly.

"Not what, but who. I had to leave Oakstorm, Wychwood, hell I needed to be clear of this entire realm to protect my child. It was never for me, but for him. I would have traversed the entire world, discovered and unknown, to keep him safe."

My breathing hitched. "Tarron had a brother..." I remembered the story. It was not only Elinor who was taken by Hunters, but Doran's other child. Perhaps everything that had happened thus far had made me forget about the details, but I understood without looking further that Elinor was alone in this cell.

Elinor, with the help of gripping to the iron bars, eased herself down onto the floor and sat opposite me. She did not moan, but her face winced as though she hurt from the simple action. "You may wonder why I could not judge your mother for her infidelity to her first husband. I know what it

is like to fall in love with someone whilst being eternally tied to another. Just like Julianna, I too had a child outside of wedlock. I loved him, but he was not safe in Oakstorm."

I pieced together the picture Elinor laid out before me, the missing fragments forming an untold story.

"Lovis," Elinor choked on the name as though it was the hardest thing she had ever spoke. "Was a dear, sweet boy."

Was.

"Where is he now?"

It may have been an insensitive question, but I harboured far harsher ones in my mind.

"He died many years ago. Killed by the treatment of The Hand and his acolytes. I failed my Lovis. I was not able to provide him with the safety he should have been promised. That is my failure as a mother."

I looked to the dust-covered rock ground, feeling my eyes sting as though needles pricked into them. "I am so sorry."

It hurt to hear of the loss of Elinor's son, knowing that Tarron also no longer lived. But did she know?

"I am too. I often wonder, if I had not made the choices in my life, I would never have needed to leave Cedarfall. Your mother would not have needed to help which ultimately led to her demise. I should never have had my Lovis. So many lives would have been spared if I had only curbed my longing."

I understood now why Elinor looked as though she carried the weight of the world across her hunched shoulders because she did. Guilt was a heavy burden to carry, and she bore it all.

"Whoever you were running from must have been awful enough to separate you from the family you left behind." I found myself saying it before I even had the chance to truly think.

"Tarron was the spitting image of his father. All I gifted that boy was his looks and power. The rest, his soul especially, was the perfect mirror of his father Doran. Tarron did not need me. Doran, on the other hand, required me for what I could bore him: perfect, unmarred children. Yet imagine what he would have done when he found out that Lovis was not of his flesh and blood."

For a moment my body chilled so deeply that I was certain I was free from the iron cuff at my neck and my power had returned. A shiver sliced across my skin, my mouth drying as Elinor's truth settled over me.

"Doran was not Lovis father."

Elinor nodded her head, but not once released my gaze. There was something proud about her expression. It hardened the features of her face, eradicating any whisper of sadness that had only a moment before aged her.

"There was nothing Lovis shared with Doran. Lovis was kind. Innocent. Perfect. I had once thought the same about Tarron, but as the years passed by, I knew I had lost him to his father's warped soul. Unlike Doran's other children, Tarron was physically perfect. But inside he was just as tormented as his sire. Lovis was different. Entirely, completely and undeniably opposite. It was only a matter of time before Doran noticed. I left believing that I was doing the right thing by Lovis and by me. I have learned no matter the choices we make in life, there are always countless outcomes. Ones that we do not even consider when making our decisions. This..." Elinor gestured around her. "This is simply one outcome I had never contemplated. Now I am left here to bleed for a man who speaks to demons, without my son, without my future."

There was a long pause of silence between us. Elinor allowed me a moment to decipher all she

had revealed. Questions upon questions layered upon one another and I almost forgot about the urgency of getting out of here. I could have sat here for an eternity speaking to a woman I had believed to have been a ghost.

"You know my story now. Tell me, Robin; what has happened in your life to end up here, with me, imprisoned by a madman?"

I took a deep, shuddering breath, and chose to tell my truth clearly, just as she had shared hers.

"I came for an audience with The Hand. To barter with him for his army and power. Although me being here, in the pits of the castle with you, is not how I imagined my welcome, I am no more deterred from what I desire from The Hand."

"And what brings you to ask help from your enemy right at his doorstep?"

I looked at her with a storm in my eyes. "To kill Doran Oakstorm."

Elinor rocked back, a small fluttering gasp escaping from her. She brushed the loose curls of brown waves from her face, not wanting a single strand to obscure her view of me. "And what has *he* done to you to bring about such a desire?"

My jaw hardened, teeth gritted together as I replied. "He took everything from me. And I vow to do the same in return."

I told Elinor it all. From how Doran had plotted and succeeded in the murder of the Icethorn Court. How he pointed the blame on the humans to cause a war, doing so because of his jealousy that my mother returned but Elinor never did. I told her of my father and the lengths he took to keep me from the realm of the fey and how it ultimately ended in his death at the hands of Doran Oakstorm.

So much death, in such little time.

And all because of Doran's infatuation with a woman that never loved him as he had led me to believe she had. It was clear, from everything I had heard and learned, that Doran never knew of Elinor's infidelity. He believed Lovis to be his son just as Tarron was. Elinor was his prized mount after all, the only one that gave him children whose blood was not infected with the Berserker lineage.

If Doran had known, would he have gone to the lengths he had? Would my family still be alive?

I blinked and saw a storm of Gryvern. I saw Erix and his mutated and tormented appearance.

So many lives devastated because of a secret.

Secrets were destructive. They were the evillest part of the world.

"I understand," Elinor finally said, a hint of reminiscence in her gaze. "We have all been forced to make choices and I can understand now how you have ended up before me. But I feel as though I should ask you something. Something I wish someone had asked me."

"Please," I replied softly.

"Will it be worth it? In the end, when Doran and his presence has been removed from this world, will it bring you whatever it is you seek?"

My mouth opened, lips parting for my initial confirmation to come out. But silence responded. I couldn't answer. I wanted to, but I couldn't. Because I did not know what it was, I longed for. My family? Revenge? It wouldn't bring them back, I knew that. They were gone no matter what happened tomorrow, or the day after, or the day after that.

"You do not need to answer me yet," Elinor said softly, although her voice still hummed with the air of command that had not vanished during the many years in this dark cell. "I am not going anywhere, and time is very much a luxury we have in the Below."

"I am here now," I said. "I have no choice but to keep moving forward. It is too late to give up now."

"It is never too late to change one's mind, Robin," Elinor replied. "Simply alter your desires and join a cause worth fighting for."

"And what would that be?"

Elinor frowned, her entire face pulling downwards in displeasure. "When you meet The Hand, you will understand the pure size of the evil that is coming to this realm. Doran's will be nothing in comparison. There will be a time in which his misfortune will be brought to his door, and I would argue that now is not it."

I stood quickly. Part of me wished to stay with Elinor and question her about my mother, but the burden her words put upon me had singlehandedly shaken my world. Bowing as one would to a queen, I bid my farewell. "Thank you for your time."

Elinor stood abruptly too, reaching a hand beyond her cage. "Wait, Robin."

I couldn't look at her as she pleaded for me to stay.

"May I be selfish and indulge myself with a final question?"

I hesitated, facing towards the path I had walked down. "How could I refuse a queen?"

She sighed, a hitch in her breath. "Tell me of Tarron. Do you know if he is well? How he has fared to the years of being left in his father's care?"

It felt as though a sharp and boiling hot needle was pierced through my chest. A part of me whispered that I should just walk away, leaving her with some hope that Tarron was in fact alive, but I couldn't lie to her.

"He died," I said quietly, wishing for the cave to swallow me entirely.

There was no need to tell Elinor of the details, and nor did she ask.

Instead, her small, broken voice changed into one of strength and relief as she replied, "Then he has found peace and my Lovis is no longer alone on the other side."

A had found Jesibel at the end of the pathway. She had waited for me, silently beckoning for me to follow her all without pressing questions of my conversation with the captured queen. I could see from the flickering of her gaze that she was interested in what we spoke of, but not once did she ask.

The pathway to Elinor was not the only one within this cavern. Jesibel guided me down another until it opened into a barren space that sang with dripping echoes. The walls of the cave were slick with water which dribbled and steadily flowed from unseen holes within the cave wall. Bundles of green moss spread like stains across the rocks. I even noticed the odd, small white flower that thrived in the darkness.

"Scrub yourself down, it will make you feel better." Jesibel turned her back on me.

I didn't waste another moment with tearing the clothes from my back and standing beneath the spring of water. It was so cold; it felt like a slap to the face, making my mind alert and my body sodden. It was displeasing for only a moment. After a while I simply stood there, letting the bitter stream envelope me like a welcoming hug.

I almost forgot about Jesi's presence until she cleared her throat in a I-am-still-waiting kind of way.

Against my wishes, I stepped free of the spring and changed, body numb and limbs almost refusing to cooperate. My dirtied clothing had been discarded at some point, leaving me to dress in a set of mismatching clothes, a tunic and trousers which hung off my frame. Although I was thankful not to smell. Lifting my arm up to my nose I was greeted with the faint musk of age, and not dirt and blood.

After I changed, I shadowed Jesi, moving through the Below like a ghost. Deep in thought, I lost myself to the conversation I had with Elinor, my body acting of its own accord and carrying me every step of the way. Jesi allowed me the silence. It was clear she wished to break it, but I was thankful she didn't.

~

"I should be thankful, but this is disgusting," I said, perched upon a stool beside Jesi. She had brought wooden bowls filled to the rim with a dark grey slosh of what could only be described as edible mud. I couldn't even brave a spoonful, not as the waft of something terrible offended my nostrils when I brought the spoon to my mouth.

Jesi replied with a mouthful. "It does the job. We are not exactly overwhelmed with choice in the Below."

I could hardly watch as she stuffed another spoon into her mouth, teeth dragging the food from the utensil like a wolf ripping the skin off a lamb. Defeated, I dropped the spoon back into the bowl.

"Well," she said, swallowing hard with furrowed brows of displeasure. "If you are going to let it go to waste then give it to me."

I thrust the bowl into her hand which she snatched greedily. As her sleeve shifted, I saw the puncture upon her arm again.

"Do you know why they're taking fey blood"

Jesi's expression pinched, as though the memory was as painful as the mark on her arm looked. "There is a price to pay for staying here no matter if it is out of our control or not. Blood. They take us, without warning, drain us until we are too weak to stand. Then we are brought back here. Sometimes the letting of blood can feel as though it is without gaps. Other times they leave you here until you start to believe they have forgotten about you. Then your name is called once again, and the cycle begins."

"He uses the blood to change his followers," I said, remembering the human who had wandered into Farrador. He had displayed power that did not belong to him. I had yet to understand how The Hand could create such a thing but understood clearly that it came from fey blood. "I have seen it."

"Honestly, I don't care." Jesi's response surprised me. "He could bleed me dry, and I would still find it impossible to locate a fuck to give."

"Why?" I looked to her, studying the way her brow twitched and she nibbled at the skin of her lower lip.

"I have nothing left to care for." She shrugged, discarding the bowl by her feet and sitting back until her head rested against the wall of the cave. "You will soon come to learn that no one is coming for us here. The ones who do only end up locked up behind the same bars. Just like you. It has been years since I was captured, shortly after Queen Julian..." She trailed off, wincing slightly. "After your mother died and our Court was left unprotected. We had to flee, all of us. It made us easy pickings for the Hunters who seemed to wait patiently for us to step out of our protection. No one has come. Not the Cedarfall Court, our closest allies. I do not see them funding a rescue. We are forgotten. So why should I care for The Hand's plans, when those his sights are focused on do not care for me?"

For a moment I wanted to disagree, but soon realised Jesi was right. Not once had I heard of plans to save the fey taken by the Hunters, only the plans to avenge them. Perhaps it was because no one in Wychwood believed in a possibility that they would still be living. Hell, even I had not thought of such a thing.

"They do care," I replied weakly. "I know people who would raze every realm to find you if they believed there was a chance you still lived."

I had seen Althea herself, Princess of the Cedarfall Court, lead parties of soldiers to infiltrate Hunter camps. First hand I had witnessed her fight for them.

"Then where are our saviours? I have lost count on the number of years I have been kept here. Some, like Elinor, have dwelled within this prison far longer. No one is coming, Robin. You may think they care, but they don't. Every now and then a new bunch of prisoners will be brought here. They bring news of the outside world and with that the lack of want to re-join it again. It would seem that we are safer in the Below than out in a world where the realms are on the cusp of war."

I looked up towards the raised podium, wishing that the Twins had returned for me as they had promised. Watching and waiting stretched out time, but as it went on, I began to believe they would

never return for me. I was stuck, like Jesi and Elinor and the hundreds of other fey.

"If I can, I promise to get you out of here."

Jesi laughed. It was a painful, horrible sound that did not reflect happiness or joy, but disbelief and irritation. "Many have said and promised the same. And if you look around you, I could point them out even now. They may have forgotten but I haven't. I won't. Because the day I forget is the day I wish to perish entirely."

I felt a sense of responsibility for Jesi, knowing her life was displaced due to the chaos that followed my mother's death. When the Icethorn Court fell, so did the lives and homes of many people. Jesi, in this moment, represented them all.

There was a strange atmosphere that had followed my meeting with Elinor. I had noticed the shift in attention as soon as we had returned from the springs. From when I arrived, no more visible than a phantom, now it seemed that everyone within this cave saw me. Jesi did not seem to show signs of noticing or caring, but I felt the tension as crowds of fey huddled together in whispers.

It all came to a head when a group broke apart and walked over towards where we sat. I first thought they would simply join in on our conversation until the lead fey, a bulky man with a wild beard and an equally eager gaze, clamped his hand down upon my shoulder.

The air was driven out of me.

Jesi was up, standing tall in comparison, both bowls she had held protectively now spilled across the dirty ground. "What the fuck are you playing at?"

The man gestured towards me with a fist, seething from gaped teeth, "Word is he calls himself our King."

I was standing now, sensing his anger as though the emotion itself had barrelled into me. "Is there a problem?"

"Yeh," he replied, knocking his fist into my chest so suddenly that it had me jolting back two steps.

Jesibel was between me and the man, not a sense of care for the rock-hard fist that was now held before her face. "Return to whatever it was you were doing. Now is not the night for trouble, big boy."

I felt myself redden as the entire cavern seemed to silence, listening in with tense and quiet interest. Looking towards the glinting of silver I noticed the guards beneath the gates even watched intently.

"You're standing up for him? Have you forgotten what happened to our homes when his family failed us? And now he wants to call himself a King whilst he has done nothing but fail us again."

Icethorn fey. Unlike Jesibel they did not share the same midnight toned hair and moon-pale skin as I, but there was no doubt that they had come from my Court long before it was truly ever mine.

"Turn. Back," Jesibel warned, her stance preparing for more than a conversation. "It would be an awful shame if I was to embarrass you before all your... pathetic friends."

The man chuckled, cracking his fist in his hand as though every bone sang with desire to connect with me. "Move out of our way, little girl, or you will—"

Jesibel sprung forward, hand slashing out towards the lead assailant's neck. It happened too fast to make sense. He doubled over, eyes bulging as his hands instinctively grasped at his throat. Gasping like a fish out of water, he then cocked his head back as a sickening crack sounded. Jesibel attacked, not once but twice, all without allowing him to finish what he had to say. His neck was red from her first hit, but it was his nose which gushed with blood. It poured between his fingers, deep and scarlet, as he wailed like cat whose tail had been stamped upon.

She moved like water around stone, dancing between the next two that jumped into the fight. It was over before it truly begun. Before I had a chance to react, three writhing bodies lay at my feet.

"Anyone else?" Jesibel cried, face red with fury. "Go on, give me a reason to break bones, you cowards."

No one else stepped forward. Even the three who had greeted us with such aggression were now scuffling away, the lead man leaving a trail of his blood across the ground as he retreated.

I placed a hand upon Jesibel's quivering shoulder. "Jesi, it is over."

She gave the crowd a final look, one full of warning, before she shrugged off my hand and took her seat once again. "They all forget their place. The podium of your status to ours may be levelled, but you are still an Icethorn. You are due respect."

"Respect is earned," I replied, still on edge by the attempted attack. "I appreciate you standing up for me, but I also understand why they see me the way they do. I am nothing but a reminder of what was left behind and I am here, not in the capacity they may have wished."

Jesibel rubbed her reddened knuckles, still physically seething from the reaction. "You are a reminder of home. Sometimes reminders are painful for some, and not for others. Your presence here will have effect on those here in varying ways."

"And how does it make you feel?" I questioned, catching her black eyes as though they reflected my own.

"It reminds me..."

I swallowed audibly, picking at the frayed material of the trousers I wore. "Of what?"

"It reminds me of what was taken from me, and what I would do to get it back."



The Twins returned as they promised they would, looking down upon the crowd of prisoners from their podium with blank and empty expressions. Their presence snatched the breath from my lungs.

"Robin," they called, silencing the crowd until I could have heard a pin drop upon the floor. "Step towards the gate and await your collection."

Jesibel startled from her slumber. She had fallen asleep a long while ago, but I didn't have the heart to wake her. She gave me a look, one brimming with concern. Jesibel and I had yet to discuss the matter of what occurred to the fey when they were collected for their payment of blood. I hadn't asked because it would not happen to me. I was here for an audience with The Hand, confirmed by the Twins themselves. He would not require my blood. At least that was the lie I told myself over and over.

"Do not fight back." Jesibel took my hand and squeezed. She was cold to the touch, a whisper of the Court she would have once lived among. There was so much I didn't know about her but in the short time I had spent I had gleamed the most important details, and that was I could trust her. She oozed conviction which made me warm up to her with ease. "The process of bloodletting is discomforting, but not utterly painful. It will be over before you know it."

I forced a smile, hoping to keep my thoughts from creasing my expression. I hadn't the heart to admit aloud that I was not planning on returning here. I would speak with The Hand, petition my release and the safety of Duncan.

At what price?

"Thank you for everything, Jesibel."

"Sounds an awful lot like a goodbye," she replied, winking with tired eyes. "Go quickly and good luck. I *will* see you soon."

Luck. I needed more than that.

Jesibel released me, crossing her arms before her and watched me leave as though she was my guardian on my first day of freedom. Her entire being oozed with apprehension. As I left her, I buried a promise into my soul. If I was to succeed, I would do everything to release the fey kept captive here. Jesibel, Elinor. All of them.

I wandered towards the gates. The guards, who finally took keen notice of me, waited beyond the bars. The Twins watched too, not once taking their attention off me, their gaze prickling my skin. I looked up at them, holding their stare in competition.

It was a rehearsed process, I understood that as the imprisoned fey watched me as I passed, the ones closest to the exit of the prison rushed to put distance between it and them. I understood why when the gate screeched open, and the guards rushed in with unsheathed and sharp blades.

"Steady and slow," the guards warned, urging me into a circle of them. Only until I had passed back out of the prison's gate, and it closed securely behind us were the swords put away.

It was all happening so quickly. Rough gloved hands grasped my arms and moved me around as though I could not do it for myself. I caught the flash of the metal leash that had been removed from me upon my arrival, promptly listening to the snap of the clasp as they connected it back to the collar at my throat.

"I will not resist you," I sneered, skin aching from their pinching and tugging. "There is no need to be—"

A cloth was held above my mouth and nose, silencing my appeal. The scent that followed stung at my nose, itching at my eyes. I tried to reach up and pull the hand away, but my arms did not seem to move. My mind grew heavy. Blinking, my vision doubled. The sounds around me seemed to stretch out as though I was disappearing further and further away from them. But in truth, I had not moved an inch. Sluggishly my eyes looked up towards the two figures of the Twins who still watched from their perch. Darkness crept in the corners of my vision. Still, they stood and watched.

The last thing I remembered were hands that caught me as my body gave up.

Then there was nothing but emptiness.

The drip, drip, drip, quickly became torturous as it was without rhythm or pacing; even if there were other sounds, it was impossible to know as I fixated on the dripping.

Soon enough I could smell again. I half expected the stinging scent that had coated the cloth to still cling within my nose, but it was the sharp tang of copper that greeted me. Pungent and undeniable, I wished to hold my breath to rid myself of the disgusting smell that soon become a taste at the back of my mouth as that sense returned.

Soon enough I could see again. Desperation had me crying out as I threw my eyes open. That cry soon spluttered as the shock of light had me gasping and clamping my eyes shut again for relief from the brightness.

"It will be over soon." The person who spoke was nearby. My ears told me they were close, close enough that they only needed to whisper for me to hear.

My body stiffened in response. I could feel that I sat in a chair with armrests that held my arms up at my sides at an odd angle. Only when I tried to pull away did I realise I couldn't move—not because my body refused, but due to the strappings that kept my arms and my legs pinned in place.

I squinted, straining against the light to see who it was that spoke. Before me sat a man—a fey; the twin points of his ears revealed as much. A helmet of silver hair, wild and untamed, haloed his aged face. A messy beard covered his jaw. His eyes were hooded by heavy loose skin that did well to hide the dull green of his eyes. A film of smoke seemed to cover them, catching the orange-flame light strangely. He too was sitting on a chair, an arm's length away.

"Struggling will not set you free boy," he said, voice gruff and expression bordering on annoyance. "It is best you keep yourself calm. Every drop spilled beyond the container is classed as a waste which will only prolong the letting of your blood."

I looked down, mouth dry and still filled with the taste of copper. Blood trickled down my arm, falling over my fingers like water over rocks, where it splashed into a white bowl upon the floor beside my seat. There was a cut upon my arm, small yet deep. I would have expected pain for such a wound but felt nothing but the cold trickle of blood as it spread down my skin.

"Are they that desperate they must do this whilst I am incoherent?" I said through gritted teeth. "Is this how it always happens?"

The fey man looked down; shirt rolled up to his elbow to reveal the wound that we shared; his arm was covered in brown splotches that usually peppered an older person's skin. "Depends on the

person. Bloodletting can be a discomforting process. The more one does it the less it is bothersome."

Turning as much as the chair and my restraints allowed, I made sense of the large room we were kept within. A towering ceiling, walls carved from a white stone with veins of darker stone throughout, lit mainly by the burning fire that leaked warmth and the countless pillar candles that stood erect on metal holders along each of the four walls.

The two chairs we sat upon seemed completely out of place. There was not much furniture to compare them to, but what little dressers and cupboards I could see were crafted from a white-stained wood. My chair, and the one *he* sat upon, were darker and older, with worn, scuffed red material that pulled apart in clumps across the armrests, likely a result of nails that scratched away at it. I could see the marks beneath my hands, gouges torn from the wood from other fey who had likely sat upon the chair over the many years of their capture.

"Looking for someone?" the old man asked.

"I expected to be speaking with The Hand, not strapped to a chair and bleeding," I replied, lightheaded from the blood loss. The bowl was nowhere near full, but I could see that I had been bleeding for a while.

He sighed, clenching his fist over and over as though attempting to locate feeling in the tips of his fingers. "It is payment. Even I have given blood for many years. Be grateful for the company, it is not usual to share this room during the letting."

I winced, starting to register the cold discomfort of pain in my arm. Even my own hands were becoming numb at their tips. "Then I suppose it would be rude for me not to ask your name whilst I sit here having my blood stolen without consent."

"Aldrick," he replied, eyes bloodshot and tired.

I waited for him to ask mine in return, but he didn't. Remembering Father's teachings of respecting elders, I swallowed the disconcerting feeling that revealed itself and decided to ask another question. "Do they only tie down the new arrivals?"

I had noticed that his arms were free from the constraints I had. Perhaps he had been captured a long while ago and had grown complacent, allowing them to take his blood without any resistance.

"Your new blood. How you react is unknown and frankly a waste of time. It is less painful for all if the blood is taken without resistance. In time you will grow used to it."

I wondered if he noticed my recoiling at his response. It was defensive and harsh, reminding me of how my old teachers spoke to me when reprimanding me for something I had done.

Aldrick stood up. The sudden movement caught me off guard. From his back pocket he pulled forth a cloth and held it above his wound to staunch the bleeding. "All this way and these are the questions you have for me. When are you going to get to the more pressing matters... Robin?"

"I—" My heart filled my mouth, silencing me. I watched the fey man walk with confidence that did not belong to a prisoner. "I didn't tell you my name."

"You did not need to."

I gripped the armrests, body tensing as I watched Aldrick stand behind his chair. I had not noticed it before, but a jacket was draped across it. He plucked it off, and with a dramatic sweep, thread himself into it one arm at a time.

"Who are you?"

His lips did not lift from their hard straight line, but his glazed eyes seemed to smile from within. Aldrick was entertained by my surprise, that much was clear. "Have a guess."

I shook the chair, legs clattering as I kicked upwards. "I am not playing games with you. You are one of The Hand's acolytes. Like the Twins. Where is he!? I demand to speak with him!"

That was when I noticed one great difference between us both. His neck. An iron cuff was absent, unlike mine which seemed to strangle and pinch at my skin.

He raised both as though he welcomed my shouts. "I can assure you this is very serious. Do you truly hold such shock and disbelief that you cannot see that it is I whom you speak with? Yes, you have known of me by one name, but you may refer to me as Aldrick... unless you prefer The Hand as a title."

"Liar," I hissed, not caring for the blood that spilt across the floor as I struggled to break free from the leather straps.

"Come on, Robin." Aldrick almost sagged in on himself. His old, tired body struggled to stay upright. "I know your story. You have seen many things that you would never have believed possible. Yet you look at me and cannot imagine it a reality that I am the very man you have sought?"

I scowled; stare narrowed in burning incredulity. "But you are fey. You can't be The Hand."

"And why can't I?" he retorted, tilting his head to the side as he scrutinised me. "How is it you have come to believe you know so much about me? Remind me, have we met before? No. Your first lesson, never assume. Assuming leads to stupidity. And you have not struck me as one who suffers from idiocy, up until this moment at least."

I couldn't believe it, that or I didn't want to. The Hand was fey, which was the last truth I would have ever believed. Even from his mouth, I still couldn't trust he was telling the truth.

"Then tell me," I sneered, tugging forward at my restraints. "Help me understand why you would condemn your own kind! What has driven you to do what you have...?"

"Condemn my kind," he repeated, contemplating the question as he ran fingers through his beard. "Have you not traversed this realm for my help in killing a man? Is he not the same as you?"

"I have my reasoning."

"As do I."

I couldn't catch a breath. My chest heaved, cheeks reddening as I replied, "Then. Tell. Me." Fury thrummed through me. If I was without the iron band around my throat, I would have exhaled such force across the room it would have broken through stone and flesh. From the look of teetering pleasure, Aldrick knew it too.

"I, like you, do not solely belong to one realm. It is because of that truth that has led me here, and you to me," Aldrick begun, clearing his throat as though it was cluttered with cobwebs. "We are merely products of the world around us. It causes us to act in certain ways. Some may call it desperate and deranged, where others would see us simply changing ourselves to find a place to fit in."

"That is an awfully long way of telling me you are part human and fey," I said, lip curling in disgust.

How could a man so old and frail inspire such demanding hate in a group of people? *Duwar*. The answer was at the tip of my tongue before I finished thinking. "Which of those halves causes you to inspire such bloodthirst? That is why you are doing this, isn't it? Blood."

Aldrick limped slightly, edging his way back around the chair until he could lower himself into it. Seeing his fragile nature stole all fear I had for him. Instead, I felt only pity. That was until a voice echoed through my mind. His voice.

There was a time when fey would construct walls within their minds. I see those teachings have been forgotten with my absence.

I shook my head, feeling as though I bathed in filth with his presence in my head. "How are you doing that?"

"It was a gift which was passed through blood from my father," he replied. *Imagine the feys'* distaste when a half-breed displayed such powers. How jealous they became. What they did because of that very jealousy.

"Stop it!" I cried out, skin shivering as the voice tore through me. When Aldrick spoke, his voice reflected his age. Feeble and pathetic. Yet the inner voice was brimming with strength and vitality; it was loud and demanding, echoing slightly with each word.

You wanted to know, did you not?

Gritting my teeth, I did my best to keep a hold of his glassy glaze, feeling how soaked my head was becoming with sweat. "So they treated you like shit. You have harboured such hate for so many years and I can see how it has changed you."

"Assumptions," Aldrick spoke aloud. "Did you not heed my warning? It matters not as to why I do as I do, but you should be asking how. That is a question in which I would perhaps answer. Tell me what it is you want of me, Robin." *You wish for me to help you kill a King*.

I winced, his voice slicing like a knife across my mind.

I sense that you feel as though you have made a mistake.

"Get out of my head."

It could be done. Aldrick continued, ignoring my growling demand. Doran Oakstorm is, as the fey are, the epitome of delusion and selfishness. If his head is what you desire, then so be it. But there is a cost that comes to seeking revenge. Would you be willing to pay it?

"I change my mind," I cried, feeling the mental pain of his claw-like presence. "Please, stop."

Aldrick retreated his presence from within me like a serrated blade being withdrawn from a fresh wound. "All this way for you to change your mind. Surely there is something you desire from me?"

Perhaps it was my exhaustion, or deliria from his horrific power that had me spluttering my deep, burning want. "Duncan, I want Duncan to be spared."

"General Rackley," Aldrick spoke, drawing out his name as though he thumbed through a list in his mind, trying to locate Duncan upon it. "Ah yes, the boy accused of sinning. Forgetting his mission for our God and defiling himself with, well, *you*."

"Yes," I said, jaw tense and hands clutching the chair. "That is what I desire."

"Do you truly care for him more than killing the man who stole, not one, but both of your parents? That is an interesting priority. Not one I personally can understand."

"Too many lives have been taken in your authority. It would be wrong for me to add another to your list."

That amused Aldrick. He barked a laugh which soon turned to a barrage of hacking coughs. He clutched his chest, eyes bulging and bloodshot. I could do nothing but watch as he struggled to catch his breath, fighting for some control as if his aged and tired body was at war.

I spotted small flecks of blood around the corners of his mouth, staining his grey beard in places. He had coughed it up, noticeable by the splattering across his fist which he lowered quickly to his side.

"You are dying," I said, knowing it wholeheartedly.

"We all die. Doran will die whether you hold the knife or not. You will die. Duncan, the man you hold so terribly dear to your heart, will die."

I scowled, not caring for his distraction. "That is not what I asked."

"You did not ask, you assumed. Which will promptly end this conversation you have so desperately requested if it happens again." Aldrick's face was flushed red, from anger or his previous coughing, I could not tell. Speaking with him was no different than being scorned by a parent; it irked

me.

"Spare Duncan," I said again, choosing to leave the man's pending death for another conversation. I cared little. Hell, he could have keeled over now and stopped breathing, and I would not have cared. "Surely your *God* will not care if one is forgiven. I hear you make all the decisions on His behalf."

"Duwar," Aldrick said, rolling the letters down his tongue as though the name was not from his language or any other I had heard before, "will require payment for his forgiveness. Are you willing to pay the tithe?"

"I am."

Aldrick rolled his eyes, pushing himself back to standing with a chorus of bones clicking and creaking. "Do you wish to know the price before throwing yourself before Duwar's judgement?"

"From my understanding, Duwar is imprisoned and kept away. I do not fear him, only crazed fools who idolise false Gods. You lead your Faithful blindly, with the promise of this Duwar. But what is he going to do? Long gone are the days of Gods; you should realise that better than anyone."

"Sharp tongue for someone powerless and imprisoned in my care." Aldrick turned his back on me, taking careful steps towards a chest of drawers across the room. As he spoke, his voice echoed, amplified by the towering, barren chamber. "The world will soon remember Duwar. I cannot blame you for your insolence for you are not alone within it. I pity you, but do not blame you."

Aldrick withdrew a cloak from the drawer. It was midnight black, plain and hooded. I watched as he struggled to put it on, tying it around his waist with a grey cord and lifting a hood across his head to cover his distinguishing features. Suddenly he was simply an old man, crooked and unimportant.

"Tonight, you will make your payment for Duncan Rackley's pardon."

He was preparing to leave me, I knew it from his lack of attention as he shrouded himself in the cloak. Before he reached the door he paused, age-spotted hand hovering above the handle as though he had suddenly remembered something. That was when he looked back to me, his face completely concealed. From within the folds of heavy material he spoke. "I almost forgot the most important thing."

He limped towards me. I gripped onto the chair, kicking down at the ground to try and break free as his inner presence crept up my mind like a snake cornering a mouse. There was nothing I could say to him. No words that would affect him. Aldrick was detached from this world, lost to his age and delusion, that I knew no words would reach him. He had likely heard them all before.

I spat, a gob of thick saliva that splattered by his feet.

With the years that have passed I have been in the company of many Kings and many Queens. I have shared an equal distaste for them all and yet I admit not one has ever been like you. Worthless, spitting like an animal without grace and decorum. Admittedly I had put you on a pedestal, understanding our similarities. Meeting you, Robin Icethorn, has been one of my life's greatest disappointments.

I gasped as though his words slapped me physically. If my hands were not strapped to the chair I would have scratched at my head, tearing through skin and bone to rip his presence out.

"Fuck..." My mind filled with images for a moment. The room fell away and in the shadows that replaced it were flashing views of lands riddled with fire. Skies awash with lightning and pregnant clouds. Sunless, dark and horrific. *Red*. Droplets of scarlet fell from the heavens and covered the ground. *Blood*. It was everywhere.

A time of reckoning is upon us. My vision returned and with it came the roaring of screams that filled my ears. It was me.

"What did you do? Get out of my head!"

I showed you the future. Not tomorrow, nor the day after and the weeks after that. But soon. A time that is not far off from this very moment. Aldrick lowered himself with a symphony of audible groans, picked up the bowl of my blood from beside me, and held it before him. He was careful with it, while I struggled and thrashed as much as the strappings allowed. Not a drop of blood was wasted.

"You are nothing but an old, forgotten *madman*," I shouted, spit flicking onto my chin as I watched Aldrick turn back towards the door.

He did not flinch or show signs that he could hear me as he opened the door with a yawning creak.

"Do you hear me, you bastard?" The chair almost toppled back in the chaos of my thrashing limbs. "Listen to me! I will stop you. I will. I. Will!"

He closed me in the room. The sounds that tore out of me no longer made sense. My throat grew hoarse, my chest feeling as though it burned with each breathless cry. Then that dreaded, scratching presence returned as strong as it had been when Aldrick had stood before me.

It would seem that you are the mad one now.

The human king and queen of Durmain sat rigid in twin thrones as they looked warily upon the grand room. For a moment I believed they were made from stone, regal statues of wealth and power. Not a single muscle moved, turning their heads seemed impossible, and their lips didn't even twitch as the chamber I was seated within filled with Hunters. The black wave came at once, making the air sticky and the noise unbearable.

I noticed something flickering in the King and Queen's eyes—*panic*—unblinking and frantic as they darted around the room; it was almost as if they screamed through them, trapped inside a body they couldn't control. They were imprisoned to their flesh, bones now iron bars keeping them within a cage, a feeling I shared.

Silence. Watch. Comply.

Aldrick's command had echoed through my mind from the moment the Twins had come to collect me from the chamber I was left tied down in. His words were nothing but empty commands, until I discovered my body refused to follow my rebellious thoughts. I knew he was controlling me in some manner.

I couldn't put up a fight as the Twins dragged me here. Imposing and dark, the room was overwhelming, arched ceilings so high that the top was shrouded in shadows. The walls were old, each worn brick filled with stories of this castle's history; some stones were so large that it must have taken giants to carry them.

I sat upon a podium alongside the human royals. It was curved with polished slabs of marble; dark veins cut through the white stone as though they wished to devour the light. I soon learned that the podium, once a place to hold royals at a high esteem than those who came to see them, now felt like a stage. We were the puppets; Aldrick was the hidden figure at the end of the strings.

I was aware of the bodies who walked ominously behind us. Was it Aldrick? I suspected not. I was helpless, like a butterfly pinned to paper and kept from flying.

Aldrick's control meant I no longer required physical binds to keep me still. I sat rigid in the chair, every bone in my spine pressed uncomfortably against the velvet cushion that was stitched into the chair's back. His control, however, did not stop my mind from wreaking havoc; nor did it keep the anxiety from burning beneath my skin, making it feel as though it would melt away if I sat here a moment longer.

It was soon clear that we were not the only one enthralled by The Hand's immense power. As the Hunters who filled the room distracted each other with chaos and excited shouts, no one cared to witness Elinor being escorted towards a seat beside me. She walked, chin held high, and arms pinned to her sides. As she took her seat, silver chains connecting from her collar to the personal guard who

had brought her, she paid me no mind. But her eyes mirrored that of the king and queens. If I could have seen myself in a mirror, I too would have looked deranged.

Aldrick, although nowhere to be seen, kept all of us complacent.

It was evident that his power did not need to control the crowd. They were rampant and wild, shouting and chattering over one another as they filled every inch of possible space on the cobbled floor beneath the podium, like fish rotting and stuffed into barrels. They flooded into the room until not a speck of floor could be seen. They wanted to be here. Their excitement soured the air. It entrapped me with horror and all I could do was watch, my neck frozen so I could only face the crowd and no one else.

Something was happening tonight, and my skin shivered with unwanted anticipation, dreading whatever was coming.

At the far end of the room were two doors, opening out to a courtyard full of bodies. More Hunters. Their grumbling displeasure mixed with the excited chatter, irritated that there wasn't enough room to accommodate them all inside.

I focused on the Hunters, trying to remember details to stifle my panic. Many looked upon me with the disgust I had grown accustomed to. *Imagine if you knew whom it was you followed blindly*. If I could have smiled, I would have, but the echoing voice that bounced across my mind kept me from doing anything but watching silently.

Part of me scoured through the crowd for Duncan. Although I knew he would not have been among them, I still hoped. Aldrick was many things, but I hoped he kept promises for Duncan's sake.

It took a while, observing the many faces, before I spotted Kayne. He had been looking at me the entire time, expression stoic and unreadable. Unlike those that pressed in around him, laughing and shouting, talking and stamping with excitement, Kayne was as still as me, but not for the same reasons.

The entire room silenced within a moment. From terrible noise, to dead quiet, I watched almost every pair of eyes shift to the left side of the room. I strained my own vision to see what it was that kept them quiet, but the movement was just out of sight.

Then the chanting began. "Duwar, Duwar, Duwar." It was low at first, then the stomping began, and the room seemed to shift and shake as though the stone beneath us all would crack.

I could see Elinor in the corner of my eye as I strained to witness what caused the commotion. Although statuesque, there was something calm about her posture, as though she physically sat in the same room, but her consciousness was elsewhere.

"Duwar, Duwar, Duwar."

The human King and Queen did not look towards the chaos, instead their eyes strained to look at one another. I could almost sense their desire to reach out and touch. Fear spilled out from their gazes, framed by exhaustion and shadowed skin.

Look at them all. My eyes snapped forward and looked to the crowd, but not out of choice. Aldrick filled my mind again, voice loud and demanding attention. All this time they have longed to see me. Unlike you all, Kings and Queens, they follow my dictation all without the need for heavy metals atop my head and a title that is given to you but never earned.

He spoke to every single one of us upon the podium. I sensed it as though his voice was stretched across us, growing louder and quieter as he spoke, as if he walked from either side of the podium.

All these Faithful have come for me. See how they hunger for what I can promise them. Possibilities beyond anything you can provide them.

There was no denying that The Hand was in control here, the human royals no more than his play

toy. It explained everything. How the law had turned its back on the brutality that filled the lands in the name of The Hand and Duwar. How the faith of the Creator had dwindled, like a candle beneath a storm, on the edge of being extinguished, snuffed out in the name of Duwar.

The chanting ceased, stomping feet fading off until silence bathed the room once again. And everyone watched as the limping cloaked figure of The Hand entered and paced slowly across the podium as though it was his birth right.

"Faithful, welcome." Aldrick spoke from beneath the shadows of his hooded cloak. His voice was strained with age. It cracked as he shouted, breaking with the great effort it took for his frail body to pretend it was strong. "My, how many there are of you! It warms my soul to see that you have all received my invite for this evening's festivities. Unfortunately, not all those who have been invited have come, but what more can we expect from the cowards lingering across the Wychwood border?"

Aldrick turned his crooked posture towards Elinor and me. From beneath his hood, I caught a glint of those glazed, narrowed eyes.

"But alas, the show must go on. That is what you are all here for is, it not?"

The crowd released a shout of agreement in unison.

Aldrick turned his back on the sea of his Faithful, looked towards the human royals and bowed. It was strained. Anyone with vision could see it caused him discomfort. It was all part of his act. Aldrick's head tipped slightly, but enough to notice the respectful gesture. "As always we thank you for your warm hospitality. Duwar will favour you both for turning your back on the old God of lies."

Both of their eyes flew wider, yet not a sound came from them. He commanded such I was certain, filling their heads with his overwhelming presence so that they reacted just the way he wanted.

"I can sense your hunger." Aldrick's voice rose, speaking back to the hundreds of Hunters who had come to see him. They were enthralled by him, waiting with bated breath at his every word and movement. They looked towards the cloaked man as though he was a God himself. They did not speak when he spoke for fear of not hearing him. "All of you have travelled from near and far for the Resurgence. A spectacle I have not shared with you until now. Do you wish to see why your bounties have been so important to Duwar's cause? To see what it is I do to aid his promised release? Tell me, Faithful. Let me and Duwar hear your enthusiasm from the realm he is trapped within. Do you wish to see?"

The noise nearly knocked me back out of my chair. It filled the room, likely spreading across the entire realm for all to hear. I could only imagine how terrifying it would have been for those living within Lockinge who knew little of what occurred this night.

Aldrick spoke to someone out of view, my eyes could not see who it was no matter how hard I strained. "Bring in the chosen one."

There was a thud of heavy dragging feet. The clattering of chains sent a shiver up my spine. Then I saw *him*, and my mind screamed a name which caused Aldrick's pleased chuckle to fill my head.

Duncan.

His chest was bare, scars both new and old on display for all to see. A glistening sheen coated his head and caused the strands of dark hair to link in damp chains down his neck. Duncan scowled, paying no mind to the crowd who sneered at him. Among the broken chatter, I could hear slurs being hurled toward him.

Not once did he flinch.

Not until he looked at me.

My heart panged and I wished nothing more than to clutch my chest. Aldrick's control did not allow such a thing. I was forced to watch from my seat, unable to do anything but allow my horror to

burn from my eyes, windows to the turmoil that devoured me internally.

Duncan's brows furrowed, paled lips pulling into a tight, harsh line which tugged at the prominent scar that I had memorised so perfectly. I wondered if Aldrick filled his mind. It would seem as such for Duncan walked freely and without refusal. There was something utterly rehearsed about it.

"Some of you may recognise Duncan Rackley as he stands before you," Aldrick spoke. "A general held at high esteem, who, like you all, had pledged his life to better the world in Duwar's name. He has personally delivered a countless number of fey into my hands. Because of him, and you all, we are even closer to seeing through Duwar's greatest request. General Rackley is the perfect candidate for the Resurgence. To show you all what I have been doing with your bounty and how your belief will alter the unfair balance that we all recognise in the world."

Resurgence, a word that had been used enough times to grip sharp talons into my consciousness.

It will soon make sense. Aldrick's voice echoed across my skull.

The crowd were tense and silent, as though they stood on the precipice of a cliff, waiting to see what waited on the other side. I understood what was going to happen. Unlike the crowd before me, they clearly did not know what occurred with the fey blood. How it changed humans and gave them access to power that did not—should not—belong to them.

You have seen my failed creation.

The vision of the thin, weak looking human that had infiltrated the Cedarfall Court filled my mind, conjured by Aldrick's will as though to tease me.

This will be different. Many of my chosen have lived long enough to spread a message, but not to thrive as Duwar so wished. This. Duncan. It will be different this time.

As his horrific voice filled my head, Aldrick retrieved something from the folds of his cloak. A dagger. Duncan did not seem to notice, nor did the crowd as they were transfixed on Aldrick as he carried on speaking about Duwar's promise and what they wished to gift His Faithful.

But I noticed. And could not do anything to warn Duncan. I studied the blade as though my life depended on it, noticing the swollen handle made of glass that sloshed with dark liquid. Aldrick held the flat side of the blade to Duncan's back. Surely Duncan sensed it? Yet he did not react.

"...how unfair it is that some are born with power and others not. It was why the Creator failed. Unlike the fey's God Altar, the Creator was selfish with his power, keeping it for himself when he moulded you in his image. It was his greatest downfall. Duwar sees this and forgives you for following a God who never truly cared for you. Not like Duwar will. He sees us all as His children no matter whom we are created in the image of. He adopts us all. And in thanks for following His promise, He has instructed me to carry out His wishes as you all know. In His name I will give you all a chance to become warriors in His making. Our campaign will soon spread like wildfire. When those who still cling to their old Gods see what Duwar can promise, they will run to us with open hearts just for a taste of what Duwar can provide. Witness. See for yourselves what He will provide. And then decide... are you willing to meet your end to better your future?"

Aldrick hoisted the dagger high into the air. The action snatched the breath from the crowd collectively. I managed my own shuddering inhale through tight lips.

Duncan stood still. He did not move as the dagger arced downwards, sharp tip aimed for his chest. The blade met its mark. It passed through his flesh with ease, stopping only when the hilt slammed skin deep. Aldrick held him with a vice-like grip, keeping Duncan from falling to his knees. All the while the dagger was left impaled through his ribs, reaching all the way into his heart.

I pinched my eyes closed. If I couldn't see what was happening, it was not real. Someone shouted Duncan's name from the crowd. Kayne. I recognised his voice. Then struggling grunts as he fought his

way towards the podium.

Open your eyes and watch the Resurgence, Robin. Do not be afraid.

I fought to ignore Aldrick's command but failed.

Duncan staggered. He was far taller than Aldrick who was beginning to struggle holding him up.

"Blood is the key. It always has been. I can take power from the underserving and give it to those who would do better with it in their possession. As there is a cost of everything in life, so there is for the Resurgence. But those with burning, strong faith will make it through. Watch! All of you witness what your belief can do. See what you can become."

I could do nothing but watch as Duncan's arms stayed pinned to his side. He did nothing but look forward, the dagger in this chest changing with every passing moment. Blood. That was what splashed within the glass handle. It drained slowly, down through an unseen hollow compartment in the dagger and into the heart that the blade had pierced.

Only when the vial-like handle was empty did Aldrick tear it free and discard it across the podium where it skipped to a stop at my feet. My entire world shattered as Duncan finally made a sound. He cried out, suddenly breaking out of the prison of silence Aldrick had locked him in.

"General Rackley's faith will see him through the change." Aldrick stood back, still a hooded and crooked figure, as he gestured towards the staggering man. "The stronger your faith, the more blessed you shall become." Aldrick was frantic, shouting, throwing his arms around as though he battered an unseen swarm of monsters that flew around him.

No matter how he delivered his desperate speech, not a single set of eyes were taken off from Duncan, not as he struggled against death itself.

"Ro—Robin!" Duncan screamed, voice trembling. "Robin!"

Blood filled my mouth as I bit down on my tongue. I had never wished so hard for anything other than to speak. To tell him I was here. To make him understand that he was not alone. Duncan faced his death like any other would, fearful like a child looking into the dark unknown, crying out with harsh, sharp breaths. Then it all stopped. Not because Aldrick commanded so, but because there was no more pain to scream about.

I watched everything unfold, my heartbeat thundering like a horde of stampeding hooves in my ears.

Duncan uncurled, panting heavily. He stood tall with his chin lifted as he faced the crowd. The room let out a collective gasp at something I could not see. From beneath the shadows of Aldrick's hood he released a bubbling, manic laugh that itched at my soul. The air seemed to shift, thickening as it crackled with a wave of unseen energy. I looked down to the tickle across my arms, watching the hairs standing on end.

"It worked!" Aldrick cried, voice almost muffled by the dense and crackling air. "See how the balance can shift. And in Duwar's name we will cleanse the land and prepare it for His arrival. Together."

I watched, with bated breath, as Duncan turned slowly to look at me. A glow of stark blue light emanated from him. His eyes were overcome by the bright radiance that also spread across his arms and hands which he held before him as though he feared their proximity, lines of sharp, splitting light which fizzed and popped. *Lightning*. His skin was covered in jagged, snaking lines that moved with such speed they did not stay in one place for long. His chest showed no sign of a wound, only the blood that still had not dried.

I longed to speak. To say something to Duncan as I recognised the fear that creased his handsome, glowing face. He looked from me back to his hands, and back again as though he could not make

sense of the power that radiated from him.

A single tear dripped down my cheek. I felt my skin shiver, my body shaking with the tension that built within me. Still Aldrick did not release me from my imprisonment.

The crowd's awe held them in silence. I could have heard a pin drop upon the floor with ease. All I could do was focus on the heavy breathing of Duncan and he stood there bathed in power that should never have belonged to him.

Then he turned again, face hardening, eyes narrowing, as he focused all his attention on Aldrick. My heart leapt in my chest, stomach jolting as though I rode upon the back of Gyah in her Eldrae form. "That is enough, General Rackley," Aldrick spoke sternly.

Duncan faltered, expression pinching as though he fought something internally. Then he continued, taking a shaking step forward. Aldrick backed away, cloak shuffling around his awkward feet. The crowd began to shout, and all I could do was *think* my encouragement.

Kill him, Duncan. Do it.

"Guards," Aldrick cried and the clink of metal replied as armoured men and women ran toward Aldrick. I could see they held an iron cuff identical to the one strangling my throat.

They hesitated as they drew closer to Duncan. His crackling power intensified and spread, singeing the ground where it touched; smoke hissed like reaching snakes around his feet.

"Tell me their names," Duncan growled as he closed in on The Hand.

"Stand down."

"Give me their names!"

Despite Duncan's request being somewhat vague, I knew he asked after his parents' murderers, and I wondered if Aldrick's hesitation was a sign that he knew that too.

The crowd was riled up, some pushing past the lines of Kingsmen as they tried to clamber onto the stage and provide aid to The Hand.

The air split with a thundering clap, blending with Duncan's demanding shout. "Tell me!"

I began to feel movement in my limbs, a prickling of needles as the feeling returned from my feet upwards, spreading out across my spine into every part of me. Aldrick's presence retreated slowly from my mind as he fought to get Duncan under his control. Elinor gasped at my side, sucking in a breath as though she had held it this entire time. She too was released.

Then the human King cried, voice croaky as though it had not been used for years. "Sei—seize him!"

It was hard to tell if he spoke of Duncan, but the shaking finger he attempted to raise pointed straight towards Aldrick. The king was ignored in the chaos, his voice no longer important to those who filled the room. They were here for The Hand and the promise of Duwar, not the King and Queen who were merely brought before them for show.

Everything happened so quickly. It was almost a shock when I heard the distant, scratching scream from beyond the chamber room. I put it down to someone fighting in the chamber below the podium until I heard it again.

"Duncan..." I whispered, my voice finally my own again.

"What is that?" Elinor spoke over me, leaning forward with a grimace as she looked to the dark sky beyond the open doors and stained-glass windows. "Do you see it?"

I tore my eyes from Duncan and Aldrick as another screech reached me, this time louder than before. Beyond the chamber room and filling the sky were large, winged beasts.

Gryvern.

The skies were filled with Gryvern.

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indows exploded as grey-slick bodies shattered through them. The shards of glass fell upon the crowd like rain as they froze, gripped with terror. It was impossible to know who screamed louder, the petrified humans or the monstrous Gryvern.

There was no time to think, only act.

In the panic, Aldrick had withdrawn completely from my mind. My body was mine again, and so was my voice.

"Duncan!" I shouted over the chaos. "Leave him."

Aldrick was being surrounded by the silver-plated guards. His aged, drawn voice was muffled by the thundering of feet, screams and horror that clasped the room.

For a brief moment, I had never been so thankful to see the sickening creations of King Doran's curse.

I pleaded for Duncan to join me. This moment of distraction was what we needed to get away from Aldrick.

"Stay with me, okay?" I said to Elinor who faced the horror with an expression of stern power. I gripped her wrist and held it as though she was the most precious thing in the world. "We are getting out of here. Duncan!"

I could do little but watch as the Gryvern picked humans up without care, ripping limbs apart with a sickening wet noise that turned my stomach inside out. The death transfixed me, as well as Elinor, who muttered her husband's name quietly as though she *knew* what these creatures were to him.

By the time I looked back towards Duncan, Aldrick was no longer in sight, removed from the room with haste. Meanwhile, the human King and Queen were left for the feasting creatures, holding onto each other upon the floor. No one went to help them. They were not even an afterthought.

"I will help them," Elinor shouted as though reading my mind. She tore her arm from my grip and positioned her body towards the human royals. "Go and calm the Hunter before the Gryvern reach us. If this is our chance to get out of Lockinge we will not have long before the window closes."

I nodded, feeling the warmth from my body drain. My throat tightened at the prospect of escaping. Perhaps I should have demanded we left the human royals and thought of ourselves. But the steely look in Elinor's diamond bright eyes told me she would have refused.

The humans who circled Duncan had either fled with Aldrick or raced towards the beasts with forced confidence. Hunters swung short swords and fists, both as pathetic as the other against the clawed and sharp-toothed monsters. Many flooded out beyond the open doors, beneath the dripping of flesh and blood, only to be greeted to a sky filled with the flying demons.

I reached Duncan with ease. He stood before me, shoulders rising and falling dramatically. I reached instinctively for him and was met with a sharp, sudden pain that had my fingers rearing back.

"What is happening to me...?" His voice popped and crackled, charged from within as the bolts of stark light still raced across his skin. Duncan held his hands before him, looking down at the snakes of power that circled his fingers and set the hairs across his strong arms aloft.

"We can figure it out," I replied, breathless from urgency. "But when we are far away from this place—"

Duncan's glowing gaze widened. It was the only warning that something was wrong before his hands pushed hard into my chest. The world faded into darkness as the air was driven out of my lungs. Nothing made sense for a long painful moment until I caught my breath, noticing smoke curling from the burned handprints on my tunic. I was at a distance, my body aching as though every bone had shattered, mended and broke again.

Duncan was not standing where he had been. Instead, he dangled in the air, kept from the ground by the Gryvern whose taloned claws pierced his arms. I couldn't conjure enough breath to shout as the prickling of Duncan's new power still coursed through my body. I watched, splayed across the floor, as Duncan reached up, wrapped a hand around the Gryvern's long, bent leg and forced the blue twisting light into it. The Gryvern burned from the inside; the wet pop that followed was beautiful.

Duncan fell hard to the ground as the creature exploded, chunks of gore, bone and skin splattering everywhere. I was stunned, awed by the power that crackled beyond Duncan's skin. He looked to me, horror and concern creasing his brows.

That was when I saw the Twins. "Be—behind you!"

Duncan had not a moment to spare before they attacked. Each wielded a blade, equally deadly and beautiful with its sharp steel and bejewelled handle. Their lack of trepidation to the power emanating from Duncan only confirmed that their actions were not their own. Duncan threw out his hands before him, a bolt of crackling light following, missing the Twins but colliding against a wall; stone split and exploded, leaving a charred crater in its wake.

My arms shook as I pushed myself from the ground. I could recognise Elinor fussing over the hysteric King and Queen, whilst shouting my name to see if I was all right. Her pleas did not matter. I had to help Duncan.

Despite the unknown power crackling around him, Duncan was fluid and precise as he danced around the two fey women, years of training put on display. The Twins did everything to stay away from his fists and reaching hands, but they too had enough training to keep out of harm's way.

Beside me there was a human body, lifeless and still, clothing drenched in his own blood. His dead fingers gripped a sword that had done little to keep him alive. My body screamed as though it was lit by fire from within. Gritting against the agony from Duncan's touch, I clawed myself across the floor, tore the sword free and claimed it as my own.

I raced towards Duncan and the Twins, sword held high. I did so without uttering a sound, knowing the element of surprise would be the only thing to give Duncan a fighting chance. There was no hesitation. Neither paid me mind as they spun and twisted, swords flashing towards Duncan's exposed skin. Cutting my blade downwards, it was met with steel instead of flesh.

Kayne. He looked over the edge of his blade, eyes narrowed. With a great push he forced me to take steps back, his strength unparalleled.

"They will kill him!" I said, knuckles white as I stared the tracker down. Kayne's disdain for me was palpable, and his tall body acted as a barrier, preventing me from saving Duncan.

Kayne hesitated; the lines creased across his forehead softening for a moment. My breathing

shallowed as I watched his mind turn behind his narrowed eyes. He was captured in his own internal war; then he replied, jaw tightening as he spoke through gritted teeth, "I am going to regret this."

Kayne spun, grunting as he brought the hilt of his sword down on the back of one of the Twins' heads. The crack could have been heard over any level of noise. She dropped, and her narrow body crumpled in on itself. Her counterpart screamed, her entire focus on her sister who laid in a heap upon the floor, ignoring everything else around her.

Duncan took his chance and joined my side. "Brother," Duncan panted, facing Kayne who still held the sword determinedly in his fist. "What took you so long?"

"What has he done to you...?" Kayne whispered, sweeping his sweaty, ginger curls out of his eyes. "Give me a good enough reason not to put you down right now."

"You won't do that because it is me," Duncan replied. "I can't tell you what has happened because I do not know."

"It's not right, Duncan. None of this is right."

"Then help us," I interrupted, aware that the crowd was thinning and the Gryvern would soon be focused on us. "If we do not get out of here, all of us will die."

I could see the hesitation in Kayne's gaze as he looked between Duncan and I then to the blood-soaked room.

"By helping you I go against The Hand and Duwar. We have been warned about your kind's trickery. Duncan has been weak to see it but—"

Sparks of light reached for Kayne as Duncan's sudden anger exploded around him. "It has all been lies. Kayne, see it for what it is."

"We really don't have time for this." I wished to tug on Duncan's hand and draw him away from here, but his power frightened me, and it was still crackling in the air around his body. Even now I felt the lingering pain from his touch; the burns in my shirt were enough warning as to what would happen if his charged touch met mine again.

Elinor cried out, capturing our attention. She pulled back on the arm of the Queen who was being dragged by the claws of a Gryvern. Her cry was one that would inspire war. Powerful and determined, Elinor did everything in her strength to hold on without the help of the cowering King at her feet.

Kayne sprung to action before we had the chance to help. He raced forward; sword held with two hands above his head. With a great leap he swung it downwards, aiming for the Gryvern's claws. But he was too late. Elinor let go, tumbling from the momentum until the back of her head hit the slabbed floor. The human Queen was ripped into the air, thrown into the claws of another Gryvern who treated her more like a toy. Kayne's sword slapped into the ground, sparks emanating from the collision. With the strength of his strike, I was surprised the floor didn't split in two.

I raced for Elinor's side, helping her up. "We need to leave."

She grunted her response, reaching for the back of her matted curls with a wince. "I tried to help her."

"I know, you did all you could," I replied, witnessing as Kayne consoled the human King. "But now is our chance to leave. Do you think you can manage it?"

Elinor nodded, stern and resolute. "I would rather die by the hands of my husband's children than visit the prisons again. We leave, or I die happily."

Husband's children. In that one comment she confirmed what I had learned after seeing Erix's transformation.

"There is far too much that is required from you in Wychwood," I told her, gritting my jaw as I

pulled her to her feet. "Dying is not on the cards today. Not for any of us."

"Fine," Kayne shouted. "We leave together. Now. Before I change my mind. Those doors will take us out into the belly of Lockinge. I need to find Lucari and she will scout the skies for the safest time to leave."

Lucari, as Duncan had explained, was the hawk I had seen nestled upon Kayne's shoulder.

There was no time for further discussion. Kayne took the human King, arm draped over his shoulder, and I helped Elinor as we left the room together. The Gryvern were growing restless. They had successfully picked through the crowds, toying with the dead flesh of the humans with growing distaste. Without the living humans to feast upon, it was likely they remembered why they had come all this way. For me.

Duncan led the way, an illuminated torch of power. He kicked open the door, boot leaving a scorched mark across the wood. Into the dark corridor beyond we ran, Kayne forced to close it behind him.

Something heavy thumped into the other side as Kayne lowered the slat across the door, locking it in place. Then another. And another. Gryvern flew into the door, straining the wood until it groaned and snapped beneath their weight. Even the aged wall around it shuddered, fluttering dust upon us like snow.

All we could do was run.

"Don't let me go," I said to Elinor.

"Never," she replied, breathless. "I did with your mother and vowed I never would again."

Her words kept me going, each step less of a struggle as the memory of my mother raced through my mind. Even with the heavy, draining echo that the iron collar left upon me I felt close to her, with the hand of her friend enclosed within mine.

Duncan led us blindly through the castle. Every now and then Kayne would shout a direction. It was clear the tracker had been within these walls before. It was a maze of darkness and stone for the rest of us.

The sky beyond was dark, Lockinge alight with terror as Gryvern wreaked havoc. I had caused every pain and death beyond the castle's walls. It should have made me feel guilt. If the humans within the city did not hate the fey enough, they would despise us even more now. Just like the humans in Ayvbury had when they had been senselessly attacked by the fey King's creatures. The horror from this evening would snap the little hope of tolerance between both realms, a wound that might never heal.

Pushing all of those thoughts aside, I focused on the burning need thrumming through my blood. The need to survive. It made thinking about anything else impossible. One foot in front of the other, breathing harsh yet focused, I kept my attention on putting as much distance between myself and this place.

Robin, where do you think you are going?

Aldrick's presence crept back into my mind like a vicious snake, constricting and hungry. I opened my mouth to cry out in warning until his command kept me quiet.

Silent. Until I tell you to speak, you will listen.

My body kept moving despite my wish for it to stop. I looked to Duncan's back, wishing nothing more than to call out and tell him what was happening.

Aldrick kept me complacent, his controlling, unseen strings tied tight around my body and mind once again.

Did you truly believe I would simply let my two most valuable assets leave my castle so easily?

I screamed back, voice filling my head. It is too late.

It is not. Now, you are going to do what it is I tell you to do. Understand?

No.

Aldrick's laugh bounced across my skull. Like a fly within a spider's web, you have flown too close. I will not let my treasure slip so easily through my fingers. Come to me. All of you.

I blinked as directions filled my head. Without being able to stop myself I called out, voice mimicking what Aldrick spoke within me, "If we leave now, we will only be picked off by the Gryvern. Follow me."

"Robin," Duncan shouted as I turned, pulling Elinor with me. "What are you playing at? If we go back, we will only lose ourselves within Lockinge. We need to get outside to make sense of our direction."

"Trust me," Aldrick made me reply. Elinor was more trusting than Duncan, but even she noticed a shift in my behaviour.

I pleaded for her to comment about it. To say something, anything for me to reply and tell her what was happening within my mind.

Why me? I asked as my hurried footsteps lead us back into the heart of Lockinge, right towards Aldrick.

Because your mind is wide open, and your will is weak. If you did not wish to be such an easy catch, then you should put up more of a fight like Duncan had. My, how he impressed me.

There was nothing I could do or say to stop the inevitable from happening. That spark of hope that I had clung to dissipated as I led Elinor, Duncan and Kayne who still carried the King, towards Aldrick.

We were all flies, and this castle was an elaborate web that not even the King could have crawled out of. This was Aldrick's domain now, we simply dwelled within it.

here was nothing I could do to stop our group being ambushed. As I pushed the door open, I knew what waited within. Aldrick told me so, showed me flashes of images; Duncan in chains; Elinor kneeling upon the ground, arms shaking as she fought to hold her bleeding body up.

Duncan had felt unsettled as I urged them towards the specific room. I screamed with my mind, my eyes, for him to listen to his gut and not me. But alas, he did as I said. His blind trust for me would be his end.

Like lambs to the slaughter, I led them all into a dark room where Aldrick waited with a body of guards. Silver-plated men and women rushed forward and Aldrick's control on my mind did not waver; I couldn't even cry out in warning or shock.

"Run!" Duncan screamed to the rest of our party as an iron cuff was snapped around his bulging neck. Like rain upon a fire, the crackling light across his skin fizzled out, the iron severing his new abilities.

Kayne handed the King to Elinor when Duncan cried his warning. Now she was struggling beneath his weight, throwing her off balance and dragging her to the ground. It was clear he feared Aldrick greatly; just his presence alone had him to his knees.

Kayne was backing away when a figure detached from the shadows of the hallway we had left and stopped him. The sole remaining Twin held one knife to Kayne's throat and the other pressed above his spine; one wrong move and he'd suffer greatly.

"Well, well." Aldrick limped towards me, wrapped a hand around my shoulder and placed a rough kiss upon my cheek. His touch made me sick. I couldn't even move my hand to wipe the trail of spit from my cheek.

"If only it was that easy to simply leave through a back door and never return. What did you think would have happened to you all? The streets beyond Lockinge castle are full of my Faithful. I would have given you hours before you were returned to me," Aldrick boasted.

His control over my body and mind did not take away my choice to cry. Tears spilled from my wide eyes as I looked over the line of my companions. Duncan's expression was as hard as stone, but the scar upon his face was not as deep as it usually was when he was livid; that small feathering of softness told me that he understood. My doing was not in fact mine.

"You will not succeed," Duncan growled, trying to pull free from the three guards who held him down. They struggled as he fought, but he still could not break free; it didn't deter him from shouting his thundering threats. "One moment of weakness and I will end you. That is all it takes. Let go of me."

"I sense there should be a warning to follow," Aldrick replied, old fingers tightening on my

shoulder until it hurt. "After the power I have gifted you and you turn upon me immediately, General Rackley. Have your years of faith been turned to ash with a mere matter of days with this fey boy?"

Elinor's lips were pulled into a tight, sharp line. She looked at Aldrick with pure hate; if her stare was a weapon he would have been covered in deep and agonising wounds.

Aldrick was still hooded, speaking from the shadows he hid within. Were Elinor and I the only ones to know of his true identity?

It is our little secret, Aldrick confirmed, his youthful voice echoing across the cavern of my mind. Not for long. When my task is complete the people of this realm and the next will not see me as a fey. They will see me as The Hand. Bringer of Duwar. Ruling at his side. A new era.

"If I had known you were nothing, but an old man cursed with the cancer of delusion I would have never followed your false promises," Duncan spat as he replied, teeth bared, and arms taut with muscle.

"Ah, but you did not join my army as the others had. Did you, Duncan?"

I watched in horror as Duncan's eyes rolled back into his head and he pinched his eyes closed. Duncan struggled, not physically but mentally, throwing his head from side to side.

"Get out of my fucking head!"

It was becoming harder for the guards to hold him down. Others had to join, gripping his sweat slicked skin and keeping him from breaking free.

"Names," Aldrick said, drawing out the word as though it was the first time he had ever spoken it. "Your friend Kayne joined because of the promise for a new world. He heard the words I spoke of and, like the many others, wished to help bring forth this new realm in the name of the punished and forgotten Duwar. You... You simply wanted names. A selfish want."

"Get. Out," Duncan pleaded; eyes scrunched in pain.

"Please..." I said breathlessly. "Leave him. This has nothing to do with him."

"Not as strong willed as you first thought," Aldrick replied to Duncan, swatting my pleading away with the wave of a hand.

Duncan's eyes snapped wide, and he panted, lips and chin wet. He looked unhinged like a wild animal caught within a trap. He did not plead for Aldrick to withdraw from his mind anymore, instead he stared at a spot on the floor as his dark forest eyes filled with stubborn tears.

"Does it change anything for you?" Aldrick asked, releasing me and stepping forward. "All these years and you have wished for something that is pointless and useless. Names are not as powerful as you have been led to believe. What will you do with the information you have sought?"

I couldn't catch a breath as I watched Duncan retreat from this room, this world before our very eyes. No longer did he struggle. The guards did not relax their holds, but I could see that he had given up fighting now. Whatever Aldrick had revealed within Duncan's mind had broken him.

"Talk to me, Duncan," Kayne shouted, breaking his silence as he looked worriedly towards his friend. "Come on, boy. Say something to me."

Duncan ignored Kayne. Perhaps he didn't hear him through the roaring of whatever information he had gleaned from Aldrick.

Kayne then turned his attention towards Aldrick. Still, he was the only one who did not look upon the old man with horror. There was still a gleam of admiration for The Hand, even if the wince across his face told me that he struggled with it after what he had witnessed.

"What of the Faithful?" Kayne said. "Those creatures likely hunt them through our streets. Should we not be fighting them? Helping the innocents who wait within their homes for the beasts to pick them off one by one?"

Aldrick shook his head. "It would seem a disgruntled fey King waits outside our walls. Those creatures are known as Gryvern and only he can control them. Twisted and evil creations of the very King who sent them. War is upon us, but I will not waste my precious Faithful in fighting beasts. This war is not for them. They are here for something and when they retrieve it... they will leave."

At this Duncan looked to me. So did Elinor, whose stern expression cracked and revealed concern for me. A name whispered across her lips. *Doran*.

"Do not worry." Aldrick leaned into my ear and whispered, his lips uncomfortably close. I could not pull away as his strong will still gripped me firmly. "I will not give you up that easily. As a show of my good faith, and my desire to work with you and not against you, we will kill Doran Oakstorm together. That is what you wished for, was it not? My help in defeating him? You came all this way for an army, an army I can give you. With your help we will create one. Look at Duncan Rackley. Do you see what your blood can do now?"

"Monster," Elinor snarled. "I have faced men like you before and believe me, it will never end in your favour."

"And you would know one wouldn't you, Elinor Oakstorm? Robin came all this way because of your dear husband. As did you. Both for differing reasons, but it is poetic that you share such a similarity, is it not?"

"From the arms of one, to the prisoner of another. Yes," she spat, "I do know a monster and you are the greatest of them all."

Aldrick laughed, deep and rumbling, like the warning of thunder through dark-stained skies. The remaining Twin echoed his chuckle as she paced behind the line of my companions, each of them on their knees, the human King still sobbing into the stone slabs at his feet. Not a single guard had to hold him down; he was no threat.

Dark lines sliced down the Twin's grief, crazed face. Her hair was a tangle of wild and messy strands. Her clothes stained with the blood of her sister.

"Please," Kayne said, flinching as the Twin came too close. "The more time we waste the more people will die to the hands of those... the Gryvern."

"And their lives will not be wasted," Aldrick snapped, displeased with Kayne's sudden interruption. "Have you not seen what I can do for those who die? Look at your trusted companion. Stabbed in the heart yet still lives. Ask yourself why that is."

"Blood," Elinor said quickly. "He steals it from our bodies and puts it into the vessels of his Faithful. Just like my *dear husband*," she mocked. "Your Hand is no different. He creates beings that should not exist under Altar's or the Creator's rule."

"Right and wrong," Aldrick replied. "The result of my work does not belong to me, Altar or the Creator. These are the children of Duwar. Beings that do not belong. Beings that are not claimed by either the fey's God or the human's beloved Creator. Just as Duwar did not belong among his siblings, Duncan and the rest of my Faithful do not have a rightful place among the realms. That will all change soon enough."

Do you wish to say anything?

My voice was mine again. Aldrick's claws pulled free from the flesh of my mind, allowing my control to return.

"Burn. In. Hell."

"That judgement does not belong to you, Robin Icethorn. I think it is time that you all see for yourselves the promise of a future that is coming."

Aldrick looked towards the Twin. "Seraphine, it is time."

The Twin, Seraphine, nodded, sheathing her blades at her waist. It was strange to understand that she had a name; she was a nameless puppet in my eyes.

"Go to him," Aldrick said to me, hand urging me to move. "Be with your love and witness this together. Perhaps you will both understand what it is I work towards. Now go."

"Fuck you," I managed as my feet began to step forward and I walked, without my own doing, towards Duncan. As I joined his side the guards took a hold of me, dragging me to my knees. I bit back a gasp as my bones smacked into the stone ground. With the echo of a haunting laugh, Aldrick finally retracted from my mind.

"I didn't mean to—"

Duncan stiffened beside me. "I know."

I longed to reach for him, but the guards held me firm. Elinor looked down the line at me, eyes brimming with worry. I could see her question within her stare, and I nodded subtly to answer. *I am fine*.

There was a screech of wheels, an awkward, unrhythmical squeaking as Seraphine struggled to pull a large object covered in a deep red velvet cloth. Aldrick stood still, hands clasped before him, as Seraphine guided the object behind him. From my view point it looked as though it was a large frame, and Aldrick was the painting trapped within it.

"The humans have followed the Creator for centuries, all without seeing Him. Hearing His command or feeling His presence. The fey believe stories of Altar and how He created the four Courts from His blood and gave His children access to magics that bettered them above anyone else. Stories. That is all it has been to each and every one of you. I cannot blame you for thinking me a fool, a cruel old man preaching the promise of a God that has been erased from the realm's stories."

Seraphine moved towards Aldrick and reached for his cloak. With bated breath, I watched, knowing what was coming. Slowly she lowered it, exposing the face of the man beneath, and the two points of his ears.

Kayne released a sound that was both a gasp and a growl. I was silent as Aldrick finally revealed his truth before us all. Even the guards who held me relaxed their hold as they too shared their shock at what they witnessed.

Aldrick had revealed himself as the very being that he had commanded his Faithful to hunt. He was fey and that truth snatched the sound from the room entirely.

He smiled, flashing stained teeth as he surveyed each of our reactions.

"I don't understand." Kayne broke the silence. "You cannot be..."

"Fey? Was the possibility far from your mind, Kayne? Was it truly that hard to imagine that one of their own could sign the seal of command that demanded for the fey to be rounded up like cattle and brought here? I am part of both realms, Wychwood and Durmain, just like Robin here. It is why Duwar chose me to herald the new world, to create an army strong enough to fight in His name."

"You tricked us," Kayne shouted, finally fighting back against those who held him. "Why?"

"It is time you see why I've done all of this." Aldrick tipped a head towards Seraphine who grinned. She reached for the velveteen sheet across the large object and gripped a fistful.

I studied the hard, sharp profile of Duncan who did not take his eyes off Aldrick for a moment. His lip was curled, his scarred face pinched deep in disgust at the man he saw.

"History will remember the names of those who witnessed Duwar before His arrival. And each of you will help in shattering His bindings and bringing the possibility of a new realm, one combined in His name. There is still much work to do, but the wheels are turning."

Seraphine yanked the cloth and it fell from the object, gently fluttering across the floor. It was a

mirror, golden frame carved with intricate designs of stars woven among vines and flowers. The golden-painted surface had become worn in areas, revealing an uglier truth of ancient wood beneath it. The mirror held within the frame was equally as aged. In the corners webs of small cracks spread across like greedy fingers wishing to claim the entire surface of the mirror.

Someone sucked in a sharp breath. I did not look around to see who it had been as a strange movement caught my attention. Something was moving. I looked harder, narrowing in on Aldrick's back which was reflected in the mirror, then to the hand that reached out and wrapped around Aldrick's shoulder. There was nothing in the room to explain what it was we saw.

This was no ordinary mirror. It was a window, revealing a realm that was not ours. The figure stepped forward from the darkness slowly. At first it was only the hulking outline that I could see. I blinked, unable to believe that what I saw was not one of Aldrick's mind tricks. But it was real as the floor beneath my knees. As real as the hands of the guards who still held me down.

Then I found myself muttering a name I had never believed I would call out for. "Altar, help us."

emon.

It stood within the mirror's reflection not an inch behind Aldrick's back.

Duwar.

It was neither male nor female with a towering body crafted from molten rock. It seemed the layer of its hardened skin cracked in places. Beneath it glowed a body of deep, burning red that shifted tones from angry scarlet to warm orange.

I felt the creature's piercing red stare cut straight through me. The presence stole every possible sound from the room that even the King of Durmain ceased his heavy sobbing. Duwar stood deathly still, only the shifting of its eyes drifting across the room as they drank us in.

"Do you see it now?" Aldrick asked, visibly affected by the unseen, clawed hand the creature rested upon his shoulder. Only in the reflection could Duwar be seen, but its touch was as real as the glass of the mirror itself. "Until now only I have been blessed with the vision of Duwar. Never has another seen what I have seen. Witness what has kept my feet stepping forward in this direction. You see now, don't you? You see Duwar."

"A trick," I muttered, unable to form another reason as to what I saw. The creature looked back at me and tilted its head like a curious dog—but no dog had horns that burst through its exposed skull, or cracked lips of scorched earth. "Just another vision you have filled our heads with."

Aldrick looked displeased with my outburst, fighting the urge to look behind him with a face of astonishment. "Is your lack of faith so pungent that even with a God presented before you, you are unable to grasp truth from trick? Robin, what you see is very much real. A glimpse to Duwar in its prison. But not for long... soon you will be free."

It was disconcerting how Aldrick shifted his conversation from me to the creature that waited behind him.

"This proves nothing," Duncan hissed, straining against the hands of the guards once more.

Aldrick shot his attention back to the man at my side. His expression pinched, eyes storming with curiosity. "You dare question after all you have seen?"

I slowly reached my hand out sideways until I reached Duncan's sweaty skin. Aldrick was too occupied to notice, as well as the guards at our backs who were just as shocked as we all were with the scene before us.

Duncan stilled under my touch, then leaned into it. My heart swelled. The moment between us felt as though it could be the last.

"You said you wish to free him," Elinor spoke up, snatching Aldrick's attention from the disgraced Faithful general. "If... Duwar is real then what is stopping it from breaking free? It has

enough power to ensnare you, but is kept locked beneath a thin pane of glass?"

"So much history of Duwar, Altar and the Creator has been left untouched that you all do not know the stories. It is a crime, one worthy of the greatest punishments. But I am merely The Hand, voice of Duwar and speaker of the truth which has been kept from the fey and the humans for too many years." Aldrick stepped forward, shoulder raising as Duwar released its hold. The creature, silent and burning, watched as the old man stalked towards us. Aldrick reached Elinor and put a single finger beneath her chin. Without much effort he lifted her face upwards, smiling down upon her like she was a child preparing to listen to a bedtime tale. "Duwar has promised a new realm, one undivided by its sibling's laws and differences, a world with space for those who did not fit in. A home."

"I can take him," Duncan whispered beneath Aldrick's speech. The Hand was too enthralled as he unleashed his story as though he had held it in for many years, desperate to tell a soul.

I looked at Duncan's profile, keeping my movements muted and my voice as equally quiet as his. "It won't work."

Duncan's scowl deepened, eyes unmoving from the reflection of the burning, molten creature that watched from the face of the mirror. He looked at it as though he waited for proof that it was an illusion.

"I would rather die trying than perish not knowing," Duncan finally replied, the muscles across his exposed chest tensing.

"...Keys. It was my task to locate them. The first key was easiest and most obvious to find. Faith. Destroying the belief bestowed on the egotistical God the humans call the Creator. Complacent that His rule would last forever, the Creator put His forged key in faith itself. The more who worshiped Him the stronger His lock was kept upon Duwar. The weaker the devotion became... well, do you see now? The barrier between our realm and the hell Duwar has been kept within is thin as a result."

In another world, during another time, I may have believed Aldrick's story to be nothing but fiction a parent told a child at night to keep them behaving in the following days, a way of manipulating the naïve to behave with threats of demonic monsters that would come for you in the darkest of times. But then I looked back to the mirror and saw the very creature he preached about, still shrouded in shadows, its skin glowing as though fire burned beneath it, visible only through the cracks across his rock-hard skin. Eyes slitted like a cat's, forged from flame and blood, redder than the freshest of blood, glowing brighter than the proudest of fires.

"Indeed," Aldrick murmured, releasing Elinor's chin and stalking back up the line. Kayne stiffened, eyes glancing towards Duncan as though he waited for something. The King's sobbing returned, this time more frantic and pathetic than before. Aldrick paid him no mind as he continued with his story.

"It is the final keys that are harder to uncover, scattered among the fey Courts. They would not have been simple to locate and destroy. More physical than the Creator's faith, but more elusive. It would have required an army to aid me, one I had to create myself."

"One chance," Duncan muttered, lips thin and jaw tight. "Together."

The terrorising screams of Gryvern sounded beyond the room, the noise of them increasing louder than they had been before. Still, they searched for me, but Aldrick showed no sign of caring. Was my capture by Doran's creatures a better fate than the one that waited for me here?

"I can't." My whispered reply was laced with defeat. We were trapped in both outcomes. By an old man with a demon at his back, or a bloodthirsty king who would traverse the realm to see me dead.

Elinor spoke up again, shouting towards Aldrick with a sense of misplaced urgency. "Why would

He entrust you? Of all people, Duwar has chosen an old man to encourage His return. I cannot make sense of it."

Aldrick stopped just before he reached Duncan. He turned on his heel, crooked body bent inward at his shoulders as though he held the weight of the future upon his back. "It matters not how Duwar believed me worthy. Giving into that ideal is selfish and sinful. Ask yourself, why did Altar choose the families of those who rule Courts in Wychwood? Why did the Creator make soldiers of his own, only to discard them out of jealousy that they would, like he had with Duwar, overthrow him?"

That was something I had never heard of before. There was no room to question Aldrick on his mention of the Creator's soldiers as he continued.

"Perhaps it was my willingness, or lack of selflessness and pride, that captured the attention of Duwar. Whatever it may have been I am merely thankful that it was I who was chosen. When the final keys are destroyed and it is free to claim its rule across the realms, you will have the privilege to ask the question again."

"I would rather die," Elinor replied, causing a cold shiver to race up my spine.

"Unfortunately, that is not a privilege you have. Ensuring you live is highly important. I need you for Duwar's sake."

"To poison more like me?" Duncan said, spit falling down his chin.

"Precisely."

The screams of the Gryvern intensified, finally causing a reaction in Aldrick. He frowned, tired eyes glancing towards the door. "Seraphine, I think they have seen enough."

She did not respond.

Seraphine was nowhere to be seen.

"Robin," Duncan pleaded. "Please, it is now or never."

Aldrick turned his back on our line and walked towards the mirror, searching the shadows of the room behind it as though his puppet waited within. "Seraph—" The mirror toppled, falling upon Aldrick, and there was nothing the old man could have done to stop it; Duwar's form shifted, shrinking from view before the glass crashed down.

Standing behind the mirror, chest heaving, and arms outstretched, was Seraphine, her face as white as snow. "Get them out of here!"

Aldrick was lost beneath shattered glass.

Guards, in the panic, released us and sprang forward to help. At least that was what I believed until they turned on one another. Swords pierced through backs, perfectly placed between chinks of armour. When the blades were pulled free, they were covered in the dark sheen of blood.

Duncan was up, standing upon his feet, throwing a fist towards the back of an unexpecting guard's head. It connected with a crack, bone upon bone. The guard fell. I caught the glimpse of broken skin across Duncan's knuckles for a brief moment before he threw yet another fist at a new target.

"Stay with me," Elinor said, gripping my arms and pulling me back. Kayne was beside Duncan then, joining in the fight. They fought, side by side, creating the perfect barrier between the chaos and us.

"What the fuck is happening?" I spat, eyes scanning the room.

"I don't know..." Elinor replied.

Soon enough the fighting stopped. It started and ended so quickly. Human guards lay at the feet of our allies, boots crunching over shattered glass and puddles of blood.

Seraphine stood among the crowd, her grief-pinched face still present but not as overwhelming as it had been. "We do not have long."

Duncan stepped forward, fists covered in his and other's blood that were still held firmly before him. "You killed The Hand..."

"He is touched by a demon," Seraphine replied sharply. "It would take far more than that to kill him. Now, if you do not come with us, then there will be nothing to stop him when he takes control over all of our minds."

"Why would you do it?" I shouted, tugging free from Elinor whose nails scratched into the skin of my arms as she held on with such ferocity. It was clear that the guards who were left standing were allied with Seraphine. They stood before her, a barricade of flesh and steel.

"Because a rather handsome price has been put upon your head and I wish to claim it. It would be easier to take you willingly, so I suggest you cease your questioning, and we leave."

"No," Duncan said as Seraphine took a brave step forward. "No one leaves this fucking room until you tell us what is going on."

Seraphine shared a look with me that suggested I already knew what she was doing. And in a strange sense, I did. I had seen that look before, many weeks ago, upon the face of a girl who had been promised money for my head. Instead, Seraphine's expression was not as twisted and malicious, but still captured the same hunger that had glinted in the eyes of Briar.

"We are all Children of the Asp," Seraphine confirmed my thoughts. Assassins. Hired mercenaries. "Usually, we work alone but the price for Robin's return is too delicious to ignore. Enough to share."

Duncan had seen Briar himself and understood the danger associated with that title, how skilled the assassins were.

"Doran," Elinor said, voice shaking with a fear that was all too real.

Seraphine hardly spared her a glance.

"Who sent you?"

"Sent?" Seraphine laughed. "We have always been here. We are everywhere. Hidden amongst crowds, placed among the realm for when we are required to act."

"Answer the fucking question," Duncan growled. Even with the iron cuff strangling his throat, I could sense the power that dwelled within him.

Seraphine looked directly at me, a glint of pleading in her stare, perhaps created from the trunk of coins she saw when she looked at me, but I hoped for something more genuine. Then she replied with two words that sliced through the tense room and stabbed into my soul, "A friend."

e ran, feet pounding through corridors and endless connected rooms each as barren and lifeless as the next. Mixed with the sound of our heavy footfalls were clattering steel and the occasional screech of Gryvern whom still tore through the castle in search for us.

There was no room for trust as we moved with haste, surrounded by the party of armed assassins. This fate would have been far better than being left to The Hand's plans or the desperation of Doran and his twisted creatures that filled the skies beyond the castle.

A small part of me felt guilty that we left the human King behind crying on the floor. Elinor had tried to take him with us, but he refused, pushing her and demanding to be left behind. It seemed my boon did not cover the human King's survival as Seraphine and her fellow companions did not waste any time retreating, not with the honest promise of Aldrick awaking and regaining control of our freewill. He had the power, infused with his undeniable connection with the demon God, to overwhelm all our minds and take over.

Run. I screamed at myself, filling my head with that single word as we navigated through the castle.

Duncan had held my hand from the moment we left. His grip was certain, full of unwavering strength. He did not let me go. *Would* not let me go. His legs were longer than mine, far more powerful and faster; he had to slow himself down a few times to stop from pulling me over.

Seraphine knew where she was going. All we could do was follow blindly as we raced towards her promise of a *friend*. I wondered about her twin sister. Had she been part of the Children of the Asp too? Perhaps her life was the price Seraphine had to pay to see me delivered to the highest bidder.

Our party came to a sudden stop when the breeze of nightly air cut through the stuffy, stone walls of the castle. We had flown down a narrow corridor that ended in an open doorway. Two, maybe three figures, stood waiting for us, shapes outlined against the night behind them. If it was not for Seraphine's continuous running, I would have believed them to be enemies, yet another barrier from stopping our escape. We rushed towards the open door, only slowing our run as we reached the figures.

"They wait for you at the shore," one said the moment we reached them. They spoke to Seraphine only, caring little for our party. Duncan stood before me, hiding me from view behind his back. "You told us you would have one. Not four."

"Plans change," Seraphine replied, voice light and full of twisted pleasure.

"But the bounty doesn't cover—"

"Send a report only when you hear that The Hand crawled his way out of the predicament I have left him in," Seraphine interrupted. "Monitor his movements and keep me informed. Be wary. He will be scorned from our betrayal and will likely see all those around him as traitors. Keep your distance. Strike for information only when the time is right."

They nodded in agreement, their silence telling me all I needed to know about the hierarchy of the group.

I noticed as other beings peeled from the balcony of sorts that we had come to. Duncan did too as his hand tightened in mine.

Wind ripped around the towering walls and the heavy scent of salt itched my nose; as I breathed in, I could taste it, thick and undeniable. The swollen moon's reflection rippled across the expanse of darkness below us; even the winds could not hide the lullaby of water rushing over rock and stone.

"The path down to the coastline is old and worn, tread carefully but move quick." Seraphine's command was meant for all of us. "If we do not get you far from Lockinge now, there will not be another chance again. Go. With haste."

We continued running, feet clattering down the steep set of steps that seemed to have been carved into the castle's outer wall. Light was sparse which made it feel as though each footstep down was another closer to our final fall. Seraphine lead the way, each of us following behind, wind ripping at our faces.

I felt pure relief when the world seemed to settle, and our feet touched down on solid, flat ground. Cold sprays of water splashed across our skin. Our feet crunched over stones, slick and wet from the swell of the dark ocean before us.

When I spoke, my voice felt shattered, as though I spoke through shards of glass embedded in my throat, "I am frightened."

Duncan wrapped his arm around me, body damp from the ocean's spray. "Rightly so, but I am not leaving your side this time. I will not let you go."

I pressed my forehead into the mounds of his chest, feeling his hard muscle push back against my face. "If I could have done this all again, I would never have come. I put you in danger and I will never forgive myself."

"My actions are my own," Duncan replied, large hand taking the back of my head and rubbing it in calming circles. "I wished to meet The Hand as much as you, yet it would seem that hope was all in vain."

Seraphine busied herself, shouting towards our crew as she waded into the body of rocking dark water. A boat, small and weak, clattered into the pebble shore. I was certain the rough sea could have broken it into pieces of useless wood if the weather was any wilder. It was incredible to believe that this small vessel was our only hope of leaving this city.

"He told you their names," I whispered, lips pressed to his skin. Duncan tasted of salt and copper. "Tell me that it was worth it at least. Give me a reason to cling onto some feeling that this was worth something."

Duncan stilled, his hand ceasing its circles as it paused upon my head. My face moved, rippling as he took a hulking breath inward. "I do not believe I am ready to face the truth The Hand has revealed to me. Not yet."

I pulled back, glaring up through the darkness at Duncan's stern, glassy-eyed expression. "When you are ready, I will be here to help piece it together with you."

He looked down, forcing a smile as the world around us drowned away. "Repeat that promise to me when we make it far from Lockinge, okay?"

Reaching up onto my toes, body aching from tiredness and deliria, I pressed a feather-light kiss upon Duncan's lips. I felt his own quiver in response, pressing out to greet mine for a moment. There was a tension between us, taut and harsh; I only hoped we had the space and time to deal with it soon.

"There will be plenty of time," Seraphine pulled us apart, hands harsh and nails unforgiving, "Get in the boat, both of you."

Her urgency and unruly panic had us both moving towards the shoreline. Kayne already waited within the small vessel, standing with legs wide as he steadied himself against the rocking. Seraphine's fellow assassins held the boat as steady as possible like an anchor, some chest deep.

"Come quickly," Elinor spluttered, hand outstretched as her chestnut curls flew wildly around her face. For a moment, it was like seeing the vision of my mother that had haunted me all these years. Face obscured by floating hair, lullaby voice soft and gentle, even beneath the bellowing of winds that tore around us.

Seraphine waited for us to move. She took up the rear, looking back up towards the castle as though Aldrick would fly out from the windows in search for us at any given moment.

I reached for Elinor, taking her hand and she led me ankle deep into the water. We were only a few steps in when the dark night exploded with unwanted light. I clamped my eyes shut, almost losing my footing as the sudden light shocked me with its blinding brilliance.

"This ends tonight as it should have many years ago," a voice called out over the crashing waves.

I stopped dead in my tracks, water lashing up my legs. Elinor's grip on my hand weakened and fell, and I felt entirely alone and helpless as I turned to face the speaker.

King Doran Oakstorm stood upon the shore, outline glowing as though a star burned beneath his skin. His power stained the rocky shore and the castle far beyond him as he lit the scene like a beacon. The rippling of the portal he had stepped through faded behind him. At first it was hard to see his features until his glowing skin died down to a spluttering ember. Bloated belly, sunken, grotesque skin, short, awkward frame. For a man with such tremendous power, he looked as though it did not belong to him.

"Get in the boat!" Seraphine said, voice deep as the ocean that waited behind us.

"Quiet, Asp," Doran spat, displeased. "I have come for the boy. This time I will not leave without seeing him dead."

"You have come all this way for me?" I asked, wading back through the water towards Doran.

Even with my power cut off by the iron cuff, and the lack of weapons in my hands, I felt the urge to run at him, to take him down. Seeing him conjured the faces of all those who had died. Mother. Father. The memory of Erix. All the innocent lives, human and fey, that had died in the crossfire of his hate. And the Gryvern, his children, warped and twisted into creatures. They did not choose to be born. Doran condemned them from the moment he spread his careless seed. For them all, I would kill him.

I had a hunger in that moment, one that was only quenched by death. Seeing Doran reminded me of my father and the way the light dulled from his eyes. How I carried his broken and lifeless body to his eternal resting place within the Icethorn Court. Seeing Doran reminded me of it all, the storm of feelings smashing into me all at once. Even with my power severed, the hate that fuelled me made me feel like the most powerful being in the world.

"And who is this?" Doran mused as Duncan stood between us. His frame was wide and strong, hands balled into fists of stone at his sides. "Ah yes, Erix told me of you. The human Hunter whose heart has been touched by his enemy. Poetic how your parents' story has followed you like a cursed shadow. It would be a pleasure killing you, Hunter, to see Robin suffer and to know your kind could

never do as you have to my family agai—"

"Dearest?" Elinor called out, passing me with grace and ease. Her voice was a song, soft and welcoming. It was as though the water parted as she walked through the shallows with an ease that belonged only to those who demanded respect. Even nature bowed to Elinor.

Duncan took the moment of distraction to his advantaged. Wrapping his arm around my chest, he turned his back on Doran and spoke. "This is no longer your fight."

Perhaps my hearing was damaged, or the reality of what was happening finally came through the pure undeniable wish to cause Doran pain. But it took me a long moment to grasp what Duncan said and what he meant by it.

Doran's light faltered as his long-lost wife stepped free of the dark water. Her torn dress clung to her emaciated frame. The longest strands of her hair hung in clumps from where they had dragged through the water.

"It cannot be," Doran said, voice breaking with each word. "A trick. A ghost."

We all watched as a fey King trembled where he stood. Doran's heavy body thudded to the ground, knees slamming into stone without him showing an inch of care. In a heartbeat the burning power of his light dwindled to nothing, and he was simply a broken man, watching the phantom of his beloved wife walk towards him.

In the distance Gryverns screamed. They grew ever closer. In the darkened sky it was near impossible to notice their proximity.

Seraphine spoke to me, appearing suddenly from the shadows. "We go now. All that I care about is seeing you out of this place. Enough time has been wasted to distraction." She snatched my arm and began pulling me towards the boat. Duncan did not hesitate to follow nor refuse to leave without Elinor.

"I can't leave her," I said, watching as Elinor reached up for the full cheek of her husband. Greedy, stout hands reached for hers with frantic urgency and I heard his small, broken voice speak with a furious desperation.

"My love, I found you."

"Indeed," Elinor replied, standing above Doran with her back straight and unwavering. "All these years and I thought I would never see you again."

"I searched for you," Doran said, spluttering like a pathetic fool. "Given time I would have ripped this entire realm apart in your memory. Everything I have done since you were taken has been for you. Everything, my love."

"That I do not doubt." Her reply was cold and void of any love.

Something hard smacked into my back and I realised I was now waist deep in water. Seraphine shouted something at Duncan who promptly followed by hoisting me up. Kayne, with hands of reluctance, aided me into the boat. All this happened without taking my focus off Elinor and Doran.

"The Court has been poisoned since you were taken," Doran said, ignorant to Elinor's change in demeanour. "But with your return it will make it home again."

Behind them the air split, untethering in two lines of pure golden light that created a portal.

Elinor stepped back. "I can't come with you."

"Pardon?" Doran replied, breathless as he forced his body from the ground as he stood. Elinor towered above him, in height and grace.

"I was never taken from you, Doran. All these years and the deaths that had followed have been nothing but wasted life. They would never have brought me back to you, then or now. And I would rather face a lifetime imprisoned within this realm than ever standing proudly beside you. How could

I rule willingly beside a monster?"

Doran stumbled, swallowing his words thickly. We were in the boat now, feeling it rise and fall over the waves as the other assassins guided us out towards the endless, dark expanse.

"Wait," I said, gripping the boat's edge as I continued looking out towards Elinor and Doran. "Wait."

From a distance it would have seemed that two lovers embraced after a prolonged time apart, but I knew different. Having shared our truths, I knew how Elinor loathed Doran—even more than I did.

Elinor's hand drifted into her dress and quickly pulled free, as though she never had moved. Even from far away, with the splashing dark water between us, I could catch the glint of metal in her hand.

"But I love you," Doran cried out, fingers glowing as he raised them up before him.

Elinor threw her arm backwards until it bent at her elbow, then thrust it forward with strength only one scorned could hold. She stabbed the Oakstorm King, over and over, the beating of the dagger's hilt against his chest melding with the beat of my frantic heart. Elinor held the King within her arms, thrusting and jabbing, until a raged cry tore from her throat and filled the night sky. Even the winds died down as her anguish spilled into it.

Duncan held me, arms wrapped around my chest as he stopped me from falling out of the boat; only then did I register that I cried her name out across the water, throat ripping to shreds as I equalled Elinor's cry.

King Doran Oakstorm fell onto the shore, not a speck of light left within his body, the portal gone. Elinor dropped her arms to her side, dagger falling into the waters that rushed up and claimed it. Then she turned her back on the body and wadded out towards us.

"Hold," Seraphine shouted. I could hardly care that Kayne and Seraphine had begun rowing, each slicing an oar through the water. The boat calmed, rocking only because of the waves beneath it now.

And we waited.

Elinor swam towards us, face held above the water. I imagined Doran's blood being cleaned from her hands, her clothes, as the ocean drank it away. By the time she reached us, Duncan practically threw himself into the water to help her up. She fell upon her back in the boat, hands clasped over her chest as she looked up into the night.

"It is over," I said, looking down at her. There was an empty, light feeling of relief that filled my chest. It shared the space with another feeling, a darker one of jealousy that it was not I who had the chance to pierce the blade into his chest. "For good."

Elinor blinked, tired eyes flicking over the stars as though she wished to remember every single one she saw. "I did it for Lovis. For your mother, Julianna. And for you. Doran will never hurt you again."

I leaned down, pressing my forehead to hers, tears spilling freely. Duncan placed a hand upon my shoulder, his touch a welcome anchor as I lost myself to my emotions.

"Us," I replied, voice no more the flutter of a bird's broken wing, weak and tired, "He will never hurt *us* again."

E linor," I said softly, unable to stand the torturous silence a moment longer. I had clambered across the narrow boat and took a seat by her side. There was nothing comfortable about the journey, not with the pool of saltwater in the belly of the boat, soaking through our clothes and injecting the cold deep into our skin. My stomach thrashed with the continuous rocking, and it took all my restraint not to lean overboard and vomit.

"I am here if you wish to speak about what has happened. If not, we can sit here in silence if that helps," I murmured to Elinor.

The sky was stained with blush pinks and oranges. Our boat raced towards dawn, Duncan and Kayne pumping the oars through the ocean's surface with a furious desperation to put as much distance between Lockinge and us.

No one had uttered much of a word since Elinor was pulled into the boat all those hours ago, other than Seraphine who had answered Duncan's question about our destination's goal with a short, "Anywhere but here."

Elinor looked away from the expanse of blue, where the brightening sky touched the ocean's edge at such a distance it was unclear where one started and the other ended. She was pale, azure eyes heavy, framed with shadows and skin pulled taut. In the paling light of morning, it was impossible to ignore the look of pure, draining exhaustion that aged her tremendously.

"It had to be done. His death has played over in my mind for many years and if it had not happened then you would not have gotten away from him," Elinor muttered, lips cracked and sore. "But the feeling that is left with me is not one I expected. The relief I thought I would feel has not yet reached me. I keep waiting for it, but that place within me is still as empty as it was before I did it."

"I should have been the one to do it," I replied, guilt curling within me. "You have suffered enough."

"There is little point in dwelling on what could have been. I have learned that lesson the hard way."

Elinor had spent years punishing herself with the ideas of what if. What if she had never left the Oakstorm Court? What if it had been later? By a day, a week. Would she not have ended up in Aldrick's ownership if she had just prolonged her action?

"What does it mean for the Oakstorm Court?" I asked. Tarron was dead. Doran following swiftly to whatever hellscape that claimed their kind.

"It is still my home. By marriage, it belongs to me, unless others wish to petition against it."

"And do you want it?" I asked. "To be the Queen of a Court you longed to run from?"

She smiled, a small fluttering tug of her lips. "I believe I am. Oakstorm has always been my home

but that was poisoned when Doran claimed me for his own. I never believed a time would come that his presence was no longer a threat in my life... or yours. My actions pain me but knowing he cannot harm another is the promise I have given to the world. Doran hurt far too many people. One life for the rest is justified, I believe that."

Her hand grasped mine where it lay upon my knee. Elinor's fingers were strong, no more than bones and rough skin, but they were not weak, not as she squeezed and held on tight.

"You are finally free," I said, tongue catching the taste of dried salt across my lips. "From Lockinge. From Doran."

"But not from Aldrick," Duncan's deep voice sounded from behind us. "This is merely the beginning of something terrible, I know it."

Seraphine cleared her throat, lowering her feet from the edge of the boat. Unlike Kayne and Duncan, she had done little but study the far-off shoreline that we rowed beside. "You are not wrong, Hunter."

"Do not call me that," Duncan said, arms slowing to a stop which had Kayne spluttering in exhaustion. He too stopped and the boat slowed. "How long have you infiltrated his rank? You must have seen what is coming. And yet you have not stabbed a knife through his back and stopped this all from happening when you had the chance."

"There has been many a chance for me to kill Aldrick, but never has a price been put upon his head. The Children of the Asp have a code. A conduct we follow that stops us from taking life into our hands and snuffing it out when we want to or not. Until a bounty is put out, we do not act. We watch. We wait. We learn."

"None of this needed to happen if you broke your fucking rules and killed the old fool long ago," Duncan said, spitting each word.

Seraphine huffed, part laugh and part refusal to truly take in Duncan's anger. "Up until recently, The Hand has not been much of a threat. Yes, I have heard him whisper of Duwar, as we all have. But seeing the creature within the reflection tonight is the first time I truly believe what he has been saying is real."

"And what of the fey that have been captured? All those innocents being kept and bled like cattle?" I said, jaw tense from gritting my teeth. "Did you not believe that was wrong enough to intervene? I have met your kind before and am aware of the conscience you lack. Knowing you have simply watched—"

"I am the wrong person to question," Seraphine sneered, cheeks flushing with colour. "My sister and I have not simply stood by and watched. Aldrick is a powerful fey as you each have witnessed. He can enter minds, read them and bend the person to his will. We had to comply. If Aldrick had even caught the scent of me and my sister's origin, then we would not have gleaned the information we have. You would not be here, with me, sailing far from the very man we speak of. And my sister..." She choked on her words for a moment, clearly struggling with keeping her voice level. "My sister is dead because of our cause. Do not think for a moment you are the only ones who have lost something this night."

I blinked and saw the lifeless body of Seraphine's sister.

"What you know, what you have seen, would be imperative to bringing Aldrick down before that thing is released into the world." All eyes snapped to Elinor as she spoke. "I know of your guild and understand that you act if the price is high enough. Is that what you have been waiting for? The right bid for the information you've obtained?"

Seraphine leaned forward, two elbows resting upon her knees as her hands held her face up. "For

half a coin I would spill my soul if it meant stopping what Aldrick has planned to achieve. Before our involvement was business, now it is personal."

Kayne had not spoken this entire time, not once. Just a glance at him and I could still see that he wrestled with the truth he had uncovered tonight. Like Duncan, Kayne had given his life to the promise of Duwar. For him to learn that his God was in fact a demon that had been locked away for a reason must have been tearing him to pieces.

"What next?" I asked. The question was not for any sole person, and our small, strange company would likely have answered it differently.

While I waited for someone to speak up, I thought about what I wanted to come next. There was nothing more in this world that I wished for than to crawl into Duncan's arms and feel his body against mine, to let my mind release my worries and think only of him. His touch. His distraction.

"We could keep rowing," Kayne spoke finally, eyes lost to something unimportant on the floor of the boat. "Stop when this realm and the responsibilities with it are long forgotten."

Seraphine replied, knocking the tracker's knee with her fist, "Trust me, there are realms beyond this that are far more terrifying than the darkest corners of your deepest secrets. My sponsor has requested Robin's return, alive and well. After I complete this task of returning you then we can contemplate what comes next."

"Sleep," Elinor added, forcing a smile. "In a feather-stuffed bed so large that I could not reach the edges if I wished."

"And a hard drink," Kayne listed quickly, looking to Duncan who patted him upon his shoulder in a form of silent communication between them.

"Peace and time," I added, speaking the first things that came to me.

"Two. How greedy," Seraphine said, brow peaked in jest. "And what about you, Hunter? Do you wish to be normal again? Because I am afraid that I have seen others who Aldrick had changed and there is no coming back."

Her comment brought down the mood instantly. Duncan raised a finger to the iron-cuff around his neck and tugged down on it.

"No," Duncan said finally. "What comes next is revenge. Only when Aldrick is killed will I sleep easily or enjoy a drink and live in a state of peace. Until the threat has been dealt with those luxuries will be yours to claim."

Duncan was right, there was work to do. Every moment of every day counted towards stopping Aldrick, and wasting time allowed him to create his army of powered humans.

I had glimpsed a God, something I would have believed impossible before that fateful night when I was sold off to Hunters. Before now the Gods were nothing than names in stories. Now, I had come to quickly realise they were real, and that was frightening.

"Pick up your oars," Seraphine said suddenly, standing up and looking out towards the stretch of sands that we had drifted closer to. She had seen something. We all looked, following her stare, to the patch of flat landscape and the smudge of dark outlines standing upon it.

People.

My heart sank into the pit of my stomach.

"About time," Seraphine said, jumping into action. "Come on, both of you. Row. It is time we get out of these waters. I have always hated it out here."

Kayne sprang into action, but Duncan held back. I could see his distrust. "If you want my help reaching the land then you will tell us who is expecting us. Or I push you overboard and leave you to the creatures that dwell in the dark beneath us."

Seraphine scowled, both hands resting upon her hips as she broadened out her stance. "Put emotion into your threats and it might make it more believable next time."

I ignored their argument, no matter how relevant it was. Raising a hand to my brow, it was easier to see. There was a handful of people, four, maybe five, standing among sand dunes, watching us as we watched them.

"We haven't got time for this, Hunter."

"Duncan," he snapped. "That is my name, use it."

One of the figures broke from the group in the distance. I watched as they ran towards the shoreline, arms waving above their head.

"Give me your fucking oar," Seraphine snarled, throwing herself across the boat at Duncan. "I will do it myself."

"Stop this," Elinor scorned, her tone motherly and harsh. "Pack it in before..."

I didn't hear the rest, not as the breeze carried a sound towards me. I thought it was just the whistle of the wind as it skipped across the choppy waters. Then it grew clearer.

Robin.

"Shut up," I said.

Robin. I heard it again.

"All of you stop," I spoke again, this time louder.

Robin!

"STOP!"

The boat and its occupants silenced before I finished shouting. Seraphine and Duncan had stopped their argument and I could see them both in my peripheral vision as they looked towards me. But I paid them no mind, not as the figure in the distance stopped waving arms and instead unleashed an explosion of bright ruby flames into the sky from her hands. Tongues of fire turned to clouds of darkgrey smoke that billowed far into the cloudless expanse.

Tears of relief filled my eyes. As sure as I knew my own self, I knew who waited for us upon the shore. My sponsor. The person who had placed the bounty for my return with the Children of the Asp. And I cried her name as the boat rocked forward. "Althea!"

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