

# THE WOLF AND THE WITCH

A WITCH WALKER  
NOVELLA



CHARISSA  
WEAKS

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By  
Charissa Weaks



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# CONTENTS

[Want More City Owl Press Books?](#)

[Curses of a Lorian Age](#)

I. [A Life for a Life](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

II. [An Eye for an Eye](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

III. [Blood for Blood](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

IV. [A Promise for A Promise](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Sneak Peek of A Night of Wings and Starlight](#)

[Find Your Next Read](#)

[Want More City Owl Press Books?](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

[Additional Titles](#)



## PRAISE FOR CHARISSA WEAKS

“This book left me completely breathless in the best sort of way. Honestly, I don't feel like any review I can type can accurately portray just how incredible this story is and how brilliant Charissa Weeks is. Her writing is sumptuous and vivid, building a stunning world for the reader to escape to... It is perfect for fans of Jennifer L. Armentrout and Sarah J. Maas—trust me, you will not be disappointed.” — *Ashley R. King, Author of Painting the Lines*

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“This story is so unique which was refreshing. The book is well-paced and I found myself unable to put it down!”— *Emily McClung, Bookstagrammer, @busybookreporter*

“Raina utterly captured my heart and made it impossible to put this book down. I wish I could live in this book with these characters. A must read!!” — *Gabrielle Perna, Bookstagrammer, @fantasybookobsessed*

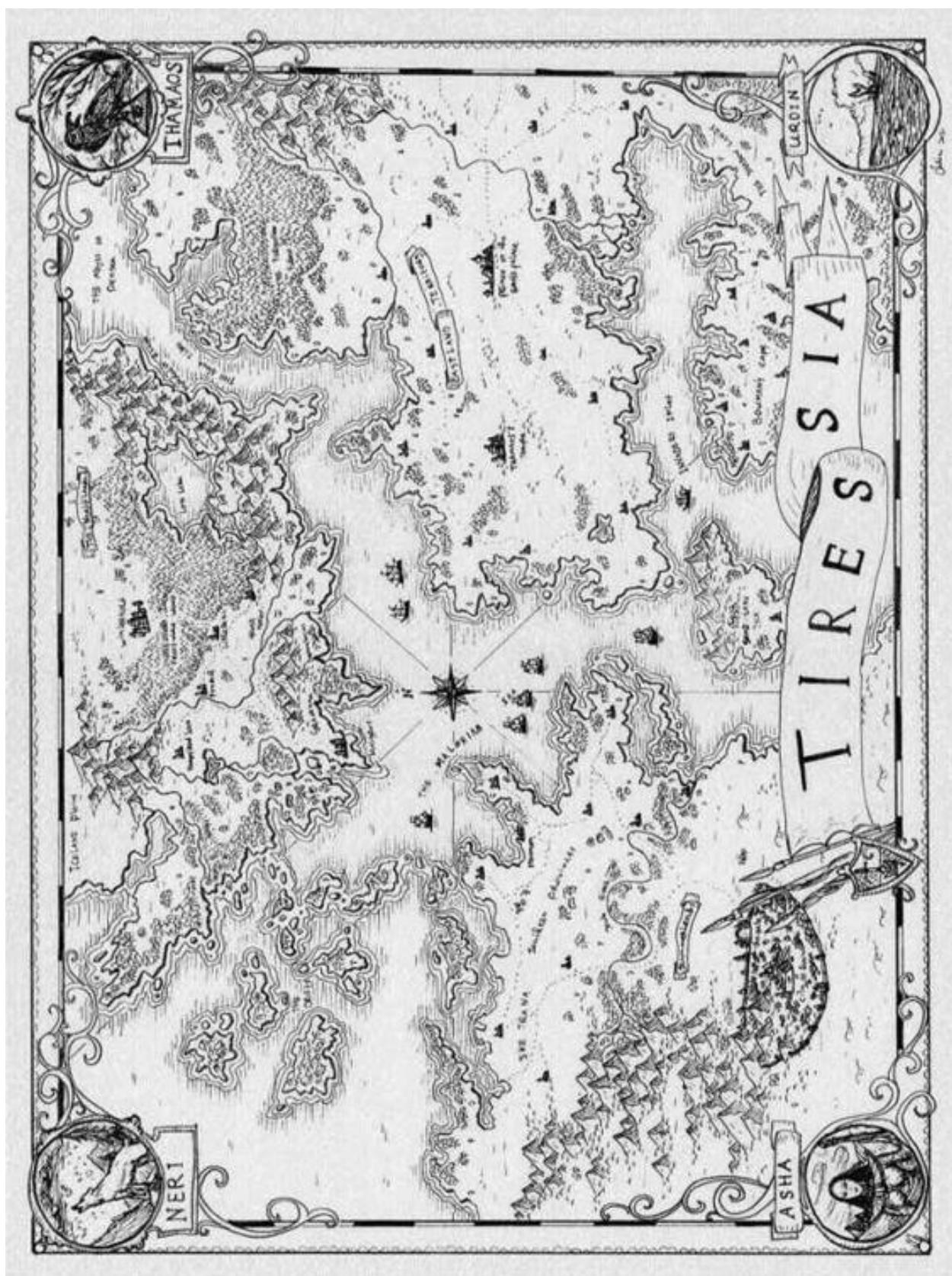


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*For the readers who have always liked  
a big, bad wolf*



## CURSES OF A LORIAN AGE

*Book Written Year 213, in the Reign of Fia Drumera*

### ***A Curse in the Blood***

**M**any believe Loria chose the grove on Mount Ulra as the final resting place for the gods not only because the power of the Summerlanders, which evolved with time, was the surest means to protect such hallowed ground. But also because the mystical earth would provide guardians of its own in the trees.

Asha mentioned Loria's provisions for resurrection in her lost letters to Rikke, Queen Alma Drumera's handmaiden. She stated that Loria held one pre-requisite for a resurrection to occur without consequence: Before any ritual can be performed, the trusted scholars at the Hall of Holies must stand in unanimous agreement with their queen that a god should arise.

If this order is not heeded, Asha's letter declares the grove is responsible for delivering punishment to those who dishonor sacred law and disturb the gods in their state of eternal rest. Asha believed this punishment would come as a curse in the blood.

Outside this mention in the Summerland goddess's ancient letters, now said to be housed in the Hall of Holies, this curse has no other known record and no known title.

I

A LIFE FOR A LIFE

I





## NEPHELE

### *Mount Ulra The Grove of the Gods*

**T**he grove is wailing. Mournful cries drift through the scorched remains of the cemetery, anguished howls baying from deep within the earth. Beneath my feet, the charred ground is covered with snow, a result of Neri's magick suffocating the fires the same way he did in Aki-Ra Quarter. Above, the ancient, heavy boughs are no more. Now there's nothing but a dense, gray cloud blotting out the night sky.

The only light is from Alexis's starlights. They illuminate the wood so we can see, our little clan desperately searching for my sister as ash falls heavy as Neri's snow.

Shivering against the cold air, I move adjacent to Alexis as he calls Raina's name. His deep voice has gone so rough and ragged that it's almost unrecognizable amid the lament of the grieving grove. He coughs from the effort, the lingering smoke almost too much for any of us to endure.

Save for Neri. Unaffected by our surroundings, the white wolf stalks close behind, returned to his corporeal form. He hasn't let me out of his sight, but my king follows too, freed from his chains by the wolf himself.

"I've been over this grove thrice," Neri says to Alexis. An irritated edge

roughens his smooth, accented voice. “She isn’t here.”

Earlier, he looked Alexis in the eyes and said, “It isn’t what you want to hear, Un Drallag, but your woman either died in her own fire, left this wood using her abyss, or she’s in Quezira with the prince and Thamaos.”

Surprisingly, his words had not been laced with bitterness, not meant to cut or wound. They sounded sincere, spoken to prevent us from doing what we’re doing now: wandering through the gods’ blistered graves, grief threatening, hoping against all hope to see my sister’s lovely face around the next bend. We all felt the ripple of strange power during the fire. A breath-stealing force *whooshed* through the grove like a mighty storm, but almost as soon as we felt it, it was gone.

A pang punches my chest as more tears flood my stinging eyes. Vision blurry, my foot catches on a root, and I stumble on my still-aching ankle.

Neri is at my side in an instant. He folds one massive claw-tipped hand around my bare arm, the other around my waist, keeping me from falling. “Careful, now.”

I steady myself against his muscled chest. The smooth skin and human features of his brawny torso are a strange juxtaposition to his animalistic lower half, covered in sleek, white fur.

Regardless of his chimera form, the contact sends a flood of heat pouring into me as his strong fingers brush back and forth over the goosebumps covering my arm. It’s his power. A gift of warmth, momentarily easing my chills.

“Better?” He stares down at me with that honey gaze, and I can’t help but notice how, even in the gloom, his skin shimmers like snow under moonlight.

“I’m fine. I think Raina’s healing was just too brief to fully mend the bone.”

He frowns. “I should carry you, then.”

“Try it,” I warn, pure venom coating my voice, and a small laugh falls from the wolf’s lips.

He skims a glance over me. At first, it’s as though he means to take inventory, so I tuck my injured foot beneath the hem of my dress. One glimpse of my swollen ankle, the skin reddened from a mixture of cold and inflammation, and I can envision him sweeping me off my feet whether I like it or not.

His attention drifts from my soot-stained wine-colored dress, the one I chose for the wedding at Fia Drumera’s court before everything went wrong

to the remnant of his heart hanging around my neck, then to my teary eyes. His gaze softens, but it's still too penetrating. Too knowing. And Colden's night-dark stare, spearing me from a short distance, is too aware. Too watchful.

Questions are brewing, and I don't want to answer any of them.

I shake free of the wolf's heated grip and take a single step away. On a deep breath, I press one hand to my aching heart while the other keeps me upright against a blackened tree. "Raina wouldn't have left us."

I say those words because I believe them. They're the only truth getting me through any of this.

As the crying wood's song abates, Colden starts toward me. He strips off his silver velvet dinner jacket to reveal a tailored pewter tunic marked with streaks from cinders. His pale skin is pearly gray with ash, his usually silky blond locks twisted into heathered tangles. The way he moves is almost as predatory as Neri, but he's far less like a beast and more like a skilled soldier hurrying to protect a man down. Colden is also tall, but he must lift his chin and blink away ash and snowflakes to look Neri in the eyes. He glowers at the northern god—the maker of his curse—baring his teeth before placing his fine dinner jacket around my shoulders and cradling my face as gently as fragile glass in his hands.

Colden kisses my forehead and wipes my tears with his thumbs. "We will find her. I swear it, love. We will find her."

Neri's lip curls back, exposing an elongated fang, and a deep, contained growl rumbles inside him. He postures for a moment, but reluctantly turns and moves on those long and muscled hind legs toward the charred remains of a giant tree, frost falling off him like mist.

His hands clench into fists, a spoiled god seething because he can't have what he thinks he wants. If he were wise, he would understand that I am no trophy. I am no prize.

I am a shrew.

Or at least I will be if our paths truly entwine as planned.

With the weight of the wolf's territorial gaze off me for once, I melt into Colden's waiting embrace. I need the familiar comfort of his arms far more than I can express. "If Raina used her power," I say against his chest, my attention still fixated on Neri, "she would've returned to the cliff's edge after destroying General Vexx. Back to Alexis's side. No matter what."

The other options are unthinkable.

*Unbearable.*

"I agree," Neri says from over his shoulder. "Which means we should leave this mountainside behind and find out if she's in Quezira. Because if she isn't—"

"She must be." Alexis's voice is as grave as the death around us. He stands in the falling ash, still as a statue. Black and gray soot covers his hulking form, making him look like some sort of creature of the night. He turns his glassy, green gaze on Neri, and a lone tear spills down his face, washing away a trail of ash. "The connection along the bond is faint, but I feel her." He lifts his hand to his collarbone, where the rune he shares with Raina marks the skin beneath his tunic. His eyes shift to me, offering the only reassurance he can. "I would know if she met her end, Nephele. *I. Would. Know.*"

Helena and Rhonin, Keth and Jaega, and Callan and Zahira appear from the back side of the grove. Their faces are grim and gray and stained with tears.

"No luck," Rhonin says, holding tightly to Hel's hand.

The expression on her face is so coldly fierce and quiet it's nerve-rattling. Her mother and sisters first, now her brother and best friend. I probably shouldn't, but I fear for the person who will one day meet with Helena Owyn's pent-up wrath and pain.

When Hel and Rhonin reach Alexis, Rhonin clasps his shoulder. The sorrowful tears in his eyes shimmer like broken glass under sunlight. "I'm so sorry, my friend."

Alexis looks around the grove, meeting each of our gazes, our fearless leader so obviously broken and lost without the woman who stole his heart.

*The woman who became his heart.*

He shakes his head and swallows thickly as more tears race down his cheeks. "If she's in Quezira, I have to go get her."

I lift my head from Colden's chest as the slightest *hum* vibrates the air.

Alexis walks backward toward a small clearing where the boughs are thin. Still shaking his head, a new kind of fury lights eyes that lock with mine.

"No!" My voice trembles as panic and understanding swallow me. "Don't!"

I push free of Colden, my hand outstretched toward Alexis, but there isn't anything I can do to stop him. He throws his hands out at his sides, and

ancient power floods from his hands, blasting ash, snow, and dirt, the force enough to send him rocketing into the sky with an echoing roar that disintegrates the charred limbs within his trajectory.

Gasping and spluttering from debris, we all stand stunned in the suddenly quiet grove. The wailing has faded to silence, as though the dirge is finally, truly over, though a new sort of mourning has just begun.

“Can someone please explain to me when he learned how to do *that*?” Colden peers upward. “And how in the bloody fuck are we going to help him now?”

In those next few moments, I find myself turning toward the *one* being I have no business beseeching for aid, certainly not pertaining to Alexis. But I close the distance between Neri and me anyway, a limp in my step. Again, he stares down at me with those molten eyes, a pointed ear peeking from the shiny strands of his long, white hair.

“You already owe me my life,” he says.

With that revelation, the Northlanders behind me make an array of noises—sighs, gasps, curses. Each one is filled with dreadful understanding.

“In exchange for your servitude until my dying day,” I remind him, wanting them to overhear.

Satisfaction lights the wolf’s lupine features as he casually broadens his stance and clasps his hands behind his back. “Exactly. Once you’ve resurrected me, I am yours to command. Not before then.”

“Please.” I step closer as I fight to keep the tears brimming on the edges of my eyelids from falling. “I will do whatever you wish. Just find Alexis and get him back here. Then go to Quezira, find Raina and Fleurie, and bring them home. You’re the only one who can.”

A tear falls, and he catches it with his finger so quickly that I never even see his hand move.

Though the gesture is kind and might offer a different woman a morsel of hope, I only feel anger and resentment as I wait for him to say no. He denied my plea to protect Raina from seeing what Vexx did to Finn. Had he granted my request, none of this would’ve happened. He gave her vengeance instead, and what end did it serve?

Neri leans down, still touching my face with a claw-tipped finger as if my skin is his to caress. He’s so close I feel the warmth of his breath on my lips. “Tempting as you are, witch, a deal is a deal. Raise me from the dead, and I will do all you ask before the sun reaches the middle of the noon-day sky.”

Tempting? The only temptation *I* feel is the urge to smack his smug face, but I force my bitterness down. He will be beholden to me once I give him what he wants. Then I will make him pay for his role in this disaster. But first...

"How?" I ask. "How will you do all of that in a matter of hours? Thamaos left here in a pile of bones. His reawakening wasn't instant. What makes you think it will be any different for you?"

"Good question." He cocks his head. "Your sister left a sacrifice to the grove when she killed that general. Best I recall, all that is needed is a life in exchange for a life. She took that life *after* Thamaos was already gone, so I'm clinging to the hope that my resurrection will be an accelerated process. Where Thamaos's transformation will likely require weeks, if not months, to return him to a truly living state, mine should be fairly instant given Vexx's sacrifice."

My gods. I still hate what Raina went through, and if I had it to do over, I would've pulled myself together and wrapped that pike in so many vines she couldn't have possibly seen what remained of Finn. But in my panic and shock, I didn't, and her rage and pain will be something I forever feel in the guilty shadows of my soul.

Her destruction of the grove wasn't for nothing, though. I found the North a weapon, and by killing Vexx, it seems she might've given me the means to wield that weapon more effectively.

I pull away from the wolf's too-easy touch and gesture toward the cliffside where his bones are buried beneath scorched earth and snow. "Fine. Lead the way. If you want to live again, *under my thumb*, so be it. But don't you dare complain when my rule is not so pleasant."

His mouth quirks as though I'm humorous. "What's unpleasant for one might be pleasant for another." He turns and stalks toward the gloom hovering between the trees. "I rather like your bark, witch," he calls. "Though I'm more interested in seeing if you have any bite."

I stare at his back until he drops to all fours and lopes away like the beast he is, disappearing into the smoke bleeding from the trees. Colden strolls up beside me, wearing a pinched and concerned expression I know far too well.

"Don't scold me," I snap. "I've missed you with my whole heart, but please don't scold me."

He arches a brow and drapes his arm over my shoulders before touching his forehead to mine. "Wouldn't think of it."

“Yes, you would.” I grip his wrist, so thankful he’s here.

He kisses the tip of my nose. “But I won’t.”

“I did what I did for Tiressia, Colden. For the North and the Summerlands. Neri will be mine, and I mean to use him.”

He slips a finger beneath my chin and tips my head up. “I understand. I understood the moment that bastard explained the situation at my cell in Min-Thuret. I just need you to be careful. I know you’re quite capable, but Neri is a *god*. Dangerous and beyond clever.” His eyes soften at the corners, as though drawn by sadness. “I want to protect you from this, but you’ve entered into a deal with a devil, and I can’t do a godsdamn thing about it.”

A sickening knot of worry tightens my chest as I lean into his embrace, my gaze fixed on the wolf’s path toward the cliff, the path that leads to a future with Neri ever at my side.

“I know,” I whisper. “Believe me, I know.”





## NEPHELE

“I don’t want anyone present but me and *you*.” Neri looks up. The sharp flick of his gaze punctuates that final word.

He sits on the ground beneath the remains of his memoriam tree and rests his sinewy forearms on his fur-covered knees while rolling a burnt twig back and forth between clawed fingers. He acts as though the cold against his wolven ass is nothing. I suppose it isn’t.

Before I can reply, Colden leans one shoulder against the massive tree trunk, hands tucked into black trousers, and says, “If you think I’m leaving her alone with you, you’ve forgotten who I am.”

Neri peers at Colden. “And if you think I fear your threats in any way, Moeshka, perhaps *you* have forgotten who *I* am.”

Colden shakes his head and scrubs his hand down his face with an exasperated groan. “Fuck me. I don’t know how I could’ve possibly believed, even for a second, that this deal Nephele has with you could be an opportunity for anything less than a disaster. I’ve seen the way you look at her, mongrel.”

Face hard as stone, Neri reveals his fangs again. “And what way is that?”

“Like you could devour her,” Colden answers. “If she indeed returns you to your human form, trust that I’ll send you back to the Shadow World myself before I stand by and watch her become the prey in the White Wolf’s next hunt.”

“You don’t own her. She can do whatever she wants, and right now, I’m telling her that I prefer this summoning to be between her and me. No one else. So fuck you indeed, *king*. If she agrees to my request, you’ll have to live

with it.”

Colden pushes off the tree. Beneath his fine clothes, his lean, muscular frame takes on an entirely different posture. The cocksure, boyish nature I see most often falls away, replaced with a threatening air—steel in his spine, ice in his eyes, fury in his fists. I haven’t experienced him like this often, not even when he’d meet Alexis on the training grounds, swords in his hands.

There’s everyday Colden, and then there’s Colden the soldier. The man who once led a small northern battalion against an Eastland army twice their size and not only won but left a staggering enough body count to render his name legend. I’ve never truly met that man, but I’m quickly beginning to believe that the path we’re traveling might ensure that I get to know him.

His black eyes narrow, and the air grows so cold that tiny shards of ice sleet from the sky. At the same time, icy veins travel up Neri’s tree, branching across the gnarled, burnt limbs.

Shaking from the thick frost suddenly filling the air, I curl in on myself and lift Colden’s jacket over my head, unable to discern which one of them is responsible for the sudden frigidness.

I open my mouth to berate one or both of them, but my attention snags on movement in the trees. The others appear in the near distance, coming to join us. They shield their heads, carefully glancing upward in confusion.

“Weather theatrics,” the wolf says. “Is that all you can do, *soldier*?”

A shadow of memory flickers across Colden’s face. Recognition bred with loathing. “You know it isn’t, *my liege*.”

The air grows ripe with three-hundred-year-old tension, which is bad enough without adding a defense of me and my honor. To defuse the situation before it gets worse, I step between them.

“Stop this nonsense. Now.” My voice comes out firm, even through chattering teeth. “We don’t have time for cock measuring. Besides, I’m just fine being left alone with the wolf.”

Colden blinks, and the haze of anger hanging over him like a pall disintegrates. Blessedly, the sleet slows, and the rushing patter of ice pelting the burned trees fades until it finally quiets completely.

I exhale a breath of relief and lower Colden’s jacket to my shoulders. “The prince still has access to a Dread Viper,” I remind them. “He could always use Fleurie to portal into Aki-Ra Quarter and take more Vipers as siphons. With that sort of power, he could win this war before it even begins. The wolf is our only way in, and I mean to use him like the asset he is.”

Already, my mind stirs with ideas of what to do, thinking about which strategy is best. Neri could not only bring Raina and Alexis home, and possibly Fleurie if her deal has been met, but he could also bring me the prince's head.

And Thamaos's brittle, old bones.

A wicked curve tilts Neri's mouth in a manner that only makes the sharp lines of his annoyingly handsome face even more devastating, especially in the lightening dawn. As ever, I sense an unspoken sexual innuendo teetering on the tongue hidden behind those full lips, but I also see delight in his features, dancing in his eyes, as though my words lit something in the essence of his spirit.

"If an advantage over the enemy is offered," he says in that deep, rich voice before sliding his stare to Colden, "*you take it*. If it means living to fight another day, *you take it*."

Squaring my shoulders, even though I want to curl into a ball for warmth, I lift my chin. "I don't disagree."

Colden goes stiff and looks between Neri and me as though he sees something he doesn't like. Eventually, his focus settles on Neri.

Again, he tucks his hands into his trouser pockets and shrugs, returning to casually cool Colden. "Fine. The others can take the legion of stairs down to the city. But where exactly would you have *me* go, oh Great One? I'm a bit *trapped*. I can't enter the City of Ruin thanks to Asha, and I can't come face to face with Fia thanks to you. I don't intend to plummet to the desert floor so you can have Nephele all to yourself while she digs up your pathetic, bony carcass."

"I sense jealousy," Neri teases.

"You sense protectiveness." Colden comes to stand at my side, resting his booted foot on an exposed root. "I've nothing to be jealous of, least of all you. But when it comes to Nephele, you can damn well believe I watch over her."

"I know you do. I've seen you hovering for the last eight years. You and the sorcerer as well. As though neither of you realizes *that* woman" —he stabs a finger toward me— "can fucking take care of herself."

I blink rapidly, shocked to hear such words coming from Neri. But I'm even more shocked at how much they resonate. I love Colden and Alexis. Colden is my best friend, and Alexis is the brother I never had. And though I know deep down they do realize that I can take care of myself—they taught

me, for gods' sake—I also know they struggle with letting go and giving me a chance. Perhaps I must force their hands.

“Enough bickering. It's as cold as death, and we're wasting precious time.” I look at my friends, weary and shivering, and jerk my head toward the over one thousand steps cut into the side of the mountain. “You all should go. Sunrise is coming. Fia Drumera must be losing her mind with worry.”

Hel nods once, but then she pulls away from Rhonin and stalks past me, heading straight for the wolf. She looms over him, her dark hair tangling in a smooth wind, and he slowly lifts his gaze to meet her seething stare.

“I *prayed* to you.” She spits at his feet. “We all did. Even my brother who believed in you so wholly. An entire valley of innocent people who trusted you to look after us. We went to temple every week. Bent our knees and prayed for your guidance and wisdom. We lifted our hands and our *hearts* to you.”

He crooks a brow, his mouth drawn into a tight line. “I never asked for anyone's worship, girl. And I couldn't have answered prayers even if I'd not been trapped inside Un Drallag. Prayers are designed to ease your conscience when you commit a wrong and to make you feel like a higher being can save you from the burdens of life and conflicts of men. In reality, no one's listening on the other side, except maybe Thamaos turning his ear to his puppet, the prince. So before you blame me for your losses, consider that gods are not all-powerful. Certainly not from the fucking grave.”

“Or perhaps *you're* just not,” she replies. “Because Thamaos constructed an entire plot for resurrection and an attack on our valley—from the *Nether Reaches*—while you were just a lost pup who couldn't figure out how to get his ass free of a sorcerer's magickal cage.”

Neri's face darkens. “It would be best for you to listen to the witch and go, girl. Before you pick a fight you won't win.”

Rhonin steps forward, tugging off his woolen coat, chest out and fists ready, but I stop him.

Hel bends to one knee. There's not a single drop of fear in her as she comes face to face with a god. “Nephele sees some sort of redeeming quality in you. I don't. But I know one thing. She will do what's right for the Northlands and Tiressia. If that means using you, then I trust her to not only do it with clever skill and intent but to also make you the most fucking miserable god this side of the Shadow World. So good luck.” She winks. “That *witch* is about to own you, you bastard.”

To my surprise, given all she's lost to the flame, Hel stands and summons fire from her palm to illuminate the gray morning, the light reflecting in her dark, glassy eyes. "Come on," she says to the group, walking over to join them again. "We have much to discuss with the queen."

Wearing a pinched expression of concern, Rhonin wraps his coat around my shoulders for extra warmth and briefly squeezes my shoulder as they pass. He says nothing, though. Keth and Jaega look hesitant and confused, holding hands as they walk by, wordless.

Zahira nears next and gently grips my hand. I understand the fear and worry I see in her eyes. If Vexx murdered Finn, what might he have done to Yaz? To Mari? Did he know of them? Or did Finn go to him? There's no way to know unless we return home to the Northland Break.

"I have faith that you're making the right move," Zahira says, her eyes shadowed.

"Me too," Callan says from behind her, clasping my face in one hand.

I offer a weak smile. I'm not sure if I'm making the best choice or not, but it's the only solution I can see.

When they disappear down the mountain, I turn to the northern god.

"Wolf," I say, acknowledging him. For some reason, I can't bring myself to speak his name aloud. "We can do this, just you and I, but you *must* help Colden off the mount first if us being alone is so important. And Colden, you will shut your lovely mouth and cooperate." I take his hand and turn away from Neri, lowering my voice. "Can you trust me? Please? The others don't know me half as well as you, yet I have their blessing. I wouldn't be doing this if I thought Neri would harm me."

He tilts his head, pursing his lips, nostrils flaring. "I *do* trust you. But harm comes in different forms, Nephele. As I said before, he's viciously cunning. Look at what he's already accomplished. In such a short time, he's done the impossible. He's fashioned a deal with the most intelligent woman I know. Even worse? He's worked his way under her skin." When I flinch, he says, "Don't deny it. I can see it."

"Like a *thorn*, perhaps," I bite back. "Sort of how it appears the handsome prince with no name got under *your* skin."

The intensity bleeding from him fades and, most unlike him, he says nothing to defend himself. I'd noticed how he watched the prince as the bastard prayed to Thamaos, but I thought little of it at the time. Because some people—even wolves and Soul Eaters—intrigue, I suppose. That doesn't

mean they're anything more than a vexing curiosity to pique our interest.

"I can take you wherever you'd like to go, Moeshka," Neri interrupts, and for once, I'm thankful for his big mouth. "I wonder where that might be?"

Colden slowly swivels his blond head, and in the rising morning light, the two share a cold look.

"He'll go to Winterhold. Won't you? To prepare the people?" I tug on Colden's arm to make him face me. "Once the wolf has been resurrected, my first command will be that he finds Alexis and Raina, and Fleurie if her rescue is possible. But after that, he's to bring me Thamaos's bones and ensure that the prince pays for this. Dearly. If he succeeds—and I can't see why he won't once he's whole again—we might be able to stop this disaster from growing any worse."

Colden's face goes stony. It's as though a mask crystallizes from magick, meant to hide the glimpse of truth I saw only for a split second. An expression of tempered panic and fear.

"Hmmm, Winterhold." Neri pushes off the ground to stand. "Ready for me to whisk you away to the cold North, king? Or perhaps you'd rather—"

"Do you *ever* stop talking?" Colden snaps.

Neri smiles, the tips of his fangs visible between his parted lips. "I'd say we were cut from the same cloth in that sense," he replies. "Words are our weapons. They can inflict the most cutting damage, especially to the already wounded, can they not?"

The thick muscle in Colden's square jaw ripples as he clenches his teeth. I feel as though I'm missing something. There's a silent conversation happening between this former general and soldier, spoken through omitted words and knowing glares.

Neri motions with a flip of his hand. "Come on, Moeshka. Let me take you home so your lovely lady friend can bring me back to life." His eyes sparkle with menace, and one corner of his lips hooks upward. "I have bones to collect and a prince to murder."

Colden grips my hand and faces me. He's breathing harder. Faster. "You'll make a good leader if we do go to war. The bravest." He slides his hand into my hair and curls his fingers around the nape of my neck. Sweetly, he presses a soft, tender kiss to my cheek. "Forgive me if I'm not at your side when it begins. I will do everything in my power to be. Because I *do* love you, Nephele. Please don't forget that."

I'm so tired, so mentally spent, that I'm unsure what just happened, what



he means. I'm not granted much time to think about it, though, because Colden walks over to Neri who fists his massive hand in the fabric at the back of Colden's tunic, tightening the material across his broad chest.

Colden mumbles something under his breath to the wolf, and the wolf nods once. The air fills with a tinkling sound, like thousands of glass chimes hang from the trees.

Neri's power, metallic and sweet, grows so thick that I taste the silver and sugar of it on my tongue. Driven by a feeling of unease, I almost stop them, but quick as wind, they vanish in a flurry of snow and frost.

It isn't until I'm left standing at the edge of Mount Ulra's cliff all alone, watching as the sun rises over the east, that the seed of worry Colden planted flourishes. The last several hours and days play across my mind like a picture book, pages flipping back to when Neri returned from Min-Thuret the first time, only to tell me that Colden, much to my dismay, wished to stay.

The pages flip again, to those heavy moments when I stood in the grove's shadows and beheld my king at the prince's side, staring at the raven-haired Eastlander with glistening, dark eyes. My thoughts even drift to years beyond, when Colden mentioned that he met the prince a few decades ago. He'd looked so lost in reverie, even wearing a small smile, but then he'd gone silent as death when I inquired what happened during that visit. Whatever the answer, he never offered it to me.

Remembering, I bring my mind back to the grove. Something other than simple familiarity had shone in Colden's eyes as he listened to the prince pray to Thamaos last night, summoning him. His gaze held a certain severity I'd never seen before, one of sorrow and despair hidden behind a momentary smirk to mask his pain. And when Fleurie portaled the prince and Thamaos to safety, and I went to Colden's side...

If I had looked closely then, past the shields he fervently keeps in place, I think I might've seen the faintest ember of hope dying and a heart breaking.

*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

A ragged breath rushes out of me as I whisper Colden's name into the smoke-laced wind. I know him so well, better than Neri does. I want to believe that. Yet he only fooled one of us, and it wasn't the wolf. Because Colden Moeshka isn't going to Winterhold, and Neri knew it, possibly before Colden had a chance to make up his mind.

Colden is going to Quezira. To Min-Thuret Palace.

To save the prince.



## NERI

**M**in-Thuret temple sprawls across a hilltop, the ground brittle under dawn's crystalline frost. The kingdom seat floats in a gray fog, easily mistaken by my eyes for a wreath of slinking spirits surrounding the hill. Like gloomy shadows, the mist rises from the lower quarters, weaving around the spires and domes of worship halls in serpentine streams, swallowing the pointed arches and tilted rooftops nestled together throughout the city.

This whole kingdom is shadowed. I feel it differently than when I came here for Colden Moeshka the first time. One would think the Shadow World has seeped through realms and begun to bleed the Nether Reaches' poisonous presence across the land.

Perhaps with Thamaos's rise, it has.

Moeshka shakes off my grip, coughing bursts of frost from my sifting us across the realm. "You couldn't deliver me *inside* the palace? Or at least somewhere less—" He bends at the waist and coughs again, then glances past me. "Awful?"

Taking a deep breath, he straightens and adjusts his tunic like a proper man. Much more proper than the soldier he used to be and a league away from a beast like me.

I look over my shoulder. We stand in a narrow alleyway behind a silversmith's shop, my pawed feet pressed into a mixture of mud whose cold I cannot feel and sharp-edged gravel that might as well be air. A sleeping woman sits on a wooden pallet with her back and head against the door to the silver shop. Her mouth hangs wide open as she snores, and her bodice lies in

a puddle of black fabric around her waist. A stump of a man lies with his head in her lap. One of his hands clings to the neck of a wine bottle, his face pressed to her bare tit.

Half alert, his beady eyes require a moment to focus, but then he latches his gaze on Moeshka and me, blinking in confusion, like he might still be drunk and is only now realizing it.

“You’re dreaming, you stupid fuck,” I grumble. “Go back to sleep.” Frowning, he slowly lowers his head to the woman’s lap once more, and I turn back to Moeshka. “In spirit form, I’ve no power over the magick of men. Coming to rescue you for Nephele was dangerous enough. I will not risk becoming trapped by the prince’s Brotherhood now that they know I’ve already infiltrated their walls once. They’ll be more prepared this time, especially with Thamaos inside.”

I glance back up at the palace. The street view is different than I recall, but not so different that the sight doesn’t unbury a thousand memories, even carrying me back to a time so long ago that nothing occupied this land save for marigolds and wildlife. Quezira was lovely before a god and his men sullied its fields, forests, and shores.

“I’m sure you can find your way into Min-Thuret alone,” I say, watching Moeshka scrub his hand through his dirty hair. “If not, try to remember your training. There’s a simple way to penetrate the enemy’s gates.”

He peers at me with a black stare sharpened to a deadly point against the relentless friction of three-hundred years of hatred. Even still, the dregs of the soldier who once considered me his leader rises to the surface of the immortal king standing before me.

“Get caught,” he mutters, as though he loathes that he hasn’t forgotten my words.

“And I’ll leave you to do just that. If you achieve your goal and persuade the prince to escape, be ready when I return. I will not hesitate to leave you here to rot.” I study the sky, the way it brightens, though the clouds still cast the world in shades of gray. “I’d say you have a few hours at most. Like I told the witch, I’ll do all she asks before the sun reaches the middle of the noon-day sky.”

He looks at me sidelong. “So confident for a god who’s never been raised from the grave before.”

“You mock me. But you should hope I’m right. For your friends’ sake, if nothing else.”

“A *god*?” At the sound of a woman’s voice, I twist toward the couple behind me. The woman shoves at the man with one hand as she attempts and fails to shield her rather voluptuous breasts with the other. “What in the devils? You have, *you have fangs*. And claws. Emon, he has *fangs and claws*.”

The man jerks awake, startled, and takes me in again, from white hair to beast-like feet. Even though he’s likely still steeped in liquor, I can see the realization that I am no apparition settling in. He swallows, the knot in his throat bobbing.

“Of course, I have fangs and claws.” I curl my lips back. “I have to eviscerate and eat you with *something*.” I lunge toward them and growl again, this time much louder than before. I also send a heavy frost into the air, enough to cloak their exposed skin in a shimmering, white sheen.

The pair scramble to their feet, screaming, and stumble-run down the alley until they round a corner into another alley where I hear the city stirring. Wooden wheels rumble as carts roll across cobbled streets, and sleepy voices mutter their protests to the rise of day. We’ve but minutes before this bastard and his woman run wailing to the night constables that a giant half-man/half-wolf is prowling Quezira’s back alleys.

“Go.” I jerk my head at Moeshka. “Before any control you have over the fate of your next few hours disappears.”

Moeshka grits his teeth, making the muscle in his square jaw leap, as though he cannot stand the thought of obeying me. For effect, he lifts his hand and flings out his fingers, sending shards of ice flying down the alley. They’re as fast and sharp-tipped as arrows, but the only thing they strike is the side of the next building.

He curls his fingers into a fist. “I can control my fate, but I’m a bit impatient, and I’d rather not suffer a ridiculous deterrence.” With that, he turns to leave.

“Say whatever you must to convince yourself that you’re not doing exactly what I told you to do, soldier.” I scoff as he shakes his head and keeps walking. “I can’t figure out *what* she sees in you,” I add, a knife I can’t help but twist.

I don’t know why I can’t leave well enough alone. Why I envy him enough to feel such spite and enmity—for a human, immortal or not. But I do. And not because of anything we went through in what feels like another lifetime. No. Only because he holds Nephele Bloodgood’s heart and doesn’t

know what to do with it.

He stops and spins back around. “Ah. I see now. If either of us is jealous, it’s you, isn’t it?” He closes the distance between us in a few long strides. “If you care for Nephele at all,” he says, “though that seems utterly impossible, tell her that I *will* return. If you can’t get to me, assure her I know what I’m doing and that I’ll find my way back home. After what you did to me, you owe me that much.”

“I owe you nothing, and you already chose your home. Like a traitor, you chose to be with the enemy. Care to know the name of the man you’re betraying your friends for?”

Moeshka’s eyes, however mistrustful of me, sparkle with anger, but also with curiosity. “Yes,” he grits out. “I want his name.”

“Your prince really is a prince,” I tell him. “He’s the oldest child and only son of a very well-known king you might remember. King Gherahn.”

The shock on Moeshka’s face is quite what I expected. I give him a few moments to let this knowledge sink in.

“Prince Elias Gherahn is his name,” I finally say. “His father is the man whose armies we battled so long ago. Somehow, the prince still lives. And you *feel* something for him, don’t you? More than the loyalty you *should* feel for the witch who has warmed your bed for years or the kingdom that has bled and died in your name.”

In a move *almost* too swift to detect, he’s holding a dagger of ice to my throat. I could sift behind him and drive that dagger into his skull. But I don’t.

For the witch alone, I don’t.

“How dare you inquire about what I *feel*.” He spits the word in my face. “You never cared before, when you took away my mortality over a goddess I didn’t even want. So how fucking dare you act as though my feelings matter now.” He leans in to place pressure on the blade. “All you need to know is that the prince—Elias if you’re telling the truth—didn’t ask for this. I know he wasn’t always this way. You gods are an *infection*, Thamaos especially, and there are some people I refuse to let any of you claim. Including Nephele. You might have her trapped in a deal but know that I will find a way to save her from you, you pathetic virus.”

I tilt my head, unable to stop the smirk that forms on my face. “One, your little knife isn’t going to do a godsdamn thing to me, and you well know it. Two, you seem a bit... torn. Like you can’t decide which lover to protect. But

I can help you with that. Because three, Nephele Bloodgood is safer with me than anyone else on this broken continent.” I lean in against the blade. “However, lastly, you need to understand that you may be too late to save your soul-sucking prince. You realize that, yes?”

“Maybe.” He jerks his blade across my throat, a pointless effort. When nothing happens, he says, “But I have to try.”

A commotion sounds behind me. I turn to find the man and woman from earlier standing at the end of the alley along with two sword-wielding constables clad in bronze leathers. Their eyes are wide as plates.

Moeshka pushes past me, ice dagger in hand, and flares his arms out at his sides as though protecting me, which is laughable. He glances back, one eyebrow raised. “Now would be a good opportunity to vanish, mongrel. Time for me to get captured.”

I shake my head at his histrionics, already silently calling upon a cold wind and the aether of the gods that blessedly still remains in this realm to come and carry me back to the Summerlands.

The last thing I hear as I swirl into a dusting of snow and ice are footfalls splashing through the mud, and Colden Moeshka’s taunting voice as he laughs and says, “Well, hello motherfuckers. Let’s dance.”



“HE’S IN QUEZIRA, ISN’T HE?”

The witch sits at the base of my memoriam tree, huddled beneath the king’s jacket. She shivers in the mount’s dull, gray light and stares straight ahead where the sunrise touches the golden desert lands, stretching beyond the cliff to the distant sea. I sit beside her, noting how hoarse her voice has become from the fading smoke.

“Yes, he is. He told me he’d try to be ready when I return. It seems your king has taken a fancy to Elias Gherahn.” She exhales a slow and shuddering breath, but the news doesn’t land with the expected impact. “You already knew.”

“I pieced it together moments after you left.” Ice-blue eyes glistening, she looks at me with a pained and bitter expression. “You could’ve taken him to Winterhold, regardless of what he asked of you.”

“You wished me to obey *your* desires for his fate above *his* own?” Her

glare softens, and the sorrow and worry on her face morph into simple sadness. “I doubt I’ll ever agree with anything Moeshka does,” I tell her. “But this is why I let your sister have her revenge last night. Your loved one’s choices are theirs to make, at least until you have complete command of me. Even then, you don’t seem the type of woman to take away the free will of your fellow humankind, let alone those closest to you. From a god, perhaps,” I say with a lighter tone. “But not your people. No matter what you see as wrong or right.”

A teardrop swells on the rim of her eyelid. I can feel the turmoil inside her as she sweeps her gaze back over the desert.

Unable to fight it, a tear tumbles down her cheek. “You could have prevented all of this, though. If you’d shielded Raina when I asked you to.”

“She would have eventually found out. Would her pain have been any less if delayed? Her enemy would be free, and she would be driven by the need for vengeance. It would’ve devoured her. Denying her revenge would’ve only blackened her soul and postponed her rage.”

“Perhaps,” she replies, and another tear falls. “I only wanted to keep us together and safe. I’ve lost enough. Raina and Colden and Alexis mean so much to me. I can’t lose what family I have left.”

She’s never spoken so openly to me. Save for her plea for her sister just hours ago, we’ve shared nothing but teasing, vitriol, and threats. Something about such honesty makes me want to ease her.

For a split second, I think to deliver Moeshka’s message as a balm, to brush away the tear stain from her face and slip my palm over the pale hand clenching the garnet fabric of her dress. In this form, I might touch her, but just like Moeshka’s blade, I can’t truly feel her. Not the warmth of blood or the pulse of life in her veins. Not the softness or the cold of her skin. Not the fragile nature of her human form or the surprising strength in her sure grasp. Only pressure. An awareness of solidity. Nothing more.

Still, a need to comfort her stirs, but the moment I lift my hand, she unfurls her grip from her soot-covered gown, scrubs at her tears, and stands.

“Can we get this over with now?”

*This.* My resurrection. My return. After three unbearably long centuries trapped inside Un Drallag, watching the ebb and flow of time from the darkness of his immortal prison, my time to live again has arrived.

The thought sends a trickle of excitement through my soul, a thrill chased by the glimmer of something foreign to me. *Fear.* That this might go wrong,



or nothing will change, and I'll be doomed to roam this land as an unfeeling spirit for eternity, little better than a stinking wraith. There could be consequences. History says as much, though history is often the boldest liar.

"I must teach you the ritual song first. We've no parchment for you to study, so I hope you have a good memory and find my voice pleasant to the ear."

She arches a sharp, sarcastic brow, any vulnerability that leaked from her before now tightly tucked away. "Don't tell me you're going to sing to me."

"Of course I am. Over and over, until you know the words by heart."

Arms crossed around her middle, she rolls her head and groans as though this is the worst day of her life. Maybe it is. A part of me worries about what this deal means for her and her future, how this resurrection will change everything about life as she's known it and render me a permanent fixture in her world. But I've come too far now to give up this chance. Haven't I?

She sits back down, carefully covering her legs with the length of her dress. "Well, go on. This ends today."

I push aside any thoughts of guilt and close my eyes. Though this somehow feels like a dream, I begin the first refrain. *Morentha tu morai... Rise my divine immortal...*

I've heard these lyrics for ages, secret knowledge stolen from Loria and passed down through a host of gods like second-hand gossip. But until this moment, I haven't uttered these strands of ancient Elikesh since before I was condemned. Still, each syllable flows smoothly, too much a part of my soul to come out wrong.

I envision the Northlands as I sing and imagine the crunch of deep snow underfoot. I've missed Frostwater Wood and the valley. I miss roaming the caves and cooking over a fire, sleeping in my cottage with each pack member asleep on the floor. I miss running with wolves over the mountains under a blood moon and shifting effortlessly from man to beast as I tear through the trees.

How I crave the vital, feral nature of both forms.

I don't know how long I sing. Long enough that Nephele Bloodgood finally reaches out and touches my hand.

"Wolf. You can stop now."

Her voice tugs at me like no other can, and I return to myself, opening my eyes, feeling as though my soul had drifted elsewhere.

My attention falls to her hand, ornately covered in witch's marks, resting

atop mine. She jerks back as though she touched something hot and rubs her palm over her dress, an effort to scrub away the feel of me, no doubt.

“That was...” She screws up her face, her perfect little nose scrunching.

“What? Atrocious? Awful? I’m sure you have another word that fits.”

She’s quiet for a long moment and then says, “Absolutely appalling.”

I smile at that because I know otherwise. “Wait until you hear me sing in my human form. If that was appalling, you’ll find the man in me abhorrent.”

A flicker dances across her eyes. *Worry*. She would have me believe that she’s convinced I’ll become an even worse experience to endure as a man. But the truth I already sense is that she fears I’ll become something even more appealing to her than I already am. Something far more dangerous and beguiling.

She would be right.

“Do you have it memorized?” I ask. “The ritual song?”

“I do. Now, all we need is this.” She slides her cold hands together, back and forth to create warmth, and tugs her long, blonde hair over her shoulder. She tries and fails to unfasten the clasp on the necklace holding the remnant of my heart. “Damn it.” She shakes her hands and stretches her fingers, the skin reddened from the air that has yet to heat from the morning sun. “I can’t feel anything.”

I hold out my hand, making every effort to prove that even gods can be chivalrous. “May I?”

She considers my offering as though I hold a poisonous adder between us. I wait patiently, trying to ignore the curves of her lovely lips, pursed into a full pout as she thinks. Blessedly, she finally gives in and lays her small hand inside my larger one.

Wishing I could really feel her, I close my fingers around hers and send all the power I can into her body, a wave of warmth radiating up her arm and spreading throughout her core and limbs. Her eyes drift closed, her pretty mouth parts, and she breathes heavily—once, twice, three times—before a shudder of relief rolls through her.

She opens her eyes and, again, quickly jerks away from my touch. “I won’t pretend that isn’t handy,” she says. “But it also feels intrusive. Like you’re...”

I watch her closely, seeing her mind at work, gnawing at a thought as she bites her lip. “Like I’m what? *Inside* you?”

Her cheeks turn pink, and this time, I’m fully aware that it isn’t from the

cold.

“Turn for me. I’ll get the clasp.” Much to my surprise, and though it happens after a moment of hesitance, she does. Like a little bird, she tilts her head down, exposing the delicate length of her slender neck.

In those next few seconds, I notice so many things about her. Every dainty blonde curl coiled tight around her hairline. The way her marked flesh rises from a cold wind, or perhaps from my nearness. The gently sloping line from her ear to her shoulder, and the streak of colorful flourishes that follows it.

These last weeks have been a battle of wills and want, a fight with yearning. It’s been so long since I’ve been capable of succumbing to carnal longings, and I’ve been captivated by her for enough years now that it’s difficult not to imagine kissing that soft skin, tangling my fingers in her silken hair, and whispering against her ear how badly I want her.

But this is not the time. If she brings me back, the right moment will come, and I will be more than ready when it does.

Carefully, I unlatch the aged clasp. Nephele catches the necklace in the palm of her hand. “Now, all I must do is sing the song? That seems rather simple. Surely there were more protections in place for such a serious task?”

Now is not the time to gain a conscience either, yet the guilt from before returns. Given the years I’ve lost, I can’t recall the last time I felt the need to lean on the side of integrity, but I cannot allow her to go any further unless I divulge all I know. Gods are not creatures of honor or loyalty, but wolves are a different story. I’ve often thought Loria might’ve made me more wolf than god for a reason.

“It was rumored that permission from the queen and her scholars was a requirement, lest the trees of the grove dole out some sort of repercussion or demand a penance. Since we’re not asking for Fia Drumera’s blessing, all you need to do is press the pendant into the earth, returning my remnant to the soil, and then no matter what happens, sing like a sparrow until I’m whole again.”

Uncertainty lines her brow as she runs her thumb over the facets of the stone in her hand, causing it to emit a soft glow.

I let out a low sigh, hating myself for my next words. “Or I can take you back to Fia’s palace, and we can part ways.”

Her eyes dart up and widen. “I thought the deal was made.”

“It is. But I can release you whenever I wish. If you don’t want to go any

further, then so be it. I will still retrieve that flying idiot you call a friend *and* your itinerant sister. Even Moeshka, if possible. After that, I'll find another way to return from the dead. With or without you."

There. Conscience satisfied, even if I loathe everything about it.

Nephele looks toward the east again, toward her sister, clutching my pendant close to her heart. "You're giving me a way out."

"I am."

"And yet you've also given me a taste of power over my enemy. An enemy who likely took my sister from this very mountain." She faces me again. "That kind of power in a time of conflict could change everything. How can I let that slip from my hands?"

I shrug. "You don't have to. But realize that the fate of Tiressia shouldn't rest on any one person's shoulders. Let alone yours."

"It wouldn't be resting on *my* shoulders," she says. "It would be resting on *ours*."

*Ours*. A word I've yet to use regarding us outside of *our deal*.

I hold her gaze. "I'm loyal to my land, Nephele. To my home. The Northland Break. Bitter and mad as I was when I said otherwise, I'll protect her without any deal between you and me. If you return to Winterhold, I'll make certain no harm comes your way. I also believe that Thamaos and I will eventually battle, no matter what happens on this mount today, and if it's the last thing I do, I will defeat him. So the decision is yours, once again. If you want to be the woman who wields a god in this war, then I trust your instinct and will obey your desires. If not..."

"You'll move on to someone else," she finishes for me.

I rest my forearms on my knees and stare at the snow. If only it were that simple.

"I still want the deal."

I lift my head and cock it to one side. "Say again?"

"*I want the deal*." She shoves her arms into the sleeves of Moeshka's jacket and repositions the spy's coat on her shoulders. "I want to be the woman who wields a god against Thamaos. I want to be the woman who wields *you*."

Fuck me. She doesn't know it yet, but I fear she already is that woman.

She limps to the tree and sits beside me, her knees bent to spare her ankle. She slices a glance at the snow-covered ground. "That's a problem."

It takes a moment for me to drag my heavy thoughts back to the moment.

We're doing this. *She's* doing this. Because she wants to.

I wave my hand. The snow around the tree vanishes, revealing what hides beneath: the golden plaque that bears my name, written in old Elikeshe, a mass of tangled tree roots, scattered ash from burned flora, and black, raw earth. It hasn't struck me until this moment that the bones that housed my soul are right beneath us, buried away yet ready to live again.

Nephele raises her eyebrows and blinks those long, feathery lashes. "Are you ready for this, wolf?" She pinches my pendant tightly between her thumb and forefinger.

I've no notion what to expect, but I have an answer. "I've been ready for three hundred years."

Nephele nods once, then she digs her fingers into the soil, pushing aside small mounds to create a hole. With deliberate movements, she places the pendant into the earthen pit, neatly arranging the golden chain around it. If I had a real, human heart, it would pound as she presses her palms to the ground and begins to sing, her voice raspy and tired but still so very beautiful.

*"Morenthu tu morai..."*

Rise, my divine immortal.

4



## NEPHELE

**A**fter only a few verses, Neri vanishes from my side. *Completely understandable*, I tell myself, shaking off the eeriness of his sudden absence. His soul *must* return to his body.

The second he's gone, the earth trembles with a soft rumble, as though being awakened again, and begins a gentle cry I recognize from last night. I almost pause my singing as the haunting moans coming from the trees grow louder.

Neri mentioned the grove could react to this summoning. We don't have Fia's nor the scholars' permission, but after seeing her face and feeling her rage upon Neri's arrival last night at the wedding, I can't imagine Queen Drumera ever allowing the northern god to be brought back from the grave, no matter how much of a defense he might provide against her adversaries. In all these years, she's never attempted to resurrect any god, even though her need was dire.

Unfortunately, I don't believe we can afford her refusal, even if I will undoubtedly be punished for this. Thankfully, I'll have a god's protection, one who could very likely prevent further bloodshed, war, and misery.

*If I make the right decisions.*

My first decision is to keep singing. No matter what.

A wind whistles through the grove. The earth's quaking becomes so severe that I'm forced to grip onto a root. As I repeat the lyrics, awash in uncertainty, the soil around the pendant caves into the small indentation I made in the ground and an unholy howl echoes through the sentinel trees.

Neri said that no one hears our prayers, but as I sing, I think a prayer to

Loria anyway. This is the closest I will ever be to our maker, so I ask for her aid. For her guidance. To release the wolf god to my guardianship, and to shield me from any fallout from the sacred crime I know I'm committing. I'm doing this for the good of all, giving up my solitude, my *life* in a sense, to tame a god and use him to the world's advantage for a change. Surely that doesn't deserve a harsh sentence.

In a moment of soundlessness, golden light splits the air, followed by a roar that breaks the eerie silence and screams from the trees. It isn't a mournful cry like last night. It's agitated.

Angry. Bitter. Restless.

As the wailing quiets, the earth stills. It isn't until the light begins to fade that I realize its source is coming from the other side of the tree. Still singing, though my words are now more like a chant, I get to my feet and carefully maneuver over the slick snow and gnarled, hidden roots. There, in a bed of upturned soil ringed in dimming light, lies Neri, eyes open as he stares unblinking toward the sky.

My song dies in my throat. He's no pile of bones. No rotting carcass. No animated corpse. He's whole, his winter-pale flesh smooth as alabaster stone, flawlessly molded over his massive form.

I try not to stare, knowing I should look away from his nakedness, but he's like nothing I've ever seen. His hair isn't as long and unnaturally silky now, though still just as lovely, and just as white as his fur had been. And his ears... They no longer bear the point of a wolf but the curve of a human.

I step closer, uncertain of what to do next. When he doesn't move, not even his chest or his eyes, my gaze drifts, searching for any sign of life.

Neri is muscled in ways I didn't know were possible, and I've beheld Colden Moeshka naked and Alexis Thibault shirtless, impressive sights all their own. But Neri...

I find him beautiful in a manner I've never felt toward Alexis or even Colden, the kind of beauty that makes my skin irritatingly febrile and my thoughts completely irrational.

My attention lingers far too long, becoming more of an appreciative study. A specific part of his anatomy is impossible to ignore, currently sleeping heavily against the inner thigh of his right leg.

*Definitely a god.*

Almost as though it senses my stare, his cock twitches, and I yelp, nearly jumping out of my godsdamn skin. When Neri sucks in a loud, ragged breath,



I slap my hand over my mouth, but I'm too late.

He rubs a palm across his forehead and squeezes his temples between the wide span of his middle finger and thumb. Then he *chuckles*. "If my cock scares you that much now, witch, you should see it when I'm rowdy."

My skin grows even hotter with the flames of embarrassment. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course, you don't." He chuckles and slowly pushes himself up from the raw earth into a sitting position. When he looks up at me, I notice the glowing amber of his eyes has dimmed to a pretty, golden brown. "Very nicely done, Miss Bloodgood."

Gods' stars, *why* is his voice like that? Husky and deep and smooth as good liquor.

Again, I try not to stare as Neri stands. That long body unfolds like a gift in the soft morning light, muscles rippling everywhere. He runs his hands over his sinewy arms and then down his impressive torso, admiring his soul's new home. But there's also a glint of a question in his eyes, as though something's missing.

My attempt at disregard fails miserably, because every naked and threatening inch of him is now on grand display, and I can't tear my gaze away. As for the wolf, he barely notices the awe I can't seem to hide, acting as though it's nothing to bare *everything* before a woman he hardly knows.

He shakes his head and taps the heel of his palm against his ear like it's filled with water. Then he turns a confused look on the soil that surrendered his bones and allowed him to reunite with his spirit.

Folding my arms across my middle, I finally divert my eyes to the charred grove instead of gawking at his rather remarkable backside. *You are agonizingly stunning, you immortal bastard*, I think to myself. *Even in human form. Especially in human form.*

And I must deal with him until I'm old and gray. Or at least until I run him off or die.

Whichever comes first.

"Stunning?" he asks. "And *agonizingly*, at that?"

I whip my head around and narrow my eyes. Surely...

"You couldn't have heard that. I didn't say anything."

He narrows his eyes too. "Yes, you did. I heard you. Plainly."

"I did not," I insist, suddenly flustered. "No words left my mouth. Not a single one."

He frowns. "You really didn't speak?"

I snatch Rhonin's jacket from my shoulders and launch it at Neri's handsome face. "No. I didn't. Now stop using whatever godly mind-snooping power you possess to tease me and put some fucking clothes on."

He catches the garment in one hand, and though I expect him to laugh, he stares at me, perplexed. "I have no such power, and I'm not teasing."

His voice holds no hint of playfulness. No tint of amusement either.

A thick knot forms in my throat. He cannot hear my thoughts. That would be—

"Impossible," he finishes. "Unless something you did forged a connection between us."

I face him fully then, my lungs working harder, the pulse in my head throbbing. "I didn't do anything but perform the necessary rite, so don't you dare attempt to fool me. Raina told me you read her mind."

He cocks his head as if a thought just struck him, drops the coat, and stalks toward me, those long and powerful legs carrying him across the short distance between us far too quickly. In those brief seconds, even though he wears the body of a human, he seems more wolf than god but also more animal than man, ever the graceful predator.

A brutal chill crawls up the back of my neck as he stops inches away and curves over me, enveloping me in his scent of winter air, smoked birch, and... vetiver. Unafraid, I tilt my head back and challenge his stare.

"You have much to learn," he says. "For one, I am not the god who toys with minds. Secondly, I can hear the thoughts of anyone who summons me, and you just performed the greatest summons of all by calling me back from the dead. You had a choice. You could've left my soul to wander this world until I found someone else to carry out the task of resurrection. But you didn't." A wicked smirk curls the corner of his mouth. "It appears such magick really does have consequences. The witch's secret observations are now whispers to the wolf's ears." He winks one golden-brown eye. "You might be careful what thoughts you conjure, Miss Bloodgood. I just might make them come true."

Panic roils like a miniature sun inside my chest, filling me with heat. My mind races, but I try to lock it down before he reads me again. There are wards to protect the mind, like those Alexis built around Raina's mind to protect her from the prince. They're not my greatest talent.

Still, I put forth my best effort to erect a mental construct anyway, a

barrier between our minds. I don't know if it will work, but—

The wolf grins wide, and I note that even his fangs are gone, leaving him with a smile that could obliterate any resistance in its path. Except for mine. I refuse to let this beast of a god affect me ever again.

“You like me,” he accuses.

“Oh, stars. I do not. I loathe you. If a blade were any danger, I would've plunged one into your heart days ago. It's tempting even still.” I flip back the skirt of my dress at the slit, revealing my dagger.

Neri waggles his brows at the slip of skin, then taps my nose, making me recoil. “Little liar. You find me lovely. Especially naked.”

I scrub my face to rid my skin of his suddenly very real touch. “You are truly delusional. Lovely is the last word I associate with you. Annoying. Arrogant. Asinine. Those are words I think of when you pop into my mind.”

He winks. “Which is often. And will be even more often now, I wager.”

I rest my hand on the hilt of my dagger as a flush burns up my throat. “Only because I so often dream of murdering you.”

He crosses his enormous arms over his chest, still wearing that irksome smile. “Take down those walls around your mind, then. If you find me so repulsive, what is there to hide?”

It takes a second to grasp, but what he just said means the construct is working.

“Sort of,” he says with a quick tilt of his head. “I can still hear bits and pieces. Enough to string together a cohesive thought.”

Again, I clamp down my racing mind and work to fortify the barrier around my subconscious. When the holes are boarded up, I step closer to the God of the North and stiffen my spine. “Stay out of my head, wolf, or I'll do just as Helena Owyn said. This agreement we have can be civil, or it can be vile. Pick your battles wisely.” I look him over with a measuring glance and make an unimpressed, unfazed face, even though I'm anything but. “Now, take me back to the palace. After that, you know what to do.”

In truth, I'm uncertain of the parameters of our deal, how to navigate having power over a god. I figure a command is a command.

“So demanding,” he says with a glint in his eyes. “If only you knew what that does to me.”

“You want me to make demands? I can make demands.” I trail my fingertip down the center of his chest, noticing the way his nipples harden instantly, all the while sensing his stiffening cock brushing against my thigh.

I suffocate the desire to glance down at him, focusing on how odd it is to feel true warmth in his skin and the gentle pounding of his heart. Determined to exert some form of control here, I let any softness on my face fall into hard lines. “Get dressed. Now. And hurry the fuck up. How’s that for a demand?”

With a huff of a laugh, the wolf turns toward his memoriam tree and is instantly dressed in a complete ensemble: dark gray britches, a cream-colored linen tunic, a dark plum overcoat, and tall black boots. His hair is half-tied back as well, and when he looks to the side, I catch the glint of a small silver-hoop earring, cupping his left earlobe. But my attention settles on the odd-looking sword that hangs across his back. The pommel is shaped like a wolf’s head, and the metal shines like nothing I’ve ever seen. I’ve heard that the gods’ weapons were forged from a specific ore found deep within the earth, an ore called galatine, free from iron and stronger than any steel.

Neri vanishes behind the tree before I can gather any further details and soon returns with his pendant in hand, any sign of mud or earth now gone from the filigree setting around the stone and chain. “This is yours,” he says. “It’s part of the deal. This remnant links us. So when we’re apart, all you must do is touch this piece of my heart, call out to me, and I will come.”

He holds his hand up between us and spins his finger, signaling me to turn around. I hate that I do it so swiftly.

He lifts the pendant over my head, and I hold my hair up while he fastens the clasp. I tell myself that the brush of his fingertips at the edge of my hairline is accidental. I also tell myself that I don’t like the way his touch feels.

When he finishes, he leans in, his nose grazing my neck. “I haven’t scented a woman in so long,” he whispers against my skin. “It’s so different absorbing your aroma like this, through godly senses, not the dulled senses of a man.” Another graze, another inhale, a hand at my waist. “You smell like bliss and ruin at the same time.”

A chill courses through me as I face him, trying to tame my rapid breathing. Other parts of my body respond to his nearness as well, to the lingering heat of his touch, the feel of his breath on my skin. I’m certain he can sense what he just did to me.

“Stop,” I command. “Stop looking at me like that and keep your nose, hands, and all your other bits to yourself.”

“Why?” he inquires with a mischievous bite to his voice. “When you so clearly want me to do otherwise?” He smiles a crooked smile, and I don’t

want it to make me swoon inside, but damn him, it does.

“*Stop it,*” I demand again, pointing a finger at him. “Just get me back to the palace and be on your way.”

“I have to touch you to sift you,” he says, raising a brow. “Am I allowed?”

My stomach twists at that, aware that I’m about to be whisked away from Mount Ultra the same as Colden was, in a flurry of godly design. I find myself stalling while my courage stops being cowardly.

“Why exactly do you call it sifting?” I ask. “I’ve always understood sifting to be a skill created by the Summerlanders. Like what the prince does.”

His face softens with a bit of humor, as though he sees what I’m doing by avoiding his question with one of my own. But if so, he doesn’t mock me.

“I call it sifting because that is what gods do. We move through” —he waves his hand around, as though searching for a word— “a primordial substance. The gods’ quintessence.”

“The aether,” I supply, having read about it.

“Yes. That is the human word for it. But the Summerlanders didn’t invent sifting. They just worked for a very long time trying to learn how to control the aether so it could be used for mankind. Some magi and even some necromancers from the East learned to manipulate the substance. It was a dangerous power in the wrong hands, though, so Urdin—the steadfast bastion of goodness that he was”— he rolls his eyes — “sealed off the Shadow World to keep the necromancers out. The magi simply kept the skill tightly contained, taught only to certain people once the gods were dead, and the aether had no one else to command it.”

My chest tightens with panic. “Thamaos. He will have access to the aether now.”

Neri shakes his head. “No, he won’t. At least he never did before. No one knows why, but the aether denies certain beings its use. There have been many gods over the ages the aether refused to answer when summoned.”

I let out a shuddering breath of relief. “Probably because it recognizes true evil.”

He smirks. “And yet it welcomes me.”

“The aether is how Alexis crossed into the Shadow World, even after Urdin sealed it off from the living,” I say, distracted by remembering his story. “He learned to manipulate it after you all were dead and buried.”

“And once he’s stronger,” Neri says, his voice laced with irritation, “the bastard could use it again, and I wouldn’t put it past him given the situation with your sister.”

My mind roils. “Alexus said what Raina did wasn’t sifting, but now I have to wonder.”

Neri shakes his head. “I traveled with your sister. Her ability is something like realm walking, or perhaps a different form of portaling. But it was not sifting. What Un Drallag did in the grove earlier, that was not sifting either. That was simple propulsion.” He moves closer, his presence overwhelming. “I can show you what sifting *is*, though. But again, you have to let me touch you. Am I allowed?” he asks again.

“Yes,” I reply after long seconds of hesitation, aware of the obvious nervousness in my voice and in my fidgeting fingers that won’t still. “Is there anything I should know first?”

“It’s only unpleasant if you let go or don’t hold your breath,” he replies. “So do as I tell you, and it’ll be over in seconds.” He slides his arm around my waist and tugs me flush against him.

My initial instinct at the contact is two-fold. Part of me wants to push him away while another part wants to draw him closer. I feel oddly protected in his arms.

Any deliberation is annihilated when a chill wind arrives, snow and ice spinning around us, pressure clamping down like an invisible, wintry fist.

“Hold on!” He lifts his voice over the roaring gusts and drags my hands behind his neck. “Now, deep breath.”

I clamp my hands together, fingers tangling in his hair, and inhale deeply as I squeeze my eyes shut.

“That’s a good girl,” he says against my ear, making me shiver.

In the next heartbeat, the world beneath my feet disintegrates, and I’m suddenly weightless, tethered only to the wolf, held securely in his strong arms.

As he sifts us from the mount, I swear I hear something on the fringes of the wind. A sound that swells and then fades quickly.

A wailing, vengeful bellow erupting from the grove.

5



## NEPHELE

“**W**as Fia angry?” I ask Hel as I carefully step out of the bathing tub in the room the Fire Queen so graciously offered me days ago. My ankle is still swollen, but it hurts less now, thanks to the soothing heat of the water.

Hel removes a sand-colored tunic and slate-gray pants from the wardrobe. “She was livid. Flames danced at her fingertips when Rhonin told her what happened on the mount and what we realized had just happened between you and Neri when we entered the palace. The whole city heard the grove’s cries.” She drapes the garments across the chair at my dressing table, then turns and meets my stare, her eyes red and tired but alert. “Actually, livid is an understatement. I’d fight her for you, gods know I’m in the mood, but much as I hate to admit it, we’re out of our league here.”

I scrub the bath linen over my wet hair one last time and wrap it around my body. Feeling sickly and weak after such a long night, I lean my hands on the table and stare at myself in the mirror. I even *look* ill, dark circles bruising the skin beneath my eyes.

But my attention quickly drifts to the pendant around my neck. I don’t know if I made the right decision when it comes to Neri.

“It’s been at least two hours since he left.” I close my fingers around the red stone. “He should be back by now.”

“But he isn’t,” Hel says. She takes a seat on the edge of the bed and leans back on her hands. “And you can’t put Fia off any longer.”

As if summoned, the guard Fia sent to escort us to the grand meeting room pounds on the door. “Misses. The queen is *waiting*.”



“We know,” Hel shouts. “Just a few more minutes, please.”

Trying to hurry, I grab a comb and begin working the tangles from my hair before braiding it.

“Ignore what that dog said on Mount Ulra,” Hel says. “I’ve been praying to Loria since we left the grove. For Raina. For Tiressia. For... Finn. The others might not hear us, but the Ancient Ones? Our maker? I still believe they do.”

I don’t know if she’s right, but I want to believe she is. The souls that live in the trees on that mountainside must come from somewhere. Are they the voices of our most ancient gods? Or something even more primordial? I can’t imagine anything older than Loria, save for the universe, perhaps.

My time is up, so once the leather band is tied around my hair, I dress quickly, strap on my dagger, and we head downstairs, flanked by armed guards. I pause before we step into the meeting hall and tuck Neri’s heart inside my shirt. I doubt Fia would know what it is or who it belongs to, but keeping it hidden seems best.

The guards drag open the massive bronze doors that groan and creak at our entry. Together, Hel and I cross the threshold. A deep breath of relief escapes me upon seeing Rhonin, Zahira, Callan, Keth, and Jaega. They sit at the far end of a long, gleaming wood table, watching me with warmth and concern.

Further up the line sit six scholars. Each one is clad in a golden robe with an umber sash adorning their neck. I didn’t see them when we visited the Hall of Holies yesterday, but I instantly know who they are. Their stoic faces, regal garb, and the Elikesht sigil of knowledge tattooed on their foreheads reveal as much.

I meet each person’s eyes before I finally clash gazes with the queen. She sits at the head of the table, donned in a white, gauzy robe, golden torques at her throat and wrists as always. Her spine is stiff, her chin high, and her posture perfect. Behind her ornately carved chair stands a great fireless hearth three times as tall as me, with an enormous painting of what must be her and her mother hanging from the stone above. Weapons displays, sprawling maps, and gilded glyphs cover the surrounding walls.

Fia stands from her seat with grace, the consummate leader. Her beautiful face is drawn tight, her stare pointed, an angry glint directed at me.

“Sit,” she commands. Her voice is sharp and sibilant.

I glance at Hel who inclines her head to the queen. When she looks back,

her eyes scream for me to *obey* before she strolls across the room and takes her place next to Rhonin.

With every expectant gaze on me, I limp to the end of the table opposite Fia where an empty chair awaits. But something inside me refuses to cower before her, even for the crime of resurrecting Neri.

I lift my chin and square my shoulders to match the queen's stance. "I think I'll stand, Your Majesty."

Her nostrils flare at my perceived insolence, but there's no other visible response. Not even a blink.

"It's clear that you've been under Colden Moeshka's guidance, Miss Bloodgood. He has a rather *impulsive* nature that I once found irresistible. But time forces us to view things differently. Even so little time as the rise and fall of the moon, which feels like less than a breath to me." She clasps her hands. "When you first arrived here, I appreciated your spark. But now I'm forced to wonder if you are nothing more than a hazard waiting to happen to my people and perhaps all of Tiressia." A small scroll lies on the table before her. With a wave of Fia's hand, it flies down the length of the table, spinning mid-air until it comes to an abrupt stop in front of me. "Open it," she orders.

The ends have been capped in bronze finishes to hold the parchment secure, the seal having long ago been broken and removed. Very carefully, and with a slight tremble in my fingers, I tug the caps free and unroll the parchment.

I glance up at the queen, my pulse a drum in my ears. "This is ancient Elikes. A dialect I'm not certain I understand."

"Try," she says.

I look it over again. "This is Summerlander dialect." I harden my voice as the meeting hall doors behind me groan open. "I can't read it, and you know it."

The pendant around my neck pulses against my skin, and a coppery scent floods my nostrils.

"But *I* can," a man says.

I go still as stone at the sound of that rich voice, dark with promise.

"So can I."

I spin around, my heart thundering. Neri stands just inside the doors of Fia Drumera's grand meeting hall.

And Alexis Thibault is with him.

Formalities and royal etiquette be damned. I hobble toward my old friend as quickly as I can and throw myself into his arms. He holds me tightly and buries his head in the crook of my shoulder. He isn't weeping, but I can feel sorrow emanating from him. It's so thick that it saturates the entire room.

When I pull back and take his face in my hands, I see cuts and blooming bruises, the odor of fresh blood pungent enough to twist my stomach and burn my throat. "What happened? Where's Colden? Raina?"

I graze my thumb over the skin beneath Alexis's busted and swollen lip, taking in the sight of his bleeding nose and blackening eye. Even worse, the shredded remains of his midnight tunic reveal a crimson-streaked chest, slashed as though by claws.

I turn a murderous look on Neri. He wipes the back of his hand under his nose to catch dripping blood before it reaches his lips. His pristine clothes are filthy and torn in places, too, with red splatters everywhere.

"What in gods' death did you do?" I snap.

His brow draws down into an irritated frown. "Why does everyone always blame *me*? Your *friend* here didn't want to return with me. Imagine that. I tried to make him, and he blasted me with his magick, trying to fucking obliterate me, which didn't work, clearly. It pissed me off, though, and I happened to have a few centuries of pent-up frustrations to take out on someone, namely him, so we had a tussle, in the fucking desert, where this great, pre-eminent sorcerer crash-landed because he still doesn't have full reign of his pathetic power."

Before I can reply, a ball of blue flame launches toward the side of Neri's head. I hardly have time to think before he throws his hand up, catching it. The fire turns to frost and rains from his fist to the floor.

He glares across the room at Fia Drumera, his golden-brown eyes now aglow. "Be thankful I didn't just impale you with a thousand needles of ice."

She shakes her head in disgust, her gaze roving up and down his impressive stature. "You look a bit different without your marks, but otherwise, you haven't changed at all. Still an arrogant brute trying to be the fairest maiden's hero."

I think back to the way he studied himself in the grove. It was his marks, whatever they might've been, that were missing.

He grins, swiping at the blood running down his chin as though it's an annoyance. "Brute? I thought I was the devil. The bad guy. The dastardly villain of the fairytale."

“You are a *waste*,” she spits. “A god who thinks with his prick and little else.”

“Are you envious that my prick never thought about you?”

A golden dagger sails from Fia to Neri. He snatches it from the air before the blade can wedge into his face.

Slowly, he turns the knife in his hand and *tsks*. “Now you’re just asking for trouble, Fia.”

Her scholars stand and draw their curved blades, magi of the highest Summerland order. Their beloved queen rounds the table and stalks toward Neri, grabbing the discarded scroll. Each member of our Northland crew remains seated, but their hands slip to their weapons, as mine does, the room humming with the Summerlanders’ tempered magick.

Without reservation, Fia Drumera approaches Neri, chin raised, and extends the scroll. “You might be breathing now,” she says. “But I know this holy land. It doesn’t take well to being trampled upon and abused by foreigners, especially gods who were exiled from the living realm and condemned to eternity in the Shadow World.” She jerks her chin at the scroll. “Go on. Read your old lover’s letter. Learn your fate, wolf.”

He stabs the dagger into the sheath hanging from Fia Drumera’s side and plucks the scroll from her hand. The room is silent as he reads.

“Do you truly think Asha and I never discussed this?” he says with a sarcastic tone. “There’s no evidence save for rumors that it’s real. If it is, then the grove is going to curse me, and most likely the prince and Thamaos as well. I don’t know about them, but I’m not scared of a little magick doled out by a bunch of ancient trees.”

“Perhaps not,” Fia replies. “But they’re going to curse *her* as well.”

I try not to wither under Fia’s dark stare when her gaze shifts to me, all while trying to ignore the strange sense of foreboding that falls over the room and creeps up my spine. A life for a life. I suppose I should’ve inquired about the extent of that particular requirement.

“Fuck all,” Alexis mutters as Neri looks my way.

The wolf’s expression isn’t so arrogant now. That haughty smirk of his falls a little, and the muscles in his jaw tighten as he clings to a mask of indifference. He corrects, but I can see unease haunting the sparkle in his eyes, as though the thought of my suffering the consequence of our crime is somehow worse than if it happened to him alone.

Even though I feel lightheaded, and the scent of blood makes my stomach

rumble, I react much the same as Neri, attempting to appear unaffected as the queen steps closer.

“I thought so highly of your mother,” she says. “What would Ophelia think if she could see you now? Here, in her homeland, making a mockery of the goddess mother Loria and her grove, standing with Neri, a self-serving and condemned god, all because you chose to defile the most sacred ground in all the world.”

“To retrieve a weapon that *I* wield,” I defend. “A weapon we desperately need. Neri will bring me Thamaos’s bones. Today. And the Prince of the East’s head. I’ve commanded him so. Perhaps once that part is over, we can all work together to prevent further bloodshed and truly heal Tiressia as a united continent.”

Eyes wide and disapproving, Fia scoffs. “Neri got to you, I see. He used that pretty face and suave charm to convince you of his ever-powerful nature.” She slides a glare at the wolf. “Have you been to Min-Thuret, Neri? And don’t lie. I can smell the city on you.”

“I have,” he answers, his voice strung tight as a drawn bow.

The queen holds out her hands. “Then where are Thamaos’s bones and the prince’s head? I’d love to see them. My magi can safely discard of Thamaos’s remains, and tonight, we can celebrate our victory with the prince’s head on a pike. I hear revenge is called for.”

Helena’s small gasp at the reminder of Finn’s murder hurts and angers my heart, but I keep my attention on Neri who turns to me as though no one else in the room matters.

“I went for Moeshka first,” he says. “He wasn’t ready to return with me. I found him in a holding cell in the lower quarter, waiting for transport to Min-Thuret for questioning. So then I sifted into the palace. Fleurie wasn’t there. Not that I could sense. As for Thamaos and the prince, they are highly guarded by the Brotherhood inside Rite Hall.” He pauses, as though unnerved by his next words. “I couldn’t get past their shields. I’m... not strong enough yet.” Again, the wolf wipes his bloody nose and glances at the red smear on his hand, perplexed. “This resurrection is having its way with me, it seems.”

My blood goes cold. I’d been correct to question how quickly he would be restored. But being right just means that my precious weapon might not be such a divine intervention after all. Not immediately, anyway.

“And what of Raina?” I ask, my words shaky. “Is she being kept in Rite Hall too?”

Neri and Alexis share a glance. They needn't say anything for me to understand that they've already discussed this.

"I couldn't sense her," Neri says. "She is not at Min-Thuret, or even in Quezira. I searched everywhere before I returned and found Thibault."

I press my hand to my roiling stomach and look between Neri and Alexis. "Where is she, then?"

"We don't know," Alexis answers, his face grim. "Possibly wherever Fleurie is being kept. It's the only answer I have."

"Raina isn't with me," a feminine voice says from across the room, so hoarse it sounds as if it's been scraped against gravel. "Not here, anyway," she adds.

We all turn toward the hearth, even those who are seated and standing at the meeting table. There, sitting in Fia's chair and dressed in soot-covered attire, is a woman who had not been there before. Though her flaming red hair is dulled by ash, I know her face. My sister described her well. I knew her the moment I saw her last night in the grove.

Fleurie.



## NEPHELE

The room falls silent, and after a long and weighted moment, Alexis slips past Fia.

His expression is one of utter incredulity, his unwavering gaze fixed on the godling across the room. Though he's known of her existence for many weeks, and though he saw her last night too, no one knew Fleurie's fate after she vanished with the prince and Thamaos's bones.

Until now.

Alexus's vivid eyes are unusually shadowed, his brow drawn down as he slowly makes his way toward Fleurie, as if he's imagining her. He's always such a towering, formidable presence. But today, there's one crack in his meticulous facade: the tremble that ripples within his entire body at the sight of his old friend.

Fleurie stands, her eyes glistening and bright with pools of unshed tears. She moves from behind the table and walks toward Alexis, bridging the distance three centuries has forced between them.

Each step is calm and oddly powerful for a woman who's been buried away from everyone and everything, existing in a half-alive state, alone and in darkness no less, for so very long. I suppose that's what the blood of a god can do when it runs through a human's veins.

She shouldn't look how she does—like the rest of us looked a few hours ago. Her clothes shouldn't be burned and scorched in places. Her face shouldn't be smeared with soot, nor her hair filled with ash.

She left *before* Raina's fire. Didn't she?

Fleurie and Alexis meet boot to boot. She tilts her head up, chin



trembling. With genuine and undeniable love in her golden eyes, she releases a spill of tears as she lifts her shaking hand to cup Alexis's face.

I've seen Alexis cry once, and that was in the grove this morning. His strong, broad shoulders shake as he weeps quietly, staring at his friend, pressing his cheek into Fleurie's touch like it's the only thing keeping him from crumbling.

Sweetly, she folds her arms around his neck and pulls him down into a tender embrace. Burying his face in her hair, he tightens his arms around her waist and picks her up, holding her as a cry of deepest pain rumbles from his chest and fills the room. After it passes, the only sounds between the two friends are rough gasps around their tears, and mournful, murmured words almost too quiet to hear. Almost.

*I'm so sorry I left you. I'm so sorry.*

*You didn't know.*

*I should've known.*

*You couldn't have.*

*You lived, Fleurie. All this time.*

*I did. We did.*

*But you were alone. I left you alone.*

*I had your memory. I was never alone.*

*I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry. Forgive me.*

*Shhh, sweet Alexi. Shhh. I'm here now.*

More words are spoken in hushed Elikes too soft and fluid to understand. But the melancholy is there, moving between them like the sweetest sorrow.

Hel and Rhonin look my way. Their faces are doleful from the same immense sadness clenching my heart and constricting my throat. How much loss, heartache, and guilt can one man endure?

Fleurie draws back, a soft, sad smile on her face. Affectionately, she tucks his hair behind his ear. "We need to talk," she says with a rasp. Her voice is battered and rough, yet somehow still smooth—gravel and silk. "I know where Raina is."

At the sound of my sister's name, my heart lurches with hope, but my head swims, the pulse in my ears as loud as raindrops on a tin roof. I'm not sure why, but I glance up at the wolf. He stares back with eyes like Fleurie's, golden honey, watching me in that penetrating way of his. He's trying so hard to read my thoughts through my shields which, thanks to the exhaustion

trying to drown me, are beginning to weaken.

He grazes the back of my hand with his finger, a sensation I register but can't make myself pull away from.

"Are you all right?" he whispers.

I'm not. But I only nod and turn my attention back to the moment at hand. Everything feels so much larger than me right now. Larger than a sick spell, larger than my anger and my hurt. Even larger than my situation with Neri. I sense a shift coming, as though Fleurie holds the power to change everything about our lives, even more than they've already changed.

Alexus sheds the heavy cloak of his grief and sets Fleurie on her feet. "How do you know about Raina at all? Did Colden tell you? The prince?"

"*The prince*," Fleurie says wistfully. Her voice is so ragged and forlorn, her more ancient intonations unfamiliar, but it's clear that *the prince* isn't her answer. It's a sadly pensive thought. "You truly cannot remember him, can you?"

Confusion twists Alexis's face. "I remember him from a few decades past when Colden and I went to meet him after King Regner died, before Thamaos fully corrupted him." He pauses, studying her as if reading her like an open book. "That isn't what you mean, is it?"

Shaking her head, Fleurie leads Alexis to the chair I left vacant and guides him to sit. She then kneels at his feet, angled in a manner where I can see them clearly. She clasps his large, rugged hand between hers, running her fingertips admiringly over the calluses formed from so many years wielding a sword.

With a swipe at the tears streaking her dirty face, she looks at the three of us still standing. "You should sit." She gestures toward the table and eyes me especially, as if she knows who I am. "Please."

Fia, Neri, nor I move. Neri is still watching me, though, his gaze heavy and attentive on the side of my face.

A cold bead of sweat forms on my upper lip. "I'd rather stand."

"Me too," Neri says.

Fia arches her sharp brow and spears us both with a dark stare. I don't know about Neri, but I'm not trying to be difficult or hold my ground this time. My ankle throbs, and I'm ill and dizzy, but though I wish I were already sitting, I feel like I might faint if I move. I don't want to be a disruption, not when we're so close to learning where Raina is, so I stay put.

Fia motions to her magi to take their seats, then she slides her hands

behind her back, chin raised. "Go ahead, Fleurie. I don't want to miss a word."

After several more pregnant moments, Fleurie lifts Alexis's hand, kisses his battered knuckles, and begins.

"A very long time ago, in the year before my father died, I met a young woman at the scholarada." She clears her throat, clutching it where a red ring from the prince's iron collar still marks her fair skin.

Rhonin, chivalrous as ever, gets up from his seat and pours a glass of lemon water from a ceramic pitcher that sits on a sideboard behind him. He offers the drink to Fleurie who graciously accepts, turning up the glass to wet her throat. When she sets the glass aside, she tries again.

"It all began when the woman arrived mysteriously in the ruins near Min-Thuret. Scared and cornered, she killed one of King Gherahn's guards. The dungeons at Min-Thuret were full, and since it was clear she held the power of magick, she was taken to the scholarada and imprisoned in the cells where disobedient students were often held." Fleurie rubs circles on the back of Alexis's hand. "But, when you questioned her, something about that woman stopped you from turning her over to the king. And later, her charm saw her to freedom within the scholarada's grounds, then even within the city and sometimes Min-Thuret, as long as she had an escort."

Alexus frowns, blinking those darkly lashed, bloodshot eyes. "I don't recall this person. But again, I don't recall many things. From that year, especially."

Fleurie continues rubbing his hand, tracing the long lines of his fingers as she holds his gaze, as though she knows the action will soothe him while she tells her story.

"There's a reason you don't remember certain things," she says. "A reason that makes me want to see my father live again if only for the chance to murder him slowly and with much misery."

Alexus leans forward, elbows on his knees, and touches her cheek. "What are you trying to tell me, Fleurie? Please. Just say it."

She takes a deep breath, like she needs the air to sustain her reply. "The woman became my friend. A sister, in truth. And she became your lover."

Poor Alexis looks more confused than ever. "Is this about my wife?" he asks.

Fleurie's brow crumples. "Your wife? If you ever took a wife, Alexis, I did not know her."

“Evie,” he says, as though Fleurie should remember, but she just shakes her head.

“No. The woman I’m talking about was only with us for close to a year. And in that time, you grew to care for her so deeply that it changed the course of your life, and mine and Elias’s as well.”

He frowns again. “Elias?”

“Gherahn,” Neri answers. “Elias Gherahn. Otherwise known as the Prince of the East. This is beginning to feel like a very boring game.”

Fleurie darts a glance at the wolf, but to my surprise, it isn’t an angry one. She seems relieved that her words have validation.

It strikes me then, what Neri said last night to the prince. “*Do you want your name?*”

He knew him. Because they lived at the same time.

Alexus straightens in his chair, his apprehensive stare on Fleurie. “Tell me he’s lying.”

She shakes her head. “I can’t. The man the world calls the Prince With No Name is the son of King Gherahn. Outside of me, Elias was your best friend, ever since you were brought to the scholorada as a boy.”

Every person in the room draws a stunned breath, including me.

Alexus scoffs, though the turbulent thoughts happening inside his mind are made evident in his bewildered expression. “I would remember that. So would he. Besides, there is no way he could’ve lived that long.”

She tilts her head, her gaze soft. “As a Soul Eater, Alexi? A threat even to the Shadow World? Feeding kept him alive, in a withering yet living condition, until my father practically called out from the grave to manipulate Elias’s every move.” Her voice trembles as tears roll down her rosy cheeks. “Because the prince we knew wasn’t a monster. We loved him because he was anything but. It’s just that neither of you remembers that time because Thamaos made sure that was impossible. We have all been made pawns in a game created inside the darkest corners of my father’s twisted mind.”

Alexus studies her face as though he’s staring into an unknown darkness. “So you’re... You’re saying Thamaos *stole* my memories?”

Neri huffs. “Un Drallag, do you think he would have spared you had you known something he did not wish you to know? He was a memory thief of the highest order. Or did he steal that knowledge as well?”

Alexus glares at Neri, the tendons in his neck tightening and flaring, but again, I see his mind turning.

Oh, my gods. I press my hands to my face because the wolf is right. That's precisely what Thamaos did.

Fleurie reaches up to touch Alexis's chin, bringing his attention back to her. "Thamaos sees memories the way some witches see magickal threads. If he sees one he wants you to forget, he reaches out and collects it. When it came to *me*, he couldn't simply *steal* memories. He'd created a spawn who was far from susceptible to him in that way. I think he tried, covertly, before he reversed our rune. I was young, and he was still unsure about my immortality and strength. But when he realized he couldn't tamper with my memories, he had no option but to destroy the bond and the emotional connection I had with you. It was the only other way he could tear us apart. You knew about this ability of his, once upon a time. You even became skilled at building constructs around your mind because as we grew older, you knew better than to trust him. You tried to protect Elias, too, but in your greatest moment of weakness, my father robbed you both." Her voice quivers, and she looks down, crying, her hands in fists on his knees. "He made us watch as he tore Elias's mind to nothing, emptying it so he could later fill that void with whatever he wished. And for you, he left only enough memories to make you miserable." She lifts her head, her agony evident, her voice thick. "But not before destroying the most precious memory thread he could."

Alexis looks perplexed, running his fingertips over the scar inside his wrist, the one Raina told me about. The destroyed bond he once shared with Fleurie. "He didn't take my memory of you, Fleurie."

Her eyes and lips turn down at the corners as she stares at him intently. "Those are not the precious memories I'm talking about, Alexi. I'm talking about the memories of that final year before Urdin killed my father. Memories that meant everything to you, because they were memories of a woman named Raina Bloodgood, who appeared at Min-Thuret late one summer night and fell under Un Drallag's care."

Alexis's face falls, stricken with yet more disbelief as I sway on my feet. Reflexively, I reach for Neri, clutching at him for stability, but he's already there, one hand spanning my lower back, the other slipping into my searching grasp.

"You believe Raina Bloodgood went *back* in time?" I hear Fia say as I stare into the wolf's worried eyes.

"I don't just *believe* it," Fleurie replies. "I *lived* it. I remember."

Another collective gasp fills the room, followed by low murmurs between the scholars.

“Gods never forget,” Neri whispers, shades of genuine empathy tinting his voice.

As Fleurie’s story seeps into me, I turn back to her and Alexis. I feel detached, every inch of my body trembling, though I’m still secure in Neri’s hold. Alexis sits back in his chair, his eyes vacant and yet wild, the rest of him frozen with shock.

“She told me about the fire on Mount Ulra,” Fleurie says. “She told me I would come to her aid, and that the meeting of our powers would send her to the past—my portal reacting cataclysmically with her abyss.” Her voice wavers. “But when I returned to the mount last night, no matter what she’d once told me, and no matter how scared I was to help her, I had to try to save her. She would’ve burned to death if I hadn’t. Fate, that cruel bitch, gave me no other choice. And so I reached for Raina, and she took my hand. Then we were floating in nothing—a place void of time or air or any substance—until she was ripped from me.” She wipes her cheeks with the back of her hand and exhales. “I landed somewhere in the desert. I lay there in the darkness, waiting for a portal to swallow me and take me back to Rite Hall, the same way it always has, since I was a girl. But it never came. What’s more, my father cursed me the night he took memories from you and Elias. He placed an invisible torque of silence on my voice so that I could not utter a single word about anything he didn’t wish me to. He allowed me the ability to scream, though. And after his death, King Gherahn made certain my voice was heard.”

Alexus’s eyes lock with hers, no doubt remembering those days of brutal torture they shared on the cliffs at the Abyss of Pensea. She hadn’t even been able to tell him what he’d lost.

“But now,” Fleurie adds, “even that curse is gone. It’s as though the collision of mine and Raina’s power destroyed my father’s old magick. The absence of it was so strange. So wonderful. So shocking. I instantly had the notion to return to Quezira and steal Elias away from Min-Thuret. But I don’t know that man anymore, and I just... I just couldn’t make myself go back to that place. For the first time since I was a girl, I felt freedom from my father’s clutches and from Rite Hall, and I just couldn’t go back. I felt so torn. Ripped in two that Thamaos has so thoroughly conquered Elias, and that everything Raina ever told me was coming true.”

“Raina’s really in Quezira?” Helena says, visibly shaken. “Three hundred years in the past?”

Fleurie nods. “She is. Her next several months there will be a battle. She will fall in love with Alexi all over again. But my father will come to feel threatened by her.” She glances around the room at those of us from the North. “Raina is why any of these last weeks happened to you at all. She’s why, once Thamaos learned from his Seers that she could be partly to blame for his coming death, he made certain the God Knife was made, so that if they were correct, a remnant for resurrection would exist. She’s why he made Elias a Soul Eater and used him as an earthly vessel. And all these many years later, she is why he sent Elias to raze the valley.” She turns her eyes back to Alexis. “Thamaos wasn’t only trying to reach Colden Moeshka, yet another pawn. He wanted to eradicate the silent witch his Seers warned him about. A woman he met at Min-Thuret, at a ball held in his famous Great Hall. A woman he eventually feared could prevent his return from the Shadow World should his life be lost. He just didn’t know which village she belonged to. That was knowledge he did not hold because you fought him with all you had to keep that information locked deep inside your mind, to protect her. But he knew she was from the valley, and when the time arose, he simply commanded Elias to burn them all.”

The wave of disbelief that washes through the room is visible on every face, especially those from the Northlands. Helena leans onto the table and buries her head under her arms, shoulders shaking as she cries. Rhonin curves around her, trying to soothe. Zahira, Callan, Keth, and Jaega sit eerily still with blank expressions, struggling to process the slaughter that took place on our land has been three hundred years in the making.

All in the name of Thamaos’s quest for revenge and power.

“If what you’re saying is true,” Alexis says, “then what happens to Raina?” His every word is drenched in two things I’ve never heard in his voice until today: heartbreak and bleakest fear.

Fleurie lifts his hand to her cheek, her brow knitted, her eyes glassy. “I don’t know. I wasn’t there when she left us, and you and I were kept apart for some time after, until my father died. All I know is that one rainy night, everything went horribly wrong. I was dragged into Rite Hall and forced to watch my best friends endure tortures of the mind and body. I was questioned for answers I did not hold. Raina was already gone—you and Elias somehow helped her escape. But too soon, all memory of her was gone as well, except

for the memory of her that still lived in me. I alone held a mind my father could not infiltrate, so he took my ability to speak of her or Elias or any of his wrongdoings instead.”

“This isn’t possible,” I mutter. My voice doesn’t sound like my own. It’s a whisper, a faint shadow. Distant and hopelessly lost.

Alexus releases a shuddering breath, his chest suddenly rising and falling hard, his reply coming out broken. “You’re telling me that you don’t know if she will *return* to me?”

Fleurie shakes her head, sitting back on her heels. “I don’t, Alexi. I’m so sorry.”

The world starts spinning, making me even sicker and weaker than I was minutes before. My knees give, and though I sink toward the floor, Neri catches me, holding me firmly against his body.

“Hey now, little bird.” He brushes his fingertips across the tears at my temple. “Stay with me.”

I try. Gods, do I try. But when I look up at his handsome face, it blurs and fades, and my world goes black.





## NEPHELE

When I rouse, still hovering in that space between sleep and waking, I think I've been dreaming. But within moments, every unimaginable thing Fleurie said rushes back to me, each word resonating soul deep.

My sister is lost.

The sickness I felt in the meeting room, accompanied by that same overwhelming weakness, gnaws at my stomach and aches in my bones. It was real. Even if I don't want to accept that anything I heard was true. *It was real.*

The first thing I see when I fully open my eyes is a shaft of late day's golden light, spanning an ornate gold and white ceiling. I turn a glance toward the window only to see a man sitting beside me, head bowed and elbows at rest on widespread knees. I would know that dark hair, those wide shoulders, and those rugged hands anywhere.

Alexus holds my wrist with a delicate grasp. His knuckles are clean now, but still a bruised and wounded mess from the fight with Neri. Carefully, I slide my hand into his, and he lifts his head.

The blood from earlier is gone from his face, but he still looks battered, emotionally and physically, his expression so weary. He tries, but he cannot smile, and not because of the busted lip or the black eye Neri gave him in the desert. The effort is there, but the sorrow hanging heavy as an iron mask is too much weight to fight against.

"Are you okay?" He tugs the blanket further up my body and leans an arm on the pillow near my head. "You scared me."

I give his fingers a slight squeeze. "I'll be all right. After everything you've been through, I should be the one soothing you." I press the heel of my palm to my aching temple. "It's just too much."

"I won't argue with that." He looks up at me, eyes squinting around a question. "Colden and the prince?" He shakes his head. "I didn't see that one coming either."

"You heard?"

"Of course. Neri carried you here from the meeting hall. After you were settled in and the physician looked you over, we stood here for a few minutes just watching you. I asked about Colden. He didn't hesitate to give me details."

"I don't believe there's any way we could've known," I say, trying not to think about Neri carrying me anywhere.

"No. If Colden wants to keep a secret, he buries it deep. He's wise, though. I trust that he found a glimmer of goodness in Elias or else he wouldn't have returned for him. So perhaps all isn't lost with the prince." He pauses. "I just keep wondering if perhaps Raina knew. If she saw them together, in the waters, and just didn't say anything."

His voice is calmer than I expect. Too calm for the moment. For the man I know, anyway.

As the light slanting through the window dims further, I realize that where I've been out of sorts for most of the day, Alexis has had hours to come to terms with all that's happened, to process that Colden is in Quezira for the prince's sake and that my sister is in an unreachable time and place.

"Hey," I say, forcing his chin up. "How are you holding up?"

He twists his lips into a grim frown as I lower my hand back with his. "I'm... functioning. It just all makes sense now. I still don't remember those days with Raina, even after everything Fleurie said. And I'm not sure if I will ever regain the memories that were taken from me. But it all makes so much sense."

I sit up and slide back against the pillows, groggy but focusing on what my friend has to say. "Tell me how."

He scrapes his fingers through his hair. "There's so much. I don't really know where to start. My mind has been connecting pieces for hours." His distant gaze falls to our hands. "But there's one moment I feel I should've questioned more than I did."

"Which one?" I ask when he pauses.

“During the attack on the green in Silver Hollow, when I first came face to face with the prince, he called me ‘*old friend*.’ I didn’t understand at the time since we’d only ever met once, at Shara Palace some three decades ago. I certainly didn’t consider us friends after that visit. I suppose he didn’t understand why he said it either, though I believe his subconscious knew. I think it recognized me. Just like *my* subconscious recognized Raina.”

I blink at him, confused. “What do you mean, *recognized* her?”

He shrugs. “She never stood out to me before. Not until these last few years, even without magick to draw my eye. I began finding myself compelled to look for her when I reached Silver Hollow each Collecting Day. And when I’d find her, I couldn’t force myself to look away, even though she never so much as offered me a glance. I think that happened because some centuries-old part of my mind remembered her face. Not the soft face of her as a girl, someone I never knew, but the stony, fearless face she acquired in these most recent years. As a woman.” He lets out a shaking breath. “I think I was remembering *my* Raina. My virago.”

“Oh, Alexis.” I touch his face as tears pour from my eyes.

I cannot imagine his torment. I cannot imagine any of this. What must my sister be enduring right now? What fear must she feel after being ripped from everyone she loves and sent back to a time when the man who has claimed her heart no longer recognizes her?

“Raina is strong,” I tell him, as much for him as for myself. “Do you hear me? Strong and smart and so very brave. According to Fleurie, she figured out how to leave that time, which means she mastered her abyss. I believe with my whole heart that she left knowing she could return to you. To *us*.”

Before he can reply, the door to my room swings open. Neri is there, tall as the massive door frame itself and—like Alexis—a little less bloody than before. His eyes instantly find me, and just as quickly, I build a construct around my mind to keep him out.

If he realizes what I’ve done, he says nothing. He simply sweeps his arm over the threshold, and a maid appears from the hall with a tray of food in hand. Another follows and sets to lighting the oil lamps, sconces, and candles for the evening.

As I wipe the tears from my cheeks, Alexis stands and moves his chair aside, allowing the woman space to arrange the tray over my lap. Discreetly, he scrubs his forearm across his eyes.

The maid spreads a napkin over my tunic and removes the lid from a

copper crock. “This dish has been sent straight from the queen’s kitchen. It’s the Drumera family’s specialty for a weak body and spirit: *tisan suahvaneis*. It’s been long simmered in Fia’s grandmother’s darra, over a fire manifested and blessed by our queen’s own hands. It’s nothing more than broth, lentils, vegetables, herbs, and spices—and a touch of magick chanted into its essence by the queen for healing.”

I lean over the pottage, feel the steam curling up to touch my face, and inhale a breath of coriander and lemon. The scents—usually so comforting—should inspire a revival of hunger, dormant since yesterday given our plight. Instead, I’m struck with repulsion.

As my stomach turns, I lean back from the food and even the short glass of wine, aware too late that I’m making a terrible face.

The maid clasps her hands at the middle of her chest, and her forehead scrunches into an array of wrinkled lines. “I assure you, miss. This tisan is quite appetizing.”

I try to tame my expression, but the nausea is strong.

“You need your strength, witch,” Neri says from the door.

If I didn’t find it so hard to believe, I’d say that’s genuine concern and perhaps even a little *guilt* shining in his eyes.

Alexus stares the god down with a look that could flay. “At least we agree on something.”

Wonderful. That something would *have* to be me.

It doesn’t matter what *they* want, though. I’m not sure I can manage a single bite to appease them. I don’t want them fussing over me, though, so I pick up the spoon nestled beside the bowl, play a bit in the stew, and say, “I’ll do my best.”

“Very good,” the maid replies. Satisfied, she turns toward Alexis and Neri. “Gentlemen, the queen and her head scholar are waiting for you in the meeting hall. She asked that I escort you both downstairs.”

Neither Alexis nor Neri look thrilled by this news.

Feet spread wide—one foot in my room and the other in the hall—the wolf leans his long spine against the doorframe and folds his massive arms. “She’s preparing a strategy to defend against Thamaos.”

Alexis tightens his fingers into fists. In fact, everything about his stature turns rigid with annoyance. I know him well enough to know that he doesn’t *want* to strategize with Fia, which scares me because it means he has other ideas, none of which Fia will approve of, and none of which are probably

safe or wise given my sister's location. I understand his sorrow, his pain, but I need him to *not* flip our world upside down again.

He returns to my bedside and lifts my chin. "Eat. It will make you feel better. I'll be back later to sit with you tonight."

"I'm *all right*," I repeat. "I don't need you to watch over me."

I don't say what I'm really thinking, that if either of us needs tending through the late hours, I have a growing suspicion that it's going to be him. I also don't mention that nothing and no one will stop me from sitting in on Fia's meeting.

At the doorway, Hel appears. She stares up at Neri with those big brown eyes narrowed to lethal slits. Her growing distaste for him is evident on her face, even in the way she stands—jaw clenched, fists tight, shoulders strong—like she's ready for a fight.

The wolf looks down at her with an amused smirk. "That vicious snarl would be much scarier if it didn't remind me of a pup baring its teeth." He feigns fear, widening his eyes and holding trembling hands up between them. "Terrifying."

Hel drops her hand to the knife sheathed at her hip, a dare in her eyes. "Mock me again, dog."

"Save it," Alexis says. "Both of you." Neri arches an irritated brow, and Hel tightens her grip around the hilt of her blade as Alexis strides toward them, stopping inches away from the wolf. "One of these days, one of these women is going to carve your tongue out of your throat, and I'm not going to stop them."

Neri's bold smirk only grows brighter. "Let them try. I'm sure either of them would be more fun to fight than you."

"My power is returning," Alexis warns, his voice still so calm. "If it's violence you want, it's violence you will get—*once I've found Raina*. Until then, I refuse to let you become a distraction." He turns his attention to Hel. "Keep an eye on Nephele? She says she's going to try to eat, but I know her lies when I hear them."

I draw in and exhale a deep, annoyed breath as Hel nods once and cuts a side glance in my direction. "Consider it done."

Alexis stalks out the door and into the hall, but Neri casts a long and lingering look at me. I can sense him trying to hear my thoughts, but I just raise my brows and smirk at him.

He smirks back and says, "Eat, or I'll return and make you."

I force as much disdain into my voice as possible. “I’d like to see you try.”

“You keep saying that. Understand that I take your telling me to *try* as an invitation. One I won’t turn down.” With a wink and a wicked grin crooking his lips, he turns on his heel, but then he turns back. “Oh and be a good girl and stay put. You need your rest.”

I fake a smile. “You know me. *Good girl* is my middle name.”

“Much as I would like to think differently, I know better. So behave.”

“You might be a god wolf, but remember, you are not *my* god.”

His grin widens. “We’ll see about that.”

He likes a challenge, especially when it comes from me. I don’t know why I keep giving him so many godsdamn opportunities.

When he vanishes into the hall, Hel closes the door and spins around, arms crossed, eyes still narrowed. “I hate him. I can’t imagine how you must feel.” She snags a leather tie from my dressing table and comes to sit with me, tying her black hair in a knot atop her head along the way. “To keep me from being a liar, at least try a *few* bites before we storm downstairs and disrupt the queen’s gathering,” she says.

I smile at how easy that was and scoop up a spoonful of tisan, shoving it into my mouth. I might as well be chewing on a lump of mud for how difficult it is to make myself swallow it down, but I do it.

Hel watches me, her brows knitting with concern. “You don’t think you’re...” She pauses, as though unsure how to say her next words. “Did you... Have you fucked Joran since we left Winterhold? Or worse, Neri? Was that even possible?”

Hel is so plainly spoken sometimes, and I was not expecting that to come from her mouth. I’m so taken aback that I almost choke on the last of the lentils making their way down my throat.

Though it makes me question my instincts and many other things, sex with Joran—once taken over by Neri—was very possible. I’m not sure about Neri, physically, outside of that. But it’s not like I’m going to share the details of my time and temptations with Neri with *anyone*.

Instead, I grab a small throw pillow and chuck it at Hel. “No!” I croak. “I did not sleep with either of them. Why is pregnancy always associated with a woman being faint? I’m not with child, Hel, thank the stars. I’m just *ill*.” To smooth away the cough that follows the near-choking incident, I chase it with wine. The bitter, deep red is actually appetizing. “Where’s Joran anyway?” I

inquire, truly worried for his well-being and what Neri might've done to him.

After a weak chuckle, Hel tosses the pillow aside and rests her hands on either side of my crossed legs. "He's fine. A little shaken and not very fond of the wolf, but he's unharmed. Rhonin has been with him much of the day, filling in the bits he couldn't remember along with Fleurie's revelations." She squeezes my ankle. "Enough about him though. Back to the subject at hand. There's no baby. We both agree that's a good thing, because Joran is an ass and Neri is a literal beast. Can you even *imagine* being the mother of his godling?"

This time, it's the wine that almost gets me. But I swallow, hard, and for a moment, it's as though the world stops, teetering on that one word.

*Godling.* A child with the wolf.

I turn up my wine glass and down the rest of the red in one gulp. The sharp, metallic bitterness makes my teeth ache. I'm clearly far more ill than I perceived.

"No." I sit my glass down with a *clink*. "I *cannot* imagine that."

"I have another theory, then," she says, her face falling more serious. "This mysterious illness has something to do with the curse Fia mentioned."

"It doesn't," I reply, shaking my head. "If I were cursed, Hel, surely there would be more to it than a sick stomach. And Neri seems fine."

She gives me a squinted look, lips pursed as she drums her fingers on the bed. "Except he was bleeding profusely instead of healing quickly like gods were known to do."

"I think all the blood was because he's newly resurrected, just like his power not being quite where we'd hoped. It might take time for his body to adjust to being something more than human."

She tilts her head, as though mentally weighing that information. "I suppose we're going to find out."

A pang of hunger strikes, as though my stomach just needed a little food inside it to remember its purpose. I force another bite, but that's all I can manage. I move the tray and ease my legs off the side of the bed. Hel stands and waits beside me, a protective little sister there to catch me should I fall.

"Alexus is going to throttle us both," she warns. "You know that, right?"

I shrug. "I can't care. I have to know what's discussed. I will not be left in darkness because everyone is worried over a little fainting spell."

"Just be prepared for a fight," she says as I get to my feet. "I have a feeling it will be two against one." There's a sliver of silence, then Hel sucks



in a hissing breath, severe enough that I look up and meet her eyes only to find tears welling there. “I can’t stop thinking about Raina and Finn,” she struggles to say as her rebel tears fall and she clutches her chest on a sob. “It hurts so much.”

Those words strike me as deep as any blade.

I gather Hel into an embrace, cradling her head against my shoulder. “Cry,” I tell her, even as my own tears threaten to flood anew. “We cry it out,” I say against her hair. “You and me. Together. Right here. And then we replace all the worry and sadness and heartache with rage and determination and clever thinking. That’s what they would want us to do. All right?”

I know that there will be moments of great courage, perseverance, and resourceful thinking in the days ahead. But for now, Hel and I sit back down on the bed, two sisters where there had been three.

And weep.



## NERI

**M**ost of our band stands around the long, gleaming table in Fia Drumera's grand meeting hall, watching as two of her scholars wave their hands above the shining wooden surface until a map suddenly appears, etched by fire into the wood.

As the magi step aside, me and the red-haired spy named Rhonin move closer. With a strange sense of nostalgia, I touch the blackened indention where the Iceland Plains meet the sea. To my left, Rhonin traces a fingertip over the jagged lines representing the dense trees of the Forgotten Forest, located in the northernmost portion of the Eastland Territories.

"I know you're worried about Raina, and if and when she will return," Fia says to Thibault. "But someone must travel north to warn your people."

He stands to her right, eyes murky as he stares unblinking at the map, rubbing his bearded chin. Zahira stands to Fia's left, lips quirked in thought as she too studies the lines of these lands, the worry for her wife evident in her tired eyes.

"Raina will return," Fleurie announces. "And Alexis will feel it through the runic bond when she does." The godling, cleaned up and wearing a blood-red outfit, pushes off the wall where she's been admiring an old galatine sword and shield, forged with the Tiressian flag on the boss, since we entered this room. She strolls to Un Drallag's side and nudges him with her shoulder. "In the meantime, we must prepare for the fight that lies ahead, right?"

He only nods. She seems appeased by that simple gesture, but I lived inside him long enough to know when his mind is at work. I don't trust that nod in the least.

“Alexus can stay here should he need to,” Fia says. “It’s highly likely that Raina will return from where she left anyway.”

“It could be a year before she shows up,” I say, mentioning the obvious since it seems no one else plans to. “That’s how long she was in old Quezira, yes? Is Thibault supposed to hunker down here and wait for her while the people of the Northlands have no leadership and Thamaos plans his attack?”

Un Drallag’s nostrils flare, but he keeps his gaze on the map. The queen, however, drags her stare toward me.

“You’re right,” she says. “The North does need a leader. You should be the one to go. You’re their god and former general, after all. Your people need to understand that this is no rumor, no game. They need to grasp that their land has already been infiltrated once, and Thamaos will only do it again. His resurrection means they have lost any neutrality they once held. He will want revenge, dominance, and power over not only this holy land and all the magick within, but all of the Tiressian empire as well. That is the only existence he knows.”

I scowl at her words. General is a term I never applied to myself. That’s the historians’ doing. I’m no leader. Never was. I’m a warrior with the senses of a wolf. I’ve always kept my pack small and close. During the Land Wars, I positioned people specifically like Colden Moeshka within the ranks of my army, people who *could* lead. My job was to teach. To train. To prepare. To strategize.

Irritation prickles the back of my neck as I lean my hands onto the table’s edge. The move still doesn’t bring me eye level with Fia’s small stature. She’s a tiny thing, full of intelligence, cunning, old magick, and raging fire I placed inside her veins so long ago.

“They won’t listen to me.” I speak sternly. Pointedly. “Thibault should go. He’s their Collector.” I gesture to Zahira. “And perhaps the captain can go with him. Because if I walk into Malgros announcing that I’ve returned from the dead, no one will believe it.”

“Then *prove* it.” Fia mirrors my stance, steepling her fingers on the Summerland side of the table. “I know the things you are capable of. So show them who you are.”

I scoff and shake my head. “Need I remind everyone that my power failed me today when I faced the Brotherhood’s magickal shield wall? I’m not myself yet.”

There’s more detail to the story that I omit. Like how I struggled to sift

Thibault back to this palace. I'm... tired, I think. Me. A god. *We don't tire.* We must force ourselves to put our human body to rest. Force it to eat. The only base physical need I don't mind is one of a much different sort of appetite.

An irresistible and sensual one I rather like.

I search for a response and find one. "They will see a magick man proclaiming to be a god. That's no different from what I imagine they deal with most any night with the drunks who stumble from their taverns."

Thibault finally lifts his head. "Neri and I will go, Fia. Together. I'm sure Zahira and Callan want to go as well, to see their loved ones. Admiral Rooke is gone now." His eyes flick up at me, the first and only recognition I will receive for that traitor's death, I'm sure. "And with Vexx dead as well," he continues, the knot in his throat bobbing as he no doubt thinks about his woman. "I have to hope we find everyone safe, and that we won't face much opposition in Malgros, if any."

I can't stop glaring at Thibault, and he glares back. He doesn't want anyone to sense the tension inside him that's tight enough to snap, but I feel it as though it's my own.

"Surely I'm not the only one who fails to believe you're just going to leave this land and travel north as if last night never happened," I say, determined to push him toward his breaking point. "That is the ideal scenario, but we all know you're turning your mind inside out trying to conjure a way to realm walk like your lover when, even if you succeed, there's no possible way you will find her."

He drops his hands to his sides, his body going rigid as he curls his long fingers into meaty fists, making me smile at the ease of my handiwork.

"I have crossed from the living realm to the realm of the dead," he says, voice hard, words sharp as knives. "I have walked where only spirits trod. Now I know I did it for *her*. I was looking for *her*. I think I've *always* been looking for her, even if my mind didn't understand. Even if it latched onto any other reason for my actions. Because my soul knew. It knew I would find her in the valley, and so I went there. It knew she would eventually be a witch in the vale, and so I took witches. That part of me didn't recognize her until she grew older and became more like the woman I once knew, standing there surrounded by night and fire with rage in her eyes and a scythe in her hand. That part of me would've *died* for her that night in Silver Hollow. It would've done anything to protect her and keep her safe. It helped her return

to me from the prince and the Shadow World's grip. So how *dare* you tell me that I cannot find her. How *dare* you think that anything will keep me from her."

The room goes deathly quiet, every person still as he seethes with enmity for me. He leans onto the table and levels a glare on me that would set me alight if he only held that power.

"Three hundred years ago," he goes on, "the love I felt for Raina, buried though it might have been, became my driving instinct. That part of me sought immortality, at whatever cost, a need masked by my guilt for Colden, so that not even *death* could become a boundary. So believe me when I tell you that time won't stand in my way either. It hasn't yet." The air around him vibrates with anger and power. "If you were capable of caring for anyone besides yourself, you would understand such things. But love is not meant for the heartless, is it? You might now walk around like a man, but you are nothing more than a selfish god who will never know what it is to love or be loved. I'm trying to do what's right for my people. The pain and worry and loss I feel is all-consuming. But I will go to Malgros. I will tell the citizens who you are and help convince them that they need to prepare for conflict. But if I figure out a way to reach Raina before then, you can fucking believe that I will disappear."

I narrow my eyes on him. "Oddly, I find that admirable, Un Drallag. Because the fact that you're willing to abandon your people to save your woman, much the way Moeshka fled to rescue his prince, tells me that you're not so perfect after all." I crook the corner of my mouth. "Because you'd let this broken continent fucking burn if it meant you were saving Raina Bloodgood in the process. I don't have to know love to understand the obsession that comes with it."

He says nothing in retort because he can't.

*Because I'm right.*

"Now," I say, feeling as though I've regained control of the conversation. "If you want me to go north with you, ask nicely."

"Fuck you," he grits out, though the fury on his face dampens. In its place, a cocky smirk forms as he looks past me.

I smell her before I see or hear her. My little dictator.

"We're going with Alexis," Nephele says from behind me. Bent over the table as I am, I straighten and turn a glance over my shoulder toward the open doors. She limps across the polished stone floor, Hel at her side, and comes to

stand only inches away from me as Hel joins Rhonin.

“Somebody’s being a bad girl,” I say, keeping my voice low between the two of us.

“Get used to it,” she replies, and I have to bite back a smile.

I haven’t had enough time to truly enjoy being reunited with my body. I wasn’t able to bask in the desert sun, to relish the heat of its rays on my skin. I’ve tasted nothing delicious, and outside of those few decadent moments with Nephele on the mount, smelled nothing of delight, touched nothing that caused my nerve endings to crave more.

But now, I relent to the notion that I might understand Thibault’s fixation and obsession better than I care to admit. Because standing next to Nephele, scenting her once again, I almost feel drunk off the rosy musk between her legs, the lavender and lilac perfuming her damp hair, the blood pulsing under her skin, the magick alive in those glimmering witch’s marks that trail beneath the collar of her tunic. It makes me ravenous for one thing.

*Her.* Naked and writhing in my bed as I bury my tongue, my fingers, my cock deep inside her sweet heat.

The thought makes my mouth water, my gums aching to release my fangs, an involuntary reaction of my more feral side, a side I cannot wait to set free. But there’s something else. A need I have no definition for. I suppose three hundred years of forced celibacy as a spirit, and nearly a decade desiring a living woman I thought I’d never have, left me with an ache that won’t be satiated until I get what I want.

*If* I haven’t fucked up beyond repair. *If* the curse Asha obsessed over, the one I never gave any heed, doesn’t rob me of everything I yearn for.

Nephele tilts her pretty face up toward mine. This close, I can smell the salt from her recent tears. I can still see the effects of her spell in the gaunt hollows beneath her eyes, too, but she pretends to be perfectly composed and meets my gaze without a glint of reservation.

“Alexus doesn’t have to ask the God of the North for his aid,” she reprimands. “This is why you’re breathing air again, or did you so quickly forget? Your purpose is to help us when needed. If Alexus Thibault says we journey north together, then we journey north together.”

She turns her face away from me and stares across the table at Un Drallag.

“We,” he says, gesturing between himself, Zahira, and me. “Not we.” He draws a quadrangle between the four of us.

Nephele grips the back of the chair in front of her, pale knuckles turning pink. “The wolf is under *my* charge,” she challenges. “I go where he goes. That isn’t going to change for a very long time. But beyond that, if you think I’m staying here and not going with *you* to help my people, then all that flying has gotten to your head, my friend. Because I’m going home to Winterhold. To prepare everyone I possibly can.”

“Until I can scope out the situation, Nephele, you’re safer here,” he argues. “Shielded by Fia’s protections. The North does not have such security anymore. When war comes, the Watch will do what they can at the coast, but we are much smaller in number and in power, with a large mass of land to cover.” He stabs two fingers into the table, as though his next words are final. “For now at least, I want you *here*.”

Nephele’s cool eyes flash with defiance and the heat of the moment. “I. Don’t. Care. The fact that the North needs all the Witch Walkers we can gather is exactly why I need to go. I’m one of the strongest witches we have on our side.”

“Unless the *curse in the blood* that Fia mentioned is real,” he says, eyes ablaze when he looks at me. “The curse Neri so selfishly welcomed upon you. We have no idea what it could entail.”

How I want to verbally eviscerate him for that comment, true though it may be. But I bite my tongue instead. A truly unthinkable thing for me. I can sense Nephele’s upset, and this is her battle. I need to let her be the one to fight it.

“Are you concerned that I’ll become a burden?” she asks him, pain coating her words as she lightly touches her heart.

His brow crumples. “No, of course not. I worry that you will need care or tending, and I won’t be able to provide it. I can keep you safe from many things, Nephele, but a curse from *this land* that I know nothing about?”

“The wolf warned me that there could be consequences if I brought him back from the dead,” she says, clearly attempting to diffuse the moment. “And I accepted the deal anyway. If there is a curse, then I fear it is one he and I must bear together. We broke the holy law. Not him, and not me. *Us*. So as I said, I go where he goes. But even if that weren’t a necessity, I couldn’t stay here and hide. You know me better than that.”

Worry and fear are evident in the shadows of Thibault’s face. “I do. But I cannot and will not lose her *and* you as well.”

She releases a heavy breath, her gaze intent. “I feel the same way. But



please realize that you are not the only one of us who lost her. You are not the only one scared and in pain.”

Thibault’s fire visibly simmers, if slowly, though he looks exhausted by it all. Like a man constantly torn between agony and misery. A man with no good choices.

“Raina *will* find her way back,” Hel says after a beat. “And she will kick all our asses if we’ve stood around pining for her instead of planning for Thamaos and whatever he’s planning accordingly.”

“Very much agreed.” Fleurie pushes her dark red hair off her shoulder as she eyes Thibault and folds her hand around his wrist. “The Raina I knew was a fighter. Don’t assume she needs you to come to her rescue. The past has already happened, and to my knowledge, this Alexis Thibault person I’m staring at right now was never there. So perhaps we should try unearthing your memories of her before doing anything drastic, so you can recall the night she left instead. That could alleviate so much worry.”

“I know you’ve never wanted to before, but you could visit the Memory Catcher,” Nephele says. Her voice falls a touch softer, her sky-blue eyes a little unsettled as a small laugh trips off her lips. “I might need to go with you.”

I glance from her to Thibault and back again, at the damage between them. All these minds toyed with as though memory isn’t what makes a human life—or any life, for that matter—feel real. With Thamaos, such atrocities were expected. But Nephele’s parents? What sort of mother or father destroys their child’s memory? And how? What were they trying to hide?

“I’ve considered seeing Ingrid once we reach Malgros,” Thibault replies.

“Just a thought,” Rhonin says, changing the subject as he traces his finger along the Northland Break’s eastern coastline. “Someone will need to take a small band and travel up to the villages near the Mondulak Range. Someone familiar with that rugged terrain. It’s dangerous.”

“I’ve traversed that territory more than a few times, so it should be me,” Thibault says. “And possibly Keth and Jaega since that’s their home. Which means some of you will have to see to it that those in the valley and at Winterhold are warned.”

“Leave that to me and the wolf.” Nephele presses her fingertips to the table, keeping her shoulders strong. “It should be a fast and uneventful trip with him sifting us between locations.”

She says those words to ease her friend, but the way he looks at me isn't a signal that he holds any confidence in me whatsoever. Quite the opposite. But this time, he doesn't argue.

Fia straightens. "Good. It seems that's settled, then. Now we just need to contact Nicolas Castalan."

Nephele frowns and shakes her head. "Who?"

"The newest admiral for the Western Drifts," Thibault answers.

"He's done an excellent job securing the western waterways the last few years," Fia adds, "and we'll need his help fortifying the Malorian Sea between Itunnan and Malgros. But we can't know how Thamaos will attack."

"I'd bet my cock and balls that it isn't by ship," I counter. "Quezira reeked of the Nether Reaches. Thamaos clearly figured out a way to bring death back with him. I don't know if he can wield them, though. That has forever been a limit on our power as gods, in order to protect the human world from deities who might use the dead to harm them."

"But Elias can," Fleurie interjects. "He was schooled in necromancy by Garujo, one of the most renowned sorcerers of our time." She looks at Un Drallag, but there's no flicker of recognition.

"A legion of wraiths infecting Summerland and Northland defenses at sea and along the coast could turn the tides of war quite swiftly," I say.

"The prince can wield *one* of them," Thibault adds, holding up his finger. "That's all we've seen him do. To control an army of unholy spirits is an entirely different task."

"One that would probably kill the prince in the process," Fia says. After a moment she adds, "But even the thought of such a thing—wraiths possessing members of the Summerland Guard and the Northland Watch—is terrifying. They could infiltrate our front lines so easily."

"Nicolas Castalan needs to know this is a possibility so he can prepare his sailors," I tell the queen. "In a war with a god, especially one who seems to have made friends with the underworld, you can't rule out anything."

"I can do it." Zahira turns her eyes on the map. "I'd like to head into Malgros first to check on my wife, but afterward, she and I can journey to the Drifts." She speaks with such confidence that her partner was spared, but her face is tight with unease as she touches the scattering of archipelagos to the west. "I've navigated these waters dozens of times, and I know Nicolas. Yaz and I have too many friends and acquaintances there not to be involved. They will listen to us." She looks up at Fia and Thibault. "In case it hasn't been

considered yet, it would be wise to send word to officials in Persei, Mapor, and Omalli as well.”

“Already planned,” Fia says. “They survive off trade with the western ports. It’s to their advantage to offer aid. I have emissaries who know the leadership in each of those countries. I just need to get them there before Thamaos is fully restored.”

“There are other possible allies no one’s mentioned,” Rhonin says, raising his brows at Fleurie. “There are immortal godlings still living in hiding. If we could locate and convince them to help us stop Thamaos, we could certainly take the upper hand. The prince has kept the territories cut off from the world. The people are easier to manipulate that way. But it does limit the East’s ability to replenish supplies and food, and it means he has no foreign friends in place to bolster defenses. That might not matter if Neri is right, and we end up battling wraiths wearing the skins of our people. But if that’s just a nightmare Thamaos can’t make come true, then we could wear down his fleets and possibly even figure out a way inside Min-Thuret where we can cut the head from the serpent. We have Neri and Fleurie after all.”

“Yes, but we must be careful and not walk them into a trap,” Thibault adds. “We can’t lose them to the enemy.”

“True.” The spy turns his attention back on Fleurie. “How much time do you think your father will require to return to his full power?”

She lifts one shoulder. “I cannot possibly say. It took me several weeks to heal, but I wasn’t dead, and my soul was in this realm and intact. The humanity in me probably slowed the process, so at most, if you’re looking for a window of time, I would expect no longer than a month or two. It’s impossible to know.”

Thibault drags his finger over the place on the map that marks Min-Thuret’s temple. “Nothing’s to say he can’t cause damage before he’s whole again.”

“Then we need to act quickly,” Hel says. “If Fleurie is willing, Rhonin and I will go with her to search for the other godlings. She should be able to sense them if we can get her close enough, and Rhonin has read all the books on their supposed whereabouts.”

Nephele leans in to look down the table at her friend. “Hel, what about your father? And Saira?”

The girl just shakes her head. Her big brown eyes are glassy, her brow drawn so tight that a crease forms. “I can’t face them yet,” she answers. “I

can't deliver the news about Finn. I just can't. Father won't forgive me, and he will try to stop me from fighting for the North. I'm not where I can handle that battle right now." Her voice wavers, her words carved by anger and heartbreak. "I need to keep moving. Helping. *Breathing.*"

Rhonin cups the back of Hel's neck, his thumb stroking the sharp line of her jaw, and bends to kiss her temple. "It's okay," he says softly.

Silence falls over the room until Fleurie raps her knuckles on the table in a one-two tap. The sound quickly dismantles the somber pall beginning to form at the mention of the young blacksmith's death.

"Sounds perfect," she says, though the way she glances up at Thibault makes it clear she isn't keen on leaving his side again. "I agree that this search is a worthwhile effort, and I would appreciate the company."

Thibault looks at Fleurie, then at me. His eyes darken with animosity every time he meets my stare. "We need fast travel. With Fleurie portaling Hel and Rhonin around the world, you will have to get the rest of us where we're going. I don't care which one of you takes me, but I need to visit Itunnan before we leave. I have business to attend on Terrowin's ship if he's still docked there. Then we can move onward to our respective destinations."

I clench my teeth. How many times did I watch from within his eyes as he scribbled and sketched in those damn journals? That's what he's returning for, I have no doubt. But what really infuriates me is that my former captor is now the one delivering orders instead of the lovely lady at my side. Worse still, given what happened earlier today, commanded or not, I might not be sifting anybody anywhere.

"Fine," I say, hoping my godly ass doesn't end up failing like a fool. "I just need the day to recoup first."

Fleurie nods in understanding and agreement. "Me too."

Thibault shoves both hands into his trouser pockets and looks everyone in the eyes. "That's it, then. Feed your bellies, get some rest, and say your goodbyes. Because tomorrow morning, it appears we go our separate ways."

## II

AN EYE FOR AN EYE



## NEPHELE

That evening, I stay downstairs with everyone in a cozy, book-filled study Zahira found while wandering the palace. Though Fia has the kitchen send trays of various meats, cheeses, and fruits, I still haven't felt like eating, and this time, I'm not the only one. The food, arranged on fancy gilded platters, sits on a tall, round table in the middle of the room where starlight pours in from the observatory dome above. It's barely been touched, but the nine of us have gone through six bottles of the palace's red in a couple of hours, much of that effort belonging to me.

As I pour another glass to the rim, I glance around at these people I now call friends. Zahira and Rhonin stand over a small desk, studying an old book of maps under the light of a brass oil lamp that hangs from the wall. Callan and Hel are sharing a tender moment near the arched window with Keth and Jaega sitting on a reading bench nearby, listening to what I'm sure is more of Callan's sage advice. Across the room are Alexis and Fleurie. They sit close together on an umber velvet divan, Fleurie telling stories about Raina and Elias.

I listened for a while, to how my sister taught Alexi of Ghent to sign so he could speak with her, knowledge that made Alexis's fast learning of the language when I decided to teach him more understandable. The memory of that skill might've been stolen with all recollection of my sister, but the mind is a fascinating thing, and the body has a sort of memory of its own.

Though it eased my soul to hear that Raina's time in the past, while difficult, held moments of happiness too, I had to step away and give Alexis and Fleurie time to talk. Alexis needs to hear about that missing year of his



life alone. He will share it with me when he's ready.

Discreetly, I slip from the study and hobble my way upstairs. The worry for Colden and Raina that gnawed at my heart and mind all day has calmed some thanks to the wine and Fleurie's stories of a time long past with my sister and a decent man named Elias Gherahn. But by the time I make it to the landing of the corridor that leads to our rooms, I'm facing another concern. My ankle is throbbing. The pressure of the swelling presses firmly against the sides of my boot. I have to walk a little and then rest a little just to get to my door.

Once inside, I work my foot out of my boot and undress, happy to slip into my sleeping gown, a garment made of pretty dark green silk. A copper bin that held ice for compresses earlier sits by my bed. There's nothing inside but cool water now. Still, I soak my offended ankle for a little while.

Just when I'm ready to put out the lights, crawl into bed, and finish off my wine, a soft knock sounds at my door. With an inward groan, I tug on my robe and answer, expecting to see Hel or Alexis on the other side. Instead, I find a tall, wolfish god staring back at me.

Neri leans in the doorway, filling every inch. His hands are tucked into the pockets of a pair of tan linen trousers, loose and low-slung on his waist, and his hair is down around his shoulders, thick, white locks framing his brutally handsome face. The sleeves of his white shirt are rolled to his elbows, drawing attention to his sinewy forearms.

But the most distracting part of this ensemble is that his shirt is unbuttoned, revealing a sleek sliver of his smoothly muscled torso, a sliver that travels from the hollow of his throat to a dark trail of hair that leads somewhere I don't need to think about.

Perhaps this is the curse. That I have to admire his physical beauty all while loathing him, for the rest of my godsdamn life.

Instantly, I check my mental wards, then I tighten one hand on the door and crush the neckline of my robe together with the other, making every effort to keep my gaze trained on Neri's smirking face. "It's late, wolf. What do you want?"

His brow crumples as he pounds his fist against his chest, feigning being wounded by my words. "Always so hateful. I call for a truce because I'm only here to help."

"With *what*? Do I appear in distress to you?"

"Only when you walk." He tilts his head and slides his gaze slowly down

my body. I clutch my robe even tighter and slip my foot back as I had on the mount, but neither my gown nor my robe is long enough to hide the evidence of my injury this time. "I heard you in the hall," he continues. "Walking. Pausing. Walking. Pausing. That ankle needs mending before tomorrow."

"And you are *just* the god for that task, I suppose?"

He shrugs, still smirking. "I'm the god for many tasks, including this one. Invite me in, and I'll prove it. It won't take long."

"That's not encouraging if your true motive is to get me naked."

He laughs, but the sound quickly fades, and his eyes glimmer with mischief. "When I get you naked, Nephele, you can rest assured that our time together will be anything but hurried."

His words make my stomach clench, but I exhale an irritated breath. "Look, I'm exhausted, and I have a glass of wine waiting for me. I'm not in the mood for your games tonight." I move to shut the door.

Without breaking his leaning stance, Neri blocks my attempt by wedging his leather-slipped foot against the bottom of the door and bracing one of those brawny forearms across the top.

I scowl. "Not in the mood."

"No games," he promises. "You can sit, drink your wine, and I'll get rid of that pesky pain. You'll owe me nothing. You can't ask for a better deal." He waggles his brows. "You have a god at your service. Use me."

Suspicion crawls through me as I narrow my eyes. "How do I know you won't try anything?"

He chuckles. "You don't, because I probably will, and you'll probably tell me to stop and get out like the night you threatened me with a letter opener. But before we get to that fun, I'll take your pain away, so my traveling partner isn't wounded."

I know better, but I'm tired of hurting, and what's more, I find myself curious enough about his godly abilities that, after several moments of deliberation, I move aside and open the door for him to enter.

He shoves off the door frame and crosses the threshold, grinning like a devil as he passes. "Look at you, letting a hungry wolf prowl into your bedchambers late at night. Naughty girl."

Already fully regretting my decision, I close the door and limp to the nightstand where my wine glass awaits. "Let's just get this over with. What does it entail?"

Neri grabs the stool from my dressing table and motions to a nearby

chair. "Sit, and I'll show you."

I've had far too much wine because I would otherwise never do what I do next, which is obey him.

After I settle in the cushioned, ornate chair, he positions the stool in front of me and sits, knees spread wide. I bite the inside of my jaw to temper the amusement inside me, threatening to show itself. He's so... *big*. This beast of a god, perched on a tiny brass-footed floral-upholstered tuft.

He seems unfazed by it as he leans down and folds one massive hand around the back of my ankle, cradling my heel with the other. I stiffen at his touch on my bare skin, even as he carefully lifts my foot, supporting the weight in his hand.

With a keen eye, he examines the rather extensive swelling, palpating the tissues and bone and turning my foot slightly. Though his hands are warm and gentle, I wince with each manipulation, reactions he notes with observant glances. I let him continue, though, because oddly, it seems he knows what he's doing.

"Mostly inflammation," he finally announces. "Possibly torn ligaments and strained muscles, but your sister *did* mend the bone. It seems she just didn't have time to tend the rest, which is understandable. Healers often work from the inside out. Easy fix for me, though."

"How? What is healing like for a god?" The moment the words leave my mouth, I silently scold myself for sounding so eagerly interested. Again, I blame the wine.

His big fingers begin rubbing the back of my ankle in long strokes, up and down the tendon, the dexterity and tenderness in his touch still a bit surprising.

"I can't say that it's healing so much as thievery. I can absorb the inflammation." He lifts his eyes to meet mine, and I swear his voice falls a touch softer. "And I can take your pain."

I start to pull my foot away, but he slips that strong hand up my leg and grips the back of my knee to stop me. "Don't be stubborn. I just need a few minutes. Surely you can endure me that long."

"I'm not being stubborn," I clarify, my heart suddenly beating faster at the heat and firmness of his grasp. Not as quickly as I would like, I refocus my thoughts. "I just don't understand why you would want to take someone's pain. You're the one who must sift us across the Summerlands come daylight, which means you're the one who needs to be whole."

“I’m not taking *someone’s* pain.” He slides his hand back down to my ankle and begins the same precise movements from before. “I’m taking *your* pain. There’s a difference to me. Besides, this little bit of damage will spread throughout my body. It’s much easier for me to deal with regardless, but even more so because it gets dispersed. It also isn’t taxing like using power to sift or summon a snowstorm. I won’t even notice it.”

“Can you rid me of a curse?” I ask bluntly, only to watch his gaze harden before turning back to my ankle, as though he can’t look me in the eye.

“I don’t know,” he answers. “But should the opportunity arise, I can promise you that I’ll try.”

I turn up my wine glass several times as he works, tenderly massaging. I don’t need him to be kind. I need him to be self-serving and arrogant and cruel, all the things history has told me about him. And with him touching me like this—taking my pain—I need him to be even worse than I ever believed. Because I fear he might be the greatest personification of every weakness I’ve ever had when it comes to men. Kindness only makes matters worse.

Taking a deep breath, I remind myself who he is, but try as I might, I can’t latch on to any distaste for him tonight. Not right now. Instead, I set my empty glass aside and lean my head back, relaxing as the tight soreness in my ankle and the weight of the last few days leave me.

“You hate that I make this feel good, don’t you?” he says after a while.

The wine is slowly rivering through my veins, so much so, I can’t even lift my head to glower at him. “Yes.”

“I’d ask why, but it’s because you know I could make you feel good in other ways too.”

Now, I lift my head, even if a bit wobbly. “Anyone can make me feel good in other ways. You are not special, wolf.”

He smiles, still working. I can see the swelling going down before my eyes. Either that or all the wine I’ve ingested on an empty stomach has fully and truly kicked in.

“I bet I’m more special than you give me credit for,” he counters, that mischievous shimmer in his eyes returning. “You aren’t curious as to what a god’s cock is like during sex?”

All right, so it *is* the wine. I’m obviously a tad drunk because instead of kicking him in the face with my now pain-free foot, I snort-laugh at him. “Unless it’s blue, which yours is not, or shoots rainbows, not in the least.”

His smile brightens, as though he’s truly enjoying this conversation,

which, I realize, he probably is. “No rainbows,” he says with a small laugh. “But endless pleasure? Yes.”

With those words, the moment shifts. It’s as though I come back to myself, sensing the small change in his touch, now more like a caress than a healing method. And his eyes. Those golden honey pools, glowing in the candlelight as he stares at me, feel like they’re tethered to my core. With the right look, in this moment at least, he could probably convince me to do just about anything with him.

He slips his hand up my leg again, but this time he also lifts my other foot, resting my calves on his knees. Such an indecent position for me to be in with him, and yet I can’t pull away.

Desire strikes in a heady rush as he runs his hands from my knees up my inner thighs, dragging my gown with them. “I smell what you want, Nephele. I’ve smelled it for weeks. It’s torture.”

I grip the arms of the chair. I should stop him, but his voice is pure sex, and though I hate that it makes me melt into a puddle of want beneath his touch, I cannot seem to do anything but shift my hips, just enough to give him access if he wants it, and I know he does.

He glances to where my robe and gown are bunched at my thighs, and I watch him swallow. When he looks back up, his irises are flecked with fire.

The remnant of his heart, hanging between my breasts, warms against my skin. Magickally, the sides of my robe pull apart under his gaze, revealing the gown beneath, the pearled tips of my nipples evident under the silky fabric. It dawns on me that he’s literally undressing me with his eyes, and I’m letting him.

“You are so fucking beautiful,” he says, making my breaths come harder and faster as he continues rubbing my thighs, his thumbs following the flourishes of my witch’s marks, his hands slipping higher and higher, his gaze intent on mine.

When he grazes me through my undergarments, I gasp and arch back, lifting one hand to grip the wooden spindle protruding from the top rail of the chair. Instinctively, I angle my hips up again.

Neri’s face darkens as he takes a deep inhale, and once more, he grazes me, this time over my clit. “The way I could devour you right now,” he whispers. “The obscene things I would do.”

I press against him, wanting him to prove himself, to stroke me until I’m mindless.

When he doesn't, I brazenly lift one foot, resting it in the cradle of his thigh and hip as I lean my knee outward, opening myself more fully for him.

A low growl sounds in his throat as he kisses the inside of my knee, his tongue tasting my skin as he strokes his hand along the outside of my leg. When he looks up at me again, his fangs slowly appear, pushing against his upper lip until he opens his mouth ever so slightly, revealing the glinting, sharp tips.

Though he looks capable of ripping out my throat, his fangs don't scare me. They make me tingle. Make my breasts grow heavy. Make my clit preen.

"Little Bird." His voice is low and husky, vast as night and sensual as the rub of silk on skin. "You're practically begging me to fuck you, and you have no idea how badly I want to."

"I think I might," I say, noting the impressive bulge in his trousers.

Somewhere in my mind, I know I'm not supposed to wonder about what he might be like in bed. But right now, a more carnal part of my senses wants him to show me.

He leans in, dipping low, and gently bites my inner thigh. "Stop thinking things like that, or I'll give you what you want and then some. I'm most certain that if that happens, you will hate me even more come morning."

It takes a moment to process his words, but once I do, I feel around in my mind. My construct is down, and he's there, at the fringes. Not fully invading. Only observing.

*Push him out, Nephele. Push. Him. Out.*

But I can't.

With a groan that resonates throughout the room, Neri gently places my feet on the floor and stands, his erection proud and intimidating. I'm unsure what's happening as he bends down and picks me up, then carries me toward the bed, but I thread my fingers into his hair, imagining his mouth on me—at my throat, around my nipples, between my legs—wanting him to hear that thought.

He glances at me from the corner of his eye. "You are not making this easy. Three hundred years, and I have to fucking say no."

My head lolls against his shoulder, and my eyelids suddenly feel like lead curtains. When Neri lays me down, I note the coolness of the sheets, that even though I've occupied his arms, the covers are already pulled back.

He presses his hands into the mattress, hovering over me. A chill races over my skin at the sight of his fangs so close, but my attention slides

downward. That sliver of skin from earlier is now a naked and masterfully muscled torso in full view, his shirt hanging loose.

I slip my hands over his chest and around his neck. “Come here,” I whisper.

Another groan, more quietly this time, a sound shared just between us. Though he seems a bit reluctant, he leans down until his lush lips are a breath away from mine.

He lingers, one hand moving to grip my hip as he pants softly against my mouth. I lie there, expectant, wanton for a kiss.

Instead, the wolf whispers, “Good night, Nephele. You’ll thank me for this tomorrow.”

I reach for him as he pulls away, dragging my hand down his forearm, but he slips free and lifts the covers over me, tucking me in like a child.

Gods, I want to say something as I watch him roam around my room, putting out the candles and lamps and closing the window, locking it for the night. But sleep calls, and I cannot resist.

The last thing I see as deep slumber comes to claim me is the wolf and his golden eyes, pausing at the open door to look back at me. Just before he disappears.

IO





## NERI

The eleven members of our crew stand on the bottom level of the terraced courtyards behind Fia's palace, saying goodbye. Fia and two of her scholars—the same two who always follow her around—watch from the steps just above, donned in golden robes. The clear sky over the City of Ruin is painted in dull shades of blue and gray, though the rising sun's fiery rays are quickly slicing through dawn's shroud. I find myself admiring the view for several minutes, finally taking a moment to revel in nature, even if it is Asha's homeland and not my own.

I lower my gaze from the morning sky and look to my left. This is the first time since I vacated his body that Joran Dulevia and I are in the same vicinity. The water witch stands a sword's-length away, hands clasped behind his back. He's seemed on edge ever since I strolled up beside him, his stance wide, his eyes fixated on the ground, though he sometimes spares a glance at the horizon.

He isn't the only one avoiding me. Nephele hasn't even acknowledged my existence this morning. I know she's struggling with leaving Helena—she can't seem to let go of the girl—but I'm also aware that she probably woke up, remembered what she did last night, and would now rather jump into the wildest, deepest stretch of the Jade River than look at me. Her mental construct is solid today, impenetrable as a galatine wall.

While everyone says their final words, embracing and shedding tears, I close the distance between me and the bowyer, until we're mere inches apart.

"We need to get a few things straight before we journey to Malgros, Dulevia. I hear you plan to remain on the coast to work with the Northland

Watch.”

“I do,” he grits out, lifting his eyes to stare at the palace, clearly not wanting to have this conversation.

“Good. Because one cross word to Nephele and I’d have to kill you, so the less time we’re around one another the better.” His nostrils flare at that, and the muscle in his jaw leaps, but he keeps his attention trained straight ahead and says nothing. “I do feel bad about what I did to you,” I continue. “A little.”

Finally, he cuts those silver eyes up at me, face reddening. “A *little*? You *violated* me.”

“It was just a handful of weeks,” I reply with a smirk and a shrug. “I didn’t do anything offensive with your body, and believe me, after the way you spoke to Nephele, I could have.” I lower my head and voice. “In fact, I could’ve buried you so deep in Frostwater Wood that no one would’ve ever found you, save for the worms.”

His face tightens. “Thanks for the thoughtfulness, you son of a bitch. And as far as the witch goes, you can have her. She’s a good lay but a wretch any other time, so best of luck.”

The heat of my human body rises. I feel it traveling up the back of my neck as I lower my gaze to the collar of Joran’s tunic. With a single thought, the ties loosen from their limp bow and crawl around his throat. He tries to remain unfazed, but he lifts his hand, a nervous tremor in his fingers and his breathing.

I lean closer. “Listen, you small dick motherfucker.” He opens his mouth to no doubt correct me, but I extend my fangs which shuts him up quickly. “Speak of her like that again, and I will murder you far more brutally than a little choking. This is a warning, so you know how much control I truly have over whether or not you keep breathing. I dare you to push me.”

Blood pumping, I wait for him to cross the line I’ve so clearly marked in the sand. Perhaps it’s the beast in me craving a kill, or maybe I’m just an envious bastard. But this man painted a target upon his own chest many weeks ago in Frostwater Wood when he slurred Nephele and threatened her, a target I can’t seem to look away from.

The clang and clatter of metal shatters the moment. The tension between us grows brittle and crumbles as Joran takes a step away from me, and we both turn our attention to the courtyards. A young man comes traipsing down the steps, carrying the galatine sword and shield that had been hanging on the

wall in Fia's meeting room, along with a leather baldric.

Fleurie stands with Thibault a few strides away. She portaled him to Itunnan early this morning under the cover of darkness to retrieve his journals from Terrowin's ship. The pair seem to hold affection for old things, because her eyes light up at the sight of the newly polished armament in the young scholar's hands, the metal gleaming in the rising light.

The young man hands the sword and shield to Fia who calls for Fleurie to come forth as she descends the steps to the last courtyard. We all watch as the women walk toward one another until they stand face to face. Fia presents the baldric and sword first, allowing Fleurie time to fasten on her new weapon, then she hands her the shield.

"This galatine armor belonged to Urdin of the Western Drifts who fought and died for all of Tiressia." The small yet powerful queen meets the eyes of everyone present before turning her focus back to Fleurie. "Your father might not have protected you," she says, "but the armor of the god that ended him will."

With her hand slipped inside the leather strap of her inherited shield and the galatine sword sheathed at her hip, Fleurie lowers to one knee before the queen. "I feel unworthy, Your Majesty. But I will do everything in my power to earn this honor."

Fia gently grips the godling's arm, encouraging her to stand. "You already *have* earned it," she says, her dark stare fervent. "You deserve all the protection we can offer, Fleurie. Because sometimes darkness spawns monsters. Other times it breeds warriors. Like you. Your resilience is unparalleled in this world, and that is the kind of valor and steadfastness that can end a war. We should all look to your example for courage in the days ahead."

I don't disagree. But I'd be lying if I said I didn't have the urge to remind everyone that I've been trapped for three hundred years too, inside Un Drallag's melancholy meat suit.

Fleurie, Helena, and Rhonin meet in the middle of the circle we've all formed. I find myself looking past them at Nephele, standing across the green. I admire the fierce determination of her countenance, the way she always lifts her chin when facing a battle, even an emotional one, if only to restrain her tears. This is a loss for her. *Another* loss. And for some reason, I can't explain, that causes a foreign pain in my chest.

Thibault slings the leather pack that holds his journals over his shoulder

and walks up to the trio that's about to leave us. He gathers Helena close and whispers something in her ear. She smiles and nods at his words, though there's sadness shining in her eyes as she stares up at him.

He then claps Rhonin on the shoulder. "Take care, my friend."

Rhonin grasps his hand. "Will do, old man. I'm just a magickless human, but I promise to make you proud."

Thibault looks the young man pointedly in the eyes. "You *have* made me proud. And you are anything *but* magickless, do you hear me? Your power lies in the greatness of your humanity. Never forget that." He throws an arm around Rhonin, and after they embrace, he turns to Fleurie and takes her face in his hands.

"I am blessed to have called you friend, Fleurie. And to be able to call you friend again. Come back to me. Swear it."

The way the godling looks at him, her golden eyes soft and full of adoration, reminds me of all the times Nephele looked upon Un Drallag while I could do nothing more than observe. The love that has been bestowed upon that man is incalculable, something I suppose I envy as much as I envy the time Dulevia and Moeshka had with Nephele. But Thibault was right.

Gods aren't meant for such things as this.

"I will come back," Fleurie says. "I can be at your side in a moment." She covers his hands with hers. "We will have many more years together, Alexi. Don't ever doubt that. Until the mountains crumble to the sea."

The corner of his mouth curls, but only a little, as though the thought of eternity no longer holds any sort of joy for him.

"Until," he replies, finally letting her go and stepping back.

Fleurie gathers Helena and Rhonin close, and with one last look at Thibault, carves her hand through the air, her arm falling in an arc. A gust of power whips across the courtyard as light splits the morning, and in the twinkle of the eye, they're gone.

Moments later, Zahira says, "It's time, Northlanders."

Everyone moves toward me, but I can't help but notice the way Nephele starts moving first, as though she needs to be near me, to feel me.

When she reaches me, she finally looks up, trying to maintain her composure, but her blue eyes fill with unshed tears. Just like last night, I want to soothe her, and I've never wanted to soothe anyone.

"They will be fine," I promise her, a paltry effort at comfort, but she takes a deep breath and nods, as though my words are words she believes.

I don't know how to feel about that.

As Fia and her scholars stand witness to our departure, everyone gathers around, even the reluctant bowyer. Each person links their arms to another for the sifting. As for Nephele, she voluntarily clutches my jacket, and I slip my arms around her waist. Like I've taught her, she squeezes her eyes shut and leans into me. Again, my heart reacts, kicking hard in my chest.

"Don't miss, wolf," Thibault says as I summon the aether and a desert wind to carry us north.

Worry that I will do just that trickles hot through my veins, but I refuse to buckle under the weight of apprehension. Instead, I focus my mind on the woman in my arms, on seeing her safely home.

"I mean it," Thibault repeats at my side. "Don't. Miss."

As though he knows my struggle.

When the wind comes, stirring our hair and the sand, I close my eyes and think of Starworth Tor. "I won't."

II



## NEPHELE

### *Malgros, The Northland Break*

**W**e arrive at the shoreline near Starworth Tor before sunrise, close to the rocky outcropping on the eastern side of the cove. The morning here is cloudy and gray, quiet save for the gentle rumble of distant thunder and the roar of a turbulent sea. Waves roll in and crash along the coastline as a small storm brews to the west.

Everyone exhales relieved sighs as our little unit dismantles. We've a bit of a walk ahead of us, but at least we didn't land in the middle of the Malorian Sea.

I take a deep breath of salty air, but it's saturated with other scents already beginning to feel permanent to me. Wintry, smoky, earthy scents. Scents that belong to Neri.

As I let go of his dark plum jacket, our crew scatters, led by Zahira who breaks into a jog. Everyone is eager yet a little unnerved about what might be found once they make the trek up the beach to the main house. But Zahira points toward a dim, flickering light illuminating the floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the outdoor breakfast area, and a faint curl of smoke rising from the chimney.

Signs of life. Thank the Ancient Ones.

A bright smile crosses our captain's face, and she shouts something, but

her words are lost in the rhythmic din of breaking waves.

With his dark hair tangling in a sea wind, Alexis watches Zahira, a soft curve on his lips as he lets out a second sigh of relief. Scrubbing his bearded chin, he scans the tor, pausing on the lighthouse that stands like a pale monolith against the gloomy sky. I can see thoughts of Raina racing across his eyes, even through the murky light of an overcast dawn.

When he peels his attention away, he peers at Neri, annoyance furrowing his brow. “You missed, wolf. Not by much, but you missed.”

Neri’s lips settle into a tight, thin line, and his face hardens as only his face can. Though I can tell he wants to, he says nothing, and I have to wonder why.

Alexis pushes the strap of his leather bag up his shoulder. “You coming, Nephele? I have a feeling a reunion and one of Yaz’s feasts awaits.”

I flinch a little at the mention of food, but I shake it off quickly. “Yes, of course. I’ll be right behind you. I just need a minute.”

He doesn’t like that answer. I know because he glances to where Neri’s hands still rest at my waist, beneath my jacket, and then back at me with a concerned glare. But even though he hesitates for a few long moments, and even though he doesn’t look happy about it in the least, he finally walks away, leaving me and the wolf alone.

“I take it this is about our rendezvous last night,” Neri says before I can so much as open my mouth to aim this conversation in the direction I’d meant for it to go.

The truth is, two seconds earlier, it *had* been about last night. I’d thought to offer a quick thanks for the healing and walk away. But now, with his hands on my body again after they’ve teased me so intimately, and after his lush mouth has so sensually tasted my skin, that particular discussion—no matter how short and sweet—is far more uncomfortable and difficult to broach than I anticipated.

“It *wasn’t* a rendezvous, wolf.” I step back, searching for distance. As much as I loathe him, his touch and nearness spark an unbidden flame inside me, one it seems I can barely control in his presence.

But his grip tightens, and he drags me close once more. Too close. So close my pulse quickens at the way he curves over me like a question I don’t know how to answer.

I swear, all common sense momentarily abandons me when he handles me with a rougher touch. There’s something about the dark way he stares



down at me too, his face all violent edges and carnal promise, his white hair wild in the wind. It makes my head swim, and not because I'm still a little weak and don't yet feel quite like myself.

"Fine," he says, his voice rugged. "It wasn't a rendezvous. I still want you to say what you wanted to say. No need to be nervous with me anymore, little bird."

He rubs his thumbs along my bottom ribs, making my nipples harden as I revel in the warmth of his big hands, their heat seeping through my tunic.

I grip his wrists and pull his hands away though. Because I cannot think with him touching me like that.

"I'm *not* nervous."

He places his hands right back on my waist. "Oh yes, you are. You're nervous and wanting. I feel you trembling."

"Because it's cold, and I'm worried about Yaz and Mari. And why do you call me that? *Little bird*."

"It isn't cold, and I think your friends are all right." He gives me a half grin, his thumbs returning to their dance. "And I'll tell you why I call you that once you finish what you wanted to say."

"Yes, it *is* cold. And I simply don't want to talk about last night anymore. I thought I did, but now I don't." Again, I pull his hands from my body. "I'm already tired of bickering with you. I can't endure more of your mouth today."

An impish expression flashes across his face, and I instantly hate myself for my poor choice of words.

I expect him to grab me again. To quip about how I was ready to endure his mouth last night and perhaps offer a test of endurance today once we get to our rooms.

Instead, he says, "I only want to know if your ankle is better. I'm not planning to mock you for what happened, though I might remind you, at some point over the next several days together, how desperately you wanted me in your bed."

I roll my eyes as heat spreads across my chest, but even *I* sense less maliciousness in the action than usual. "My ankle is better, and I do thank you for that. But as for the other, I was drunk. It was late. I was an emotional disaster. I was worried and sick and heartbroken and angry. I needed to unwind. I would've probably—"

"Fucked anyone," he finishes for me, narrowing his eyes on me as though

he sees right through me. “I think you say things like that to convince yourself that I’m no different from any other man who might tempt you. But that doesn’t make it true.”

I never should’ve let down my armor. I woke this morning with a raging headache and memories of Neri touching me and then leaving me. Instead of taking advantage of the situation and of me, he’d been respectful and thoughtful, more words I would’ve *never* assigned to him before last night. And so I made my way down to Fia’s courtyards, awash in humiliation, awaiting sarcastic remarks and flirty gestures from a golden-eyed devil.

But he let me be. He let me say my goodbyes in peace. He didn’t make a single second awkward for me. And then Zahira said it was time to leave, and all I knew was that if I was going to sift anywhere, it would be in Neri’s arms.

And now I don’t know what to think about any of this.

Because he can’t be right.

I have to dig deep, but I find the barbed exterior I’ve been maintaining with him and slip into it like a second skin. “Don’t twist things into something they are not, wolf. Because that doesn’t create truth either.” I have his full attention, but his sharply perceptive gaze suddenly darts toward the main house. Still, I can’t stop rambling. I raise my voice over the increasing wind. “You should know that I’d had at least two bottles of wine when you knocked on my door last night, and that I ate very little dinner and absolutely *no* supper, so all that alcohol was taken on an empty stomach. And I—”

He clamps his hand over my mouth and cocks his head like a dog. Oddly enough, his ears change before my eyes, the gentle curves elongating to wolfish points protruding from his wind-tousled hair.

He aims his ear toward the tor a second before dragging me the short distance to the rocks and pulling me down behind them.

I jerk free of his grip. “What in the—”

Again, he claps his hand over my mouth, blinking at me with dismay as thunder rolls through the clouds beyond him. “You talk a lot when you’re trying to lie, you know that? And loudly. Voices carry on the wind.” He presses a finger to his lips, telling me to be quiet before pointing toward Starworth Tor and dropping his other hand from the lower half of my face.

At first, I see nothing unusual. But then lightning cracks behind the low-hanging clouds, and all becomes clear.

My friends are hunkered down against the stone wall that leads to the

beach, their backs pressed flat, their weapons drawn. The metal glints for a split second under the lightning's brilliant flash.

It's hard to see in the dull light once the bolt fractures and fades, but if I look closely, I can make out the figures of four men pacing the wall near the gardens that stretch between the main house and the lighthouse.

I open my mouth to say something, but Neri presses against my mind, halting me. He holds my gaze and touches my forehead, slipping his fingertips from my hairline to my temple.

He wants me to lower my construct.

Given the situation, I don't hesitate.

*"It could be Harmon and the boys,"* I think, my fingers nervously working against the cool, rough rock I'm leaning against.

*"It's not,"* he answers, and I gasp when I actually hear him. *"I know their voices. It has to be the Watch. Rooke must not have been the only official Vexx corrupted, or perhaps the prince has more men here."*

*"If they found out about us after we left, then they're probably lying in wait for our return."* I think about the man who attacked my sister. Gavril had been his name. A sorcerer. There's no telling what became of him. He could be here.

Neri arches a brow as his next thought whispers into my mind. *"Only one way to find out."*

A breeze whirls close. Not an ocean breeze, but a silken gust I recognize intimately now.

I grab the wolf's wrist. *"You're not going in there without me."*

I hope he can hear the firmness in my thoughts the way he would if I were speaking the words aloud.

He glances at my hand and chuckles. *"Yes, I am."*

I tighten my fingers. *"No, you're not."*

In truth, I realize that I have no notion how sifting works, if he can choose to take me along or if he has no choice if I'm clinging to him.

That question is answered as another thunderclap sounds, because that cold breeze of his worms its way between us like a living thing, bringing frost and ice with it.

*"Stay here until I come for you. Do you hear me?"* Eyes locked with mine, Neri reaches over his broad shoulder, and his galatine sword rings through the morning, freed from its scabbard.

I stare at him with wide eyes, shaking my head, willing him not to leave

me here where I can do nothing. But ultimately, I have no choice but to break our connection and squeeze my eyes against the sleet and wind suddenly whirling in the air.

When I open them again, the only thing that remains where Neri had been crouched beside me is a drift of snow and something I've never seen before.

A tendril of what looks like quicksilver, twisting and writhing in the sand.



## NERI

I sift across the beach and grab the back of Thibault's leather vest, but not before he senses my presence and whirls, thrusting the razor-sharp edge of his short sword to my throat. It bites into my skin, and a warm trickle of blood slides into my collar.

Though I would rather do anything than seem weak, I drop my head back against the stone wall and close my eyes, smelling the metallic quality of the sanguine fluid now soaking into my shirt. Not because he surprised me or because I fear his blade.

But because the world is tilting.

On a better day, of which I've had many, this wouldn't be normal. Such weakness is an effect of my sifting, of this increasingly unnatural disconnection I feel, as though I've expended my power after a few short travels. It's greater and occurring more frequently than the typical fatigue I remember experiencing centuries ago. Back then I could go for days using my powers before exhaustion set in.

I think of the alleged curse Fia Drumera mentioned, then I remind myself that Fleurie needed rest from portaling, even after several weeks of restoration. God I might be, but I suppose that even though it's always happened so near instantaneously for me, I now need time to heal.

Un Drallag lowers his weapon as I open my eyes and take two deep breaths to shake off the dizzy spell. Once the world feels righted, I point between his chest and mine and jerk my head toward the main house.

He nods with understanding. The energy radiating from him on this gray morning signals that he's already primed for attack. But there's a question in

his scrunched brow as he looks around me.

My thoughts slip across the beach to the east. I point toward the rocks, so he knows where I left Nephele. She's been too ill for me to place her in the middle of a possible melee. I just need to end it quickly. Need her safe for a matter of minutes.

The others—Zahira, Callan, Keth, Jaega, and Joran—read the situation. As lightning flashes, I see the need on the captain's face to come with us. I nod once in agreement, and she slips across the sand, shoulder against the stone wall, and crouches near me and Thibault.

"Get us inside," he says to me, his voice low between gusts from the sea.

"To my library," Zahira adds, offering strategic advice for the home she built with her own hands.

With a call of the wind and aether, I do just that, hoping for the best.

Though part of me didn't expect to succeed, we indeed arrive in the library, in a funnel of blustery air, leaving a scattering of frost on the exotic rug beneath our feet. A sense of relief tingles up my neck, but it's overshadowed the moment the darkened room swims around me, lit only by dawn's stormy light, filtering through a windowpane now mottled by the beginnings of a cold rain.

I all but collapse against a bookshelf. Acting as though I tripped over the rug's edge, which is ridiculous because gods don't trip, I press my hand to the spines to steady myself.

Thibault narrows his eyes. "What's wrong with you?"

"*Nothing.*" The word sails from my lips like a dart. "For a wolf, there's too much going on in this house, too many sensations. It's all hitting me at once. Give me a fucking minute to adjust."

Sensations like weakness, for one. But beyond that, the home's aroma bombards me. I note hints of jasmine and lavender, pale woods and sea salt, figs and vanilla. All the pretty things I sensed in Joran's body but couldn't experience fully like I can now.

But underneath all the pretty things, I smell blood. Days-old blood. Though the coppery scent has all but been washed away by myrrh-scented soap and well water, the wolf in me still sniffs it out.

Someone died here. Finn Owyn, if I had to guess. Revenge taken for what I did to Rooke.

I hope Finn was the only one.

Quiet as shadows, we move across the library and frame each side of the

door that leads into the main hall, Zahira at Thibault's back. Again, my equilibrium balances itself, but just as I train my ear toward any sound I can pick up on, Thibault jerks his head for us to move onward.

I reach across and grab the sleeve of his tunic, tugging him back. To *his* ear, I suppose the home is quiet, save for the wind rattling the chained shutters outside, making them clatter against the side of the house.

My wolf, however, hears mortal sounds. Like the blood that hides beneath a layer of normalcy and loveliness, these sounds hide under the soft din of white noise from a low-burning fire and the weather's windy roar outside.

But they're here. Murmurs. Footsteps. Breathing. Heartbeats.

"The women are in the great room," I say, keeping my voice down. Yazmin and the tiny witch who sensed me so plainly inside Joran's skin our first night here are quiet but chatting. "There are men in the house as well. Two are with the women, guarding the door that leads to the gardens." I cock my ear and lift my nose, only to hear the soft creak of wood and scent the aroma of roasted fish as someone who smells a lot like leather and steel sits for a bite of food. "Another is in the kitchen. None of them are Harmon or his sons," I clarify before he even inquires.

"And outside?"

"I can't tell at this distance. Four I know of. Between the main house and lighthouse."

"Yes, four," Zahira clarifies. "We saw them too. But there could be more guarding the vestibule and main gate. The city wall, too. We could be surrounded."

"I've faced worse," Thibault groans. "But fuck me, why can't anything be simple?"

I understand the sentiment. It's odd to worry about such things. Un Drallag should be able to obliterate any enemy, yet he lacks the control to focus his intent. And I should be able to sift from man to man in seconds, snapping each neck on the way. For two beings like us, a handful of guards shouldn't pose a problem.

And yet they very possibly could.

That awareness makes my body ache to shift, a need I tamp down as best I can. The bones in my face and hands throb as my muscles tighten in a fight to maintain control. But in seconds, my fangs and claws are protracting, my mouth watering, my hands itching to swipe.



A ragged breath scrapes its way free of my chest. At least it's only another partial shift, like when I fought Un Drallag in the desert. I'm not sure what I would do to this place or these people if it had been complete, given how different every other aspect of my true nature has been over the last two days.

Silvery blue light pulses through the room with another lightning flash followed by a rumble of thunder. Thibault's eyes are fixed on me until it ends, no doubt noting my killer smile and the golden glow of my stare. I can see their light reflected like moons in his eyes.

"You better tame your beast, wolf. We don't kill *anyone* unless we have no other choice, do you hear me? We might very well need them for information."

I growl around the pain of the last claw punching out from under my fingernail. I don't want to agree with this bastard on anything, but I know he's right. "Just move, you rotting sack of misfortune. Let's get this over with."

A deep, annoyed sigh escapes him as he frees a dagger from his boot, leaving him with two weapons in his hands. One to stab and momentarily immobilize, the other to slice and kill. Armed to the teeth or not, I sense his apprehension about what he thinks we might find ahead.

Zahira unsheathes a curved knife from her belt, and together, the three of us slip into the main hall. The bronze sconces that decorate the walls are unlit for the night, save for two, flickering long shadows across the slate floor. I snuff them out with a quick thread of wind. It snakes from one side of the hall to the other, licking away the fire as we move toward the home's entry.

Un Drallag lifts his hand, fisted around his dagger. We pause across from the staircase as he peers around the corner. When he drops his hand for the all-clear, we cut a hard right and creep toward the great room.

We're three healthy strides away when the grating sound of twisting metal screeches from somewhere outside, bringing us to a halt. Suddenly, a powerful gust of salty sea air hits my nostrils, followed by a loud *boom* that resonates down the hall.

Un Drallag and I look at Zahira, then at one another as the cries of men fill the night, along with the screams of the two women in the house. Their voices fade after a mere moment, though, as if they've been sucked from Starworth Tor by a mighty wind.

But it wasn't a wind that took them.

I smell something else.

Twined with the earthy scent of briny air and rain is the fragrance of fresh soil and wisteria, and a sweet perfume I swear has permeated even my spirit. My beast stretches awake, drawn to that scent like bees to honey.

“Well, fuck all. I sense a wicked witch in our midst,” Thibault says with a smile in his voice.

With her scent guiding me, I shove past him and charge down the hall and into the great room. Wind and spitting rain howl into the house through the doors leading outside, because they’re wide open, one hanging askew on its hinges. The men who had been here moments before—men I can still smell and hear cursing and grunting at a distance—are now gone.

Yazmin and Mari sit huddled on a chaise, arms folded around one another. The room is lit by a single oil lamp that didn’t blow out and the growing light of a rainy day.

Their faces are painted with wide-eyed expressions of shock, fear, and disbelief as they look between me, Thibault, and Zahira, attempting to register what’s happening. Zahira rushes to her wife’s waiting arms.

“They’re guards sent by Vice Admiral Eryx,” Yazmin says quietly, though her words come out rushed with terror. “There are more watching the beach and main gate, and one in the kitchen.” She looks at Zahira with relief. “I... I don’t know what just happened, but I’m so glad you’re here.”

“I know what happened,” Thibault says before glancing at me. “Somebody pissed off a Bloodgood sister.”

I glare at him. Nephele was so *tender* earlier at Fia’s. I can’t imagine her angry now.

“You just go get the asshole in the kitchen and the ones out front,” I tell him. “I’ll go see what’s happening outside.”

He shoots a look back at me, no doubt loathing that I’ve commanded him to do anything. But he throws up his armored hands. “Fine. Your fuck up. You fix it. I hope she eats you.”

With that, he turns toward the hall, and I turn and stalk into the stormy morning. Even though the wind and rain are strong enough to carry away her scent, I catch a hint of Nephele’s aroma. I follow that smell and a trail of wind-blown leaves, browning wisteria petals, and fresh dirt now turning to mud across the veranda.

Sword still drawn and senses on high alert, I climb the two short flights of stone steps that used to lead to an iron gate—the entry to the stretch of

gardens between here and the lighthouse.

Now that gate is destroyed, flung open and dangling from its post and hinges. Its rain-slicked metal is twisted, bent at odd angles toward the house, as though a great force exploded through it.

Because it did.

A force named Nephele Bloodgood.

Slightly perplexed by how she made it across the beach so quickly, and a bit miffed that she disobeyed me, I shake my head at the sight and step past the mangled gate into Yazmin's lush gardens.

Down the flagstone walkway, at the edge of the wisteria arbor, stands a tall, slender woman whose curves I have memorized like a map. I scrub the rain from my eyes with the back of my sleeve, taking it all in. Her back is to me, her arms stretched wide as her long, blonde curls, wet and slithering like glistening snakes, whip in the chilly wind. She's surrounded by a soft violet halo of magick that reflects against every raindrop.

Lightning fractures the gray morning sky as six men fight to reach Nephele from within a cage of tangled wisteria branches, stabbing their swords and daggers through the gaps and calling her names as she weaves and tightens her terrifying prison of woody limbs around them. One nearly reaches her, but she uses the branches to snatch his sword and rip it from his hands.

"That's your third mistake," she says, her voice baleful. "I dare you to make another."

The branches holding the man's sword unfurl like an offering hand, from which Nephele accepts the weapon. With her pale locks still writhing wildly around her head, she plunges the blade into the cage, right into the man's shoulder.

His scream and an unholy curse break through the gardens. The wound isn't a fatal one. But it'll make him miserable enough that her warning will now ring clear.

Silently, I sheathe my sword and stand in awe of her—Nephele and her cages. A warrior witch who likes to trap things, and if the moment calls for it, make her victims suffer.

I don't hate seeing her like this. In fact, as her power swirls around her, a power I feel dancing on my skin, and as I sense the growing violence within her, it only strokes my beast. Not because she's angry and in a protective enough state to be absolutely venomous, but because she will do anything for

the people she cares about, and woe is the fool who crosses her.

Fuck, I want her. Her goodness and her malevolence.

Without so much as a hint that she's finished with these bastards, her power dissipates, melting into the night as though it was never there. She holds up the man's sword and stares at its blood-stained tip as the rain drenching us washes away the crimson, leaving only wet steel behind.

"I don't fear anything," I say, loudly enough that she can hear me over the storm. "But you're beginning to make me wonder if I should."

Her mental wards slam up around her mind, but then she crooks her head and turns on her heel, twisting to face me with a sharply arched brow. "The answer is yes. In case you need help figuring that much out."

I arch my brow right back at her, my gaze locked on her swaying hips as she saunters like a siren toward me, as though she didn't just cage six men inside a bush, stab one of them, and leave him bleeding in the rain.

"Someone's quite saucy considering she disobeyed a direct order and somehow got herself all the way from the eastern side of the beach to this veranda faster than me. That might require truth-telling, and maybe even a little discipline."

I watch her closely as she takes a deep inhale and studies me. From my wet hair to the glowing orbs of my eyes to my brutal fangs and the razor claws curling from my hands. It's almost as though she's looking for something.

But so am I. And I find it. She's nervous. She has something to hide. But my attention doesn't cling to that knowledge for long, because her desire is thick and heady and wafting from her body in waves.

I breathe her in, finding her need so easily, even from under the scents of a turbulent sea churning up a downpour.

"How I got here is none of your business," she says, blinking away the water droplets clinging to her eyelashes. "And just try to discipline me. You'll end up in a cage just like them. I put you inside one days ago. I can put you there again."

I *tsk*. "There you go inviting me to do things you know I'll do. Things you *want* me to do."

She scoffs. "In your dreams."

"Most certainly. Because every time you look at me, especially when you're trying to be furious, I feel what you really want. *This*," I say as I gesture to my face and all the preternatural things that come with it, "arouses

you. *I* arouse you. The thought of me consuming you arouses you. Your pussy is so hot right now you'd drag me into a cozy little corner of this garden and mount me in a heartbeat, lightning and thunder be damned." I crook a smile, even as thunder rolls. "I bet you'd rather like a little discipline then."

She swings her hand up to strike me, but I catch her wrist. Her chest rises and falls hard, and she adjusts the slick hilt in her opposite hand. "You might be a god, wolf. But you need to remember that I'm the woman to whose whims you are bound, by deal and honor, until I draw my last breath. Lest you forget who has control."

Mouth quirked, I rake my gaze over her from head to foot and back again. "I know my place well. At your side. But I didn't need you for all this." I glance toward her cage before meeting her eyes again, then I lower her hand, keeping my fingers wrapped firmly around her wrist. I lean in close enough for a kiss, my lips curled back over my fangs. "I was *trying* to keep you safe because you've been ill, you unappreciative little witch." No sooner than I say those words, the full force of her need punches me in the face. I stare at her, searching her eyes, a little stunned. "See? I'm being a complete ass right now, and yet your scent is as potent as a field of dark red roses. So maybe the question is, who *really* has control here?"

She all but bares her teeth, scraping them over her wet, plump bottom lip, making me want to suck it into my mouth, to learn what she tastes like wet and drenched in the scent of petrichor.

"I'm hot from the heat of a fight," she spits, jerking her wrist from my hold. "Not because of you. That notion ends tonight." Something flashes across her eyes. Something I'm not sure I recognize at first. But then I realize it's... hurt. "You left me behind. After telling Colden that I can take care of myself, *you left me behind*. I suppose I'm only powerful enough to make my own godsdamn decisions when it suits you."

I swallow, speechless for a long moment. The only words I can find are, "As I said, I was trying to keep you safe."

"Why?" she shouts, and on the edges of her voice, I hear the others shuffling up the steps from the beach. "I'm not a fragile flower, wolf. I don't *need* your protection. I don't need anyone's protection. I *can* take care of myself." She points the tip of her new sword at my face. "You admitted as much. And then you left me anyway. So maybe you need to figure out why you suddenly don't believe that anymore. Why suddenly, you think I need a

hero. I'm my own fucking hero. Don't forget it."

She walks past me, smacking her shoulder against my arm. As she passes and heads down the stone steps to meet the others, I close my eyes against the slashing rain, letting it pelt my face as I tighten my lips and groan out a sigh, wondering why indeed I feel so compelled to shelter her.

And because I don't have an answer—not one I'm prepared to face at least—I stand there, the pressure inside me matching that of the rising torrent coming in off the sea, and let her go.



## NEPHELE

**T**he stormy morning is spent with Alexis, Neri, and Zahira questioning Vice Admiral Eryx's men one at a time in the lighthouse, attempting to learn all they need to know about the man Vexx left in charge after Neri killed Rooke. Meanwhile, Callan moves around the exterior portions of the home that are shielded from the rain, marking them with runes for protection, cleansing, and invulnerability.

Joran, Keth, and Jaega—with some help from Harmon and the boys—attempt to fix the doors I battered in the great room. They resort to erecting a makeshift exit from two thick slabs they hauled from the stables.

The rain's tempo builds and then slows. Once the clouds finally move northeast, I decide to burn off my temper by strengthening the construct Alexis erected around the property to shield our presence from the men monitoring the city wall. They will see their fellow members of the Watch lurking about the gardens instead of being trapped in the cage I've made for them. There are nine in all, with varying levels of common magick. Thankfully, not much of a threat for the likes of us, but I fear they aren't who we need to worry about.

As everyone tends to their tasks, I slip into the library and lie down for a rest. My body is so spent after exerting so much energy with magick, not to mention that this makes day number three that I haven't had any normal sustenance in my body. No matter how strong I might want to be, I am wholly unwell.

It's the aroma of herbs and spices that wakes me a long while later, causing an instant pang of hunger, though the accompanying nausea is much



stronger.

Hand pressed to my stomach, I push my slightly still-damp hair back from my face and sit up, noticing that someone—likely Yaz—has covered me with a soft throw, which is a good thing, because I feel chilled. I glance at the window. It's been such a gray day, but it must be midafternoon by now.

Feeling as though I need to be more present given our circumstances, I force myself to get up and move down the hall toward the kitchen. Gods, I have to hold my breath against the scents wafting through the door as I peek inside. Joran, Keth, and Jaega are devouring a hearty meal prepared by Yaz and Mari. They don't see me slip past and head into the great room where I crouch by the fire and try to breathe my way through the chills racing over my skin and this relentless sickness.

About a half hour later, Keth and Jaega stroll into the room too, a look of surprise on their faces at seeing me. I've worn a path across the rug in front of the hearth, nervously working Neri's heart pendant up and down the golden chain around my neck. Beyond illness, my mind is a disaster of worry.

Jaega eyes me and squeezes my hand as they move toward the new doors that lead to the garden. "I'm glad you got some rest, Nephele. But you look like you might need to have some dinner. Yaz has plenty."

"Yum." I brighten my face and do my best to make little of it. "I might head that way in a bit, then."

The couple heads outside to sit in the weak light of a struggling sun to guard our prisoners, while I stay put by the fire. Joran, finishing off a hunk of bread, soon passes through, heading to the gardens as well. He hasn't so much as glanced at me since he's been back to himself, and he doesn't acknowledge me now, which is perfectly all right. We've never been friends. We don't need to be them now.

I don't stop pacing in his presence. I can't. I feel awful, so very tired and aching everywhere, but I can't be still. It reminds me of the time I caught a fever when I was a girl, the way I tossed and turned against misery. Even my skin hurts, like I need *something* desperately. Something specific to cure my ill.

Yet I have no idea what that something is.

Adding to my worry is the sliph of quicksilver wriggling in the left pocket on the inside of my jacket. I press my hand to my breast to try and still it to no avail.

Neri wondered how I arrived at the tor so quickly. I'm not ready to tell him that I stole what I believe might be a tiny bit of aether, or that I think it somehow sifted me across the beach. I didn't *do* anything to cause that to happen, or at least I don't think I did. I'd been scanning the entirety of the tor with what I thought was quicksilver in my hand, trying to decide what to do with my rising anger over Neri leaving me. Then I was just... *there*.

That can't be normal or safe, especially given that my sister is currently imprisoned in a Queziran dungeon from three hundred years past because of a mechanism we don't fully understand. It makes me wonder if Fia was right when she spoke to me and Raina days ago. If Father's reaper's marks were something more, something handed down through his lineage.

If we're truly descended from Loria.

Yaz floats into the room, and I stop my pacing as she pauses near the settee. Her round brown eyes grow tender as she looks me over. Even now, she's dressed so lovely, wearing a flowing sage green dress that compliments her skin, a soft, sun-warmed brown that reminds me of the sands of the Summerlands.

Sincerity and tenderness soften her already sympathetic expression. "Why don't you come for a bite to eat? Mari is still in the kitchen. We can make you a cheese plate. Or I have more stew heating in the hearth, too. Whichever you prefer."

I'm aware I must look a sight, bad enough for two people to have now suggested that I try to eat. Unsurprisingly, I still can't stomach the thought of food, but Yaz and Mari were so glad to see us and so relieved to be out from under the constant threat of the traitorous members of the Watch. I'm sure something as simple as feeding us seems like a task they *need* to perform in order to feel a true return to normalcy here at Starworth Tor.

For that reason alone, I cross the room and take her hand, forcing a smile as I say, "That sounds wonderful."

In the kitchen, I slip onto a stool at the large wood-topped island in the middle of the room. I take a deep breath and try to steady myself, surrounded by an onslaught of scents.

Mari slides a cup of lavender tea and a plate of warm sourdough bread, soft goat cheese, and clover honey in front of me. I sip the tea, which isn't so terrible. It quite unexpectedly soothes me a little. As for the food, any other day, I would devour every last morsel. But now, I simply pinch a healthy bite and make myself swallow it. I know my body *needs* food, and I don't want to

draw attention to my lack of appetite or seem rude.

As Mari stirs the stew in the kettle that hangs over the fire, Yaz leans her elbows onto the counter across from me, clasping her hands. "You must be so worried about Raina. About everyone."

I lick a drop of honey from my fingertip, wishing it didn't make me squeamish. "I am. There's not really been a moment of peace since we were last here. I would give anything for all of this to magickally resolve."

She offers a warm yet sad smile. "Being a Witch Walker does tend to make us wish we could wave our hands and change everything for the better, doesn't it? If only magick worked that way. If only it could mend the damage done by others."

I pull myself out of my own worries, push the plate aside, and match Yaz's pose. "Are you two all right? With everything that happened with Finn... I just can't imagine what you've been through."

Yaz momentarily closes her eyes, and behind her, Mari stiffens, though her shoulders seem so very heavy. They've already had this talk with Zahira who let everyone know what occurred upstairs, but it's clearly something no one would be able to forget.

"We're blessed by the Ancient Ones that we only heard it happen," Yaz replies, her eyes filling with sudden tears, her lip trembling. "But Harmon was here. He saw Vexx leave carrying a bloody sack. He knew instantly what had happened." She wipes her cheeks, and I notice Mari wiping her face too. "He and the boys buried Finn down near the stables with guards watching over them the entire time. Vexx left the guards here, and they've remained here since." She glances over her shoulder. "Mari tried launching fire from the hearth at one of them, but he managed to snuff it out, and then we were threatened. They said they would do to us what was done to Finn if we tried anything else against them."

"And so I didn't," Mari says.

She sniffles and swipes at her eyes, keeping her attention on the ladle in her hand. Even from across the room, I sense her guilt for not fighting harder. I know that guilt. When you feel as though you should've been a martyr, and yet you're the one who's spared.

"Mari," I say, and she looks up at me. "It's okay that you were scared. You still tried."

She lets out a shaky breath. "I'm not very powerful. Especially when I'm scared. I didn't want them to hurt anyone else."

“And that’s understandable. You did your best. Nothing that happened here is your fault. Vexx was on a mission, and he succeeded.”

“We just aren’t sure how they figured out Finn was here,” Yaz interjects.

That thought settles within me. I shake my head and try to nibble on another bite of bread, though my stomach is only growing more nervous. “The prince and Thamaos and Vexx... they’ve had eyes all over, it seems.”

Eyes I pray are done watching us, though something tells me that is a fool’s hope.

Later, after Mari has tended my room, Yaz leads me upstairs to clean up, though I plan to also sleep if at all possible. She says nothing when I snatch a large bottle of red wine from the rack in the kitchen and tuck it underneath my arm.

Our walk is a solemn one, especially as we pass the room where Finn lost his life. The door is closed, and a blue satin ribbon decorated with sprigs of lavender and hellebore hangs from the knob.

“For his soul’s serenity,” Yaz says as we pass.

A few doors down, she opens the door to the bedchambers I shared with Helena just days ago. The light of a burning oil lamp and a low fire gives the room a warm glow, but it’s the steaming bath that makes me feel like I could melt.

Yaz gestures toward the tub. “There are clean linens and clothes for you, and a fresh pitcher of extra wash water and a tray of soaps. Otherwise, all is the same as before.”

A wave of sadness crashes over me as I cross the threshold. Nothing is the same as before. *Nothing.*

After stoking the fire in the small hearth, Yaz leaves me alone, still saying nothing about the wine I so brazenly stole. I remove the cork and turn it up, immediately feeling a sense of relief warming my belly, then spreading through my limbs. It isn’t quite enough, but it staves off the bite of hunger pinching my gut and temporarily soothes the craving I can’t define.

*How odd.*

I hold the bottle at arm’s length, studying the imprint reading THE WINE OF STARWORTH TOR. I’ve never had an issue with too much drink. This need to reach for a bitter red instead of food is new and worrisome.

As if I don’t have enough worries.

I set the wine on the table near the door, kick off my boots, and move to the wardrobe, slipping off my jacket. I can’t help but peek at the aether in my

pocket, still squirming like a long worm. Shaking my head, I put the jacket away and finish undressing, hoping that thing doesn't crawl free. I can't make myself do away with it, though. A victim of curiosity, I suppose.

Always drawn to dangerous things.

Speaking of, the murmur of men's voices carries from down the hall. It isn't the right thing to do, but I move naked toward the door and press my ear against the slab.

"We sit on this information tonight, think it through. Then we end this tomorrow, if at all possible," Alexis says. "And return this city to Northlander hands."

"Agreed," Neri replies. "Eye for an eye."

First of all, I can barely believe my ears. They're speaking civilly, and it isn't about me. Secondly, a part of me wants to throw on my robe and charge into the hall, asking what they mean, but I'm just not ready to face the wolf after what happened in the garden. I need distance from him, yet I hear his booted footsteps growing heavy in the hall, footsteps I cannot believe I have learned to discern in such a short time.

He's taking the room across from mine.

The room he occupied as Joran.

His footsteps pause, and it strikes me that not only can he hear me, but he can also scent me. Probably quite well, given that I'm nude save for the remnant of his warming heart that hangs between my breasts.

Like an idiot, I gently turn the lock on the door, then I hold my breath and quietly step away, waiting for him to acknowledge my pathetic effort at keeping a barrier between us.

But Neri says nothing. Instead, the door to his room creaks open and snicks shut.

For long moments, I stare blankly at my door, but then I grab the bottle of red, slip into my waiting bath, and sip wine while I soak and think.

A soft knock startles me from my thoughts, but it's Alexis's voice on the other side. "Just checking on you."

"I'm all right. Bathing, then I'm going to sleep."

A moment passes.

"I... I couldn't stay in the lighthouse, so I'm just down the hall should you need to talk." His voice is tender, as though he knows I do.

But I simply can't right now.

"Okay," is all I say as my chin trembles. I listen as his hand slides down

the door before he turns and returns to his room.

Tears come more swiftly than I expect as I sit alone in a tub of water that grows tepid after a while, smothering my sobs behind a wadded cloth. I cry for my sister and Alexis and Colden and Elias and Finn and all of Tiressia, until my burning eyes have no more tears left to give. My mental wards are down, too, but I'm too far gone to erect them again. Neri will just have to hear my misery should he choose to prowl.

It isn't until a couple of hours later, once the last drop of wine is gone and I'm buried under the gentle weight of a comforting coverlet, that a soft *shfft* whispers through the room. I tug the covers from around my face and look toward the sound.

A note lies on the stone floor near the rug's fringe, slid through from under the door. With a frown, I push the cover back and rise slowly, my head already aching, and groggily retrieve the folded parchment. Lifting the fallen strap of my nightrail back over my shoulder, I carry the note to the hearth and hold it against the low light.

On the front is a drawing of a wolf's head, almost like the marking on a seal, announcing the author of this particular communication quite plainly. When I open the letter, I find four words written in old Elikeshe, scrawled in handwriting far too elegant for the hand that penned it. Four tiny words that I would never imagine the God of the North thinking, let alone writing.

### *Forgive me, little bird*

I want to be unaffected and unmoved, but the truth is, though I don't understand why the wolf draws such vast swings of emotion from me, my hard heart softens as I read those words a second and third time. Such an endearingly human gesture, from a beast of a god no less.

But that isn't how any of this is going to go. Neri and I will be at one another's sides for decades. I can't be so easy with him that a simple written request for forgiveness, slid like a lover's letter under my door, is all that's required to heal a rift he carved.

No. As I toss his letter into the fire, I make up my mind, knowing exactly what I must do.

If Neri, God of the Northlands, wants my forgiveness—if he wants me in any way at all—I'm going to make him earn it.



## NERI

**E**arly the next day, Thibault and I head down the main road that crests Village Hill, glamoured to look like two gentlewomen out for a morning stroll. The last thing I imagined while trapped inside this bastard Eastlander is that I would one day find myself side by side with him on a joint mission in *my* lands, shielded by *his* magick no less.

But here we are.

We didn't try to sift from the tor. We weren't sure where the vice admiral might be. And though the captive guards revealed that there are more protections around the city than usual since Rooke's murder, we wanted to get an idea of the current military climate ourselves.

In truth, I'm glad sifting wasn't an option. Not after my botched attempt last night. I lay in bed, arms folded behind my head, wanting to close my eyes and open them on the beach, to let the rush of crashing waves clear my mind after Nephele tossed my note into the fire. I heard it plainly enough, my words catching the flame and crisping to cinders.

She doesn't know she's the only being whose forgiveness I have ever asked for, but I have a feeling it wouldn't matter if she did.

With my best offer at an apology burned to ash, I listened as she padded across her room and crawled back into bed, noting how her breathing eventually slowed into a deep sleep. But her mind was in turmoil, so intensely tangled with racing thoughts that I could discern only three things. One, she's desperately brokenhearted, more than she shows. Two, she's physically miserable. And three, she plans to make me miserable as well.

When I sifted to escape the temptation to listen to her dreams, I arrived on



the windy beach, though barely. The aether felt as though it were dumping me instead of delivering me. Worse still, the sand was littered with small, splattered puddles of silver, near iridescent in the moonlight. Puddles of aether. As though the primordial substance couldn't hold itself together for me anymore.

As though perhaps it no longer recognized me.

Which is concerning.

It forces me to think about the curse from the grove as we stroll up the hill. Asha mentioned it quite often over our long years together. She'd concocted great plans for being resurrected should she somehow lose her life, plans that Fia clearly never agreed to execute for her goddess. Asha didn't want anything to stand as an obstacle should the need arise for her to be restored for her people.

Or for Moeshka, perhaps. A dream that didn't seem to want to die.

Looking back, I have to wonder if she had some other reason for such worry over the curse that I wasn't privy to. Not that I would've noticed. The only thought I gave to resurrection was entertaining her musings, and that was usually a half effort. *Why would you want to be brought back from the Shadow World?* I would ask. *What good is an immortal life if cursed? And what might that curse be?*

She could never be sure, which made it far less interesting for me, but she read every tome, scroll, and tablet she could get her hands on to try and uncover the mystery. And there I was, at her side, disbelieving and struggling to imagine that death for us would ever happen at all. Such is the way with most gods. When the only thing feared is being unmade.

But now, after centuries of existence in some form or another, I'm beginning to understand fear, even if vaguely. Because Nephele is too sick, and it's my fault. Her affliction isn't a fever either, or a simple upset stomach, or even an outcome of immense grief. It's something pernicious.

Last night, her mind radiated worry for her ill health so strongly that she's all I've thought about since, even though my thoughts should be on the traitor I'm trying to locate. A vice admiral—soon to be admiral—named Eryx.

It requires great effort to suffocate the worries plaguing me, and I still don't succeed. Because though I focus on the target before me, Nephele is never far from the center of my mind's eye.

Eyes sharp, we move deeper into the busy part of Village Hill where the day has begun. Shopkeepers and business owners open their doors

underneath the gentle warmth of a sunny sky while others work against the sea's chill wind, sweeping up leftover debris from yesterday's storm.

There's a tension tightening the air that wasn't here days ago. A city pressed firmly beneath the thumb of leadership it didn't ask for. I note the presence of sentries stationed outside every building, hands on the hilts of their swords, watching the main street diligently, if warily, conversing closely with frowns on nearly every face. These people have been placed on high alert because of Un Drallag and me. Because we proved to those who accepted the East's corruption that no traitorous leader is safe here. We proved that even their beloved Brear Hall, no matter how guarded, is far from impregnable and that they are far from safe.

According to his men, the vice admiral has more personal safeguards in place than Rooke did, perhaps not so comfortable without General Vexx here as overseer. He wants allyship with the East, though, somehow convinced that's the best plan for the people of the Northlands.

We were informed that most members of the Watch have questioned Eryx's authority in light of learning their administration is in league with the East. Many have wanted to rebel over these last days, but a power struggle with an admiral who has ties to such an entity as the Prince of the East seemed misguided without further planning, enough that the men based at the tower had to be forced to talk because they feared retaliation on them and their families. A simple showing of fangs and claws by their newly risen god proved quite persuasive, however, as did the promise of pardon once this is over.

Now we have a location to check as a possible hideout.

Before our search begins, we head toward Brear Hall. Eryx's presence today is unlikely, but his office is there. If I mean to sniff him out amongst thousands of people across this city, I need to pick up on his scent.

Thibault veers into a nearby alleyway, and I follow. When we emerge, we're dressed in the dove-gray uniforms of the Watch's guards, glamoured so thoroughly that even our hair, eye, and skin tones are different shades. The silver marks of common magick are also on grand display, traveling up Thibault's neck and covering our hands. I study the foreign flourishes. They remind me of my own marks—the adorna of the gods—that still have not appeared.

This is a bit of sorcery I envy. Glamouring is a skill never afforded to the gods. Because what a dangerous power to hold over men if we could change

our faces to look like anything and anyone?

But this is more than a simple glamour. A simple veil.

Thibault has rewritten us.

Loathe as I am to admit it, I can't help but notice just how much his magick has grown over these last weeks. He might not be able to propel himself across continents yet, and I'm not sure he ever will—that is a gargantuan feat. But for a human sorcerer whose magick lay dormant for so long, I am slightly impressed by this level of illusion.

I would gouge my own eyes out with rusted spoons before I told him so, though.

With blond hair and blue eyes, he stares up at Brear Hall's rooftop. "The last time I was here," he says, voice a bit morose, "Vexx's man—Gavril—was down at the Bitter Barrel, reversing Raina's rune."

"You wanted to kill him for her. Much the way I wanted to kill Rooke for Nephele."

He turns and levels a narrowed gaze on me, face hard as he closes the distance between us and lowers his tight voice. "I *still* want to kill Gavril. And one day, when I find him, I will. But it is not the same as what you did to Rooke. Don't even try to pretend that it is. I want to kill Gavril because he hurt the woman I love. My need for revenge exists because he tried to cut and burn away the bond we shared, and I felt her fear and agony, the edge of the blade, and the scalding of the fire. You wanted to hand Nephele Rooke's head like a godsdamn trophy. Not because you couldn't stand the thought of her being in pain for her sister or even because it was best for the Northlands that Rooke be taken out. You did it because gods believe barbarity is its own form of seduction, and you wanted Nephele. Still do." He smirks, his eyes mocking me. "But I can promise you that human women are vastly different from the goddesses you bedded centuries ago, in innumerable ways. You should take a little time to learn some of them. Because Nephele can be a cobra. One who might enjoy your music but won't be easily seduced by your charms."

It isn't my nature to do so, especially with the man who held me prisoner for so long, but I let the conversation die. I'm in no mood to discuss what was going through my mind the night I took Rooke's head *or* what I'm feeling for Nephele now. I know I have my work cut out for me if I plan to earn her trust. She's made that abundantly clear. I just haven't decided what that particular war will look like yet.

With our hands clasped behind our backs in true Northland Watch fashion, we stroll up to the entry at Brear Hall. The sentries at the main doors have just taken their stations for the day. Given the tension on every face, I expect the guards to be far more attentive, but one is still yawning, another barely awake as they offer unenthusiastic salutes. It's their duty to protect these doors, and yet their eyes drift lazily over the insignia on our jackets, and they wave us past, unwittingly inviting Eryx's enemies inside the gate.

We pause beneath the vaulted ceiling, watching a young man polishing the white marble statue in the center of the main hall. It depicts a rather ugly, beastly version of what these people imagined the God of the North to be.

"That doesn't even remotely look like me," I grumble under my breath. It's hard not to scowl. I saw this *thing* the night I came here for Rooke, but with the bright light of morning filtering in, it's even more hideous than before.

Thibault grunts low in his chest, a half laugh. "I think it's an absolutely uncanny resemblance."

I glare at him, and he meets my stare with a menacing grin.

Together we weave through the already crowded building and head toward the back of the first floor. Along the way, a man with an arm full of scrolls nearly drops every single one to the floor. I couldn't have asked for more perfect timing.

Wearing the face of a young, dark-haired sentry, I swoop in and help him regain control, preventing the scrolls from scattering across the marble floor. He thanks me profusely while I discreetly swipe one of his precious pieces of cargo in the process.

Thibault gives me a slight nod of acknowledgement, and we continue onward until we stand before a round little woman working the desk leading to the staff offices.

When Thibault smiles, she lights up like the rising sun. I study his glamour, that of a rather handsome man, all neat lines, pale, pink skin, and bold sky-blue eyes. He reminds me of Nephele. It's certainly the eyes, but perhaps even that smile.

The woman touches the graying hair coiled atop her head, then rests her chin on her folded hands, eyelashes batting wildly. "Who are you here to see, gentlemen?"

I produce the official and confidential-looking scroll and hand it off to Thibault. "Just delivering a document from the archives for Vice Admiral

Eryx,” he says. “He said that if he wasn’t in, we were to leave this on his desk and sign the log that we’d been here. You know how particular he is about things.”

Nice addition. A handy bit of knowledge volunteered by one of the guards back at Starworth Tor that makes us seem more legitimate than we truly are.

“Oh, don’t I,” she replies with a purposeful quiver to her voice as she stands. And then, “Come. I’ll walk you back.”

Eryx’s scent wafts around me the moment we enter his darkened office, notes of musk and beach wood twisted with the salty fragrance of the sea. While Thibault sets the scroll in an already overfilled crate on the vice admiral’s desk, I step close to the jacket the man in question left hanging on a hook by the door. All that’s required is a long inhale, and I’ve caught his smell.

“He hasn’t been here in days,” the woman offers, wringing her hands. “Not since that horrible incident with Admiral Rooke.”

Thibault reaches for a quill and ink pot and begins completing the visitor log with fake names and information that will eventually be found out. “I’m sure he thinks it best to remain hidden,” he says. “Until everything is sorted out.”

“Will it ever be?” she whispers, her thin brows drawing together as she leans closer to Thibault. “His mind has been turned by that man from the East. You’ll never convince me otherwise.”

He puts the quill away and faces her. Folding his arms, he sits on the corner of the desk and crosses his feet at the ankles, eyes curious. “You mean General Vexx?”

She shakes her head adamantly. “No, no. The other one. The smaller one. There’s something not right about that man. Gavril, I think they call him.”

Thibault’s cold eyes blaze. “I wasn’t aware he was still here.”

She widens her stare and suffers a whole-body shiver. “Oh, he is. He was seen just last night over at the White Wolf with the vice admiral. I can’t believe you haven’t heard. The gossip started spreading immediately.”

I don’t even flinch at the ironic name of what I assume to be a tavern. But I do speak up. “We’ve heard nothing, surprisingly. A public outing seems quite unwise given that he’s trying to lay low.”

She looks at me. “Word is that they showed up to bolster confidence among the members of the Watch and convince the people of the need for the

North to choose a side. Preferably the one who wants to see Tiressia united.”

I scoff, tucking my hands behind my back again. “Yes. United under the cruel hand of—”

“The Prince of the East,” Thibault interjects before the word *Thamaos* falls from my lips.

The woman glances between us. “Yes, well, we Malgrosians are not in the best circumstance, to say the least. I’m certain you both understand that, though.”

Thibault straightens. “We do. Too well.”

The woman escorts us from Eryx’s office. We easily make it past the guards at the main doors and step out onto the busy city street ahead. Thibault, still wearing another man’s visage, squints up at the sun with less misery than when we left the tor this morning, a man who just found a new purpose.

“Looks like you might get that kill sooner rather than later.”

He rubs his hands together, a small curl at the corner of his mouth. “Yes. Looks like. And better still? If we remove the sorcerer and his poison, reclaiming Malgros will go smoothly. We just have to find the bastard first.”

“Well, there’s only one way to find fresh meat, Un Drallag.” I sniff the air and turn eastward toward Eryx’s first possible hideout, an old fleet warehouse near the barracks and command post. “We hunt for it.”

# III

BLOOD FOR BLOOD



I 5



## NEPHELE

**I** 'm dreaming of my mother.

*She's laughing and smiling, her floral sundress billowing wildly in the wind as I chase her along the beach, the sun beating down on our faces.*

*Those long, dark curls bounce around her shoulders as she twists to see me, her tanned skin so much different than mine. More like baby Raina's. I don't expect it, but she lets me catch her, and we tumble to a blanket spread across the sand, where she folds me in her arms and pecks kisses over my face. I love her. I love the way she smells like sunshine and sea spray and home.*

*With a giggle, I slip free and crawl over the blanket to snatch a book from our basket.*

*"Read to me, momma?"*

*"Of course." She sits up and pulls me into her lap, her skin warm against mine.*

*With her arms around me, her head nestled just over my shoulder, she holds up the book's cover and reads the title. "A Witch's Language of Flowers."*

*When she opens the book, it feels like she's opening a portal, as though great magick lies within. The first page is a sketch of a single rose. Admiring, I reach out with my small hand and trace its lines.*

*"The Blood Red Rose," Mother reads. "Want to hear the story of how it came to be?"*

*I nod, twisting my finger in a blonde curl.*

*“In the age of Loria,” she begins, “a goddess named Cila fell in love with a man named Thaddius who lived hidden away from the world, deep in the snowy mountains of Omalli. Cila was from Eridan, of course. Radiant and beautiful, with silvered skin and hair that was dark as the night itself. After so many years there, she grew tired and bored of her home, so she went in search of earthly beauty, curious what the lands beyond her own realm might offer. Cila roamed the world and eventually found her way to Omalli’s white-peaked range. It was there that she met a beast. He was a beautiful man by day” —Mother pauses to lower her voice against my ear— “but a hideous monster at night.”*

*Again, I giggle, and after she kisses my hair, she continues.*

*“Thaddius tried so hard to control his beastly nature, but he was cursed by the god of Omalli, rendered a predator meant to live forever alone in his country’s misty forests and snow-packed woods. Cila couldn’t bear to leave him, so she stayed, a goddess in the land of men. Together, they built a cottage in the wood where they planned to live for a very long time, happily. But one day, while hunting in his human form, Thaddius nearly died after a fight with a bear. When Cila found him on their doorstep, she offered her own blood to save his life. He drank from her vein, not realizing that her blood would change him forever.”*

*When I scrunch my face and shiver, Mother smiles and taps the tip of my nose. “Does that sound awful?”*

*“Terrible!”*

*Mother just laughs and turns the page. “Cila never cared that Thaddius sought blood at night. Never cared when she faced the creature within him. She loved him for all his light and darkness. For that, he wanted to repay Cila by giving her the very thing she’d gone in search of in the first place. The thing she’d left her incomparable home to find. Beauty.”*

*“What did he do?” My voice is small and high against the rush of a crashing wave.*

*“Spring came,” Mother says, “and Thaddius went searching for flowers. He found tulips and daffodils and hyacinths, but those blooms didn’t speak to his soul. So he went back in the early summer and came upon a bush of white roses. They were lovely, but he didn’t care for the absence of color. It didn’t signify all that Cila meant to him. What she’d done for him. But he began plucking a bouquet for her anyway, wishing the roses were red, like the blood she’d given to save him, and like the passion he felt when he looked upon her*

*face. It was then that a thorn caught against his thumb, ripping open the flesh. Thaddius's blood spilled onto the rose in his hand and dripped onto the soil. As though he possessed the magick to do so, every rose petal on the bush flushed from bright white to the boldest blood red. He couldn't bear to pluck any more, so he returned to their cottage and brought Cila to see the roses that had changed before his very eyes."*

*"Did she like them?"*

*"She did. But they were thorny roses. More so than any other Thaddius had ever seen. He worried Cila might hate them for that reason alone. As he stood nervously waiting to hear her thoughts, she turned to him, and with tears in her eyes, told him that she loved them. He questioned her, showing her the pointy barbs in case she hadn't noticed. But she had, and she thought it made them more wonderful because they reminded her of him."*

*Frowning, I shake my head. "A rose reminded her of a beast? But why?"*

*Mother touches my chin and tilts my face to look at her. "Because my little morning star. Sometimes, even the most beautiful things grow teeth."*



I JOLT AWAKE TO A VOICE IN MY ROOM, A COLD SWEAT BREAKING ACROSS MY brow. *Morning star, morning star, morning star*, my mother whispers, as though trying to wake me.

For long moments, all I can do is stare at the ceiling, at a thin shaft of wan sunlight, waiting for the dream to let go as a headache hammers the back of my skull.

*She isn't here*, I tell myself as the voice slowly fades.

Once the sound of her words passes, I clutch the bed linens and try to steady my breathing and my heart. I swear I can still smell her. Still feel her hand on my face and the warmth of her soft skin. That wasn't just a dream. It was a memory of my time here in Malgros with my family. A time I've never recalled before now.

Shaken and still weak, I sit up and slide my legs off the mattress, only to be swiftly punched in the face with the smell of food again.

I snap a harsh look at the small silver tray of fresh breads and berry compote waiting on the nightstand near my bed. My attention doesn't remain on the meal for long, though, because there's a plucked red rose from Yaz's

garden and a folded piece of marbled ecru parchment beside it. The wolf head drawn across the front of the note in dark crimson ink tells me that Neri has been here, and that he's clearly found enjoyment in Starworth Tor's stationery items. Perhaps this is another peace offering.

With the dream still sparkling in my mind, I snatch the letter and lift the flower to my nose. On a deep inhale, I absorb the rose's fragrance which luckily masks the scent of the bread and fruit I have no desire to eat. Was this rose the trigger that unearthed the memory?

I open the note, and the first words take me aback.

*Hello, little bird,*

*You've been asleep since the night before last.*

The night before last? Rubbing my aching temple, I get up and make my way to the window, where I shove open the drapes and squint at the sunlight before taking in the empty beach below. It appears to be midmorning, though an entire day later than I imagined, it seems.

*We're all worried. Yes, even me. Especially me.*

*Should you wake today, I hope you try to eat and continue resting. But stay here at the tor. Tensions are high in the city. Un Drallag and I are still searching for Eryx, and though he's proving more difficult to locate than imagined, we will find him.*

*Hopefully, I'll see you tonight. There are important things you and I need to discuss.*

*Oh, and feel free to burn this note, too, if you so desire. I have an entire desk drawer filled with parchment and ink,*

*and enough persistence and arrogance to write you letters  
for eternity. Try me.*

*Are you still reading this, little bird?  
Your Wolf*

With an annoyed growl, I crumple the parchment in my fist and move to the hearth where a low fire has been kept burning. Every sarcastic syllable in those last words repeats in my head as I toss the note to the flames. I keep the rose, though, holding it firmly between my fingers, careful of the thorns as I bring it back to my nose.

*My wolf.* My pain in the ass is more like it. We are certainly no Cila and Thaddius.

And telling me to stay here? Who does he think he is? He clearly learned nothing from last night. Or the night before. Or two days ago. Gods, whenever it was that we fought in the garden.

I turn back to the window, head still throbbing. I feel like death. *Death that's had a long nap and a healthy dose of determination.*

Because I go where I please. As I please. When I please.

And today, I'm going to see the Memory Catcher.



DETERMINED OR NOT, I DON'T MAKE IT AS FAR AS I'D HOPED.

By the time I reach the bottom of the stairs, I'm dizzy as a drunken goose, and a chilled sweat has broken across my neck. Everything aches again. My face. My teeth. My bones. My skin. I almost push onward regardless, but Mari bursts through the front door with two baskets of jarred food in her arms, her chestnut locks wild around her pretty face.

She glances up at me and startles. "Oh, stars, Miss Nephele. You scared me."

"Forgive me," I say with as much of a smile as I can muster. "Do you need some help?" Carefully, I move down the last few steps and join her, listening to the quiet home. I reach for one of the baskets, but she turns aside.

"It's so good to see you up and about," she says. "Truly. But I was told to

take care of you. Not to put you to work.”

I raise a brow at that. “Told by whom?”

She shrugs. “Everyone, actually. Before they all left for the day. But Mr. Neri was adamant.”

My forced smile tightens. “Well, contrary to what he might believe, *Mr. Neri* is not my master.” I reach for the basket again, and this time she gives up and lets me take it, out of what appears to be a simple lack of knowing what else to do.

And I’m glad. I’m not sure I can make it to Ingrid’s home alone, and I’m not yet brave enough to tempt fate by toying with the sliph of aether upstairs, but if everyone is gone, then there’s a chance I can convince Mari to come with me.

I drag the basket handle over my forearm, doing my best to pretend the weight isn’t about to send me into a tilt from which I can’t recover. “Where to?”

She jerks her head toward the hall. “The kitchen.”



FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE THE WOLF’S RESURRECTION, I’M HUNGRY.

Sipping from a short glass of wine, I watch quietly as Mari chops fresh rosemary and thyme and sprinkles it into a kettle over the fire. This morning, she added the pork belly Harmon butchered and later added other ingredients, like onions, vinegar, and broth. She continues dumping various items into the pot—liquids, spices, and herbs I can’t begin to name.

I’m many things, but a cook is not one of them.

“Is that the same stew from the other day?” I inquire. It doesn’t smell like it.

She shakes her head, stirring the mixture with a wooden spoon. “No, this one is my special recipe. I love making it in the fall and winter. It’s so rich and hearty, and especially good for nourishment.”

I’m glad to see her somewhat at ease now that we’re here. She didn’t know Finn for long, but she seemed to take an immediate liking to him. His loss—along with the stress of everything else happening in her city—has to be difficult.

“Speaking of everyone,” I say, “where are they?”

She taps her spoon on the rim of the pot and sets it aside before grabbing a loaf of bread and a knife. “Well, Vice Admiral Eryx’s guards are helping us now,” she says as she begins cutting thick slices of fresh sourdough atop the counter. “That began this morning. They’re standing watch around the property while your friends rest from staying up last night patrolling the grounds. Zahira and Yaz have gone to meet with some of the lower-level officials they know and trust, to see if they can find someone to lead here once Eryx is removed from office, which will happen sooner than later, we hope. Mr. Neri and Mr. Thibault are out hunting for him.”

“So I heard,” I say as she wipes the crumbs from her hands then turns to taste-test her stew.

“Mmm. So good.” She looks at me from the corner of her eye. “Want some?”

I nod, more emphatically than is normal for me. I don’t know why my appetite has decided to return so suddenly, but as badly as I want to see Ingrid, I don’t rush myself. The aroma isn’t the most pleasant, but there’s a note of something in the air that’s overriding the part of my brain that hasn’t wanted to eat in days. Now, my stomach feels as though it could devour my spine.

When Mari finally slides the steaming dish in front of me, I experience a twinge of nausea, but I push past it and lift a spoonful of the stew to my mouth. It isn’t the most delicious thing I’ve ever eaten, but unlike anything else, save for red wine, it’s palatable. It’s far better than the tisan at Fia’s, good enough that I break apart a piece of sourdough bread and ask Mari to ladle a second helping of the gravy on top.

The stew is gone in an embarrassingly short amount of time. I’m still not well, but I feel ten times better than I did the morning we arrived here. Even the aches and pains from earlier have abated.

Mari takes the dish and dunks it in her wash water. “You already look better, Miss Nephele. Your eyes are brighter. Have you considered taking a swim in the thermal pool? It’s a perfect day for it.”

I dab my mouth with a napkin. “I already feel better. Thank you for the company *and* the fine meal. And... *maybe* on the thermal pool. It wouldn’t hurt to see if it might help.”

Though I doubt a bath in warm algae water can cure a curse cast by a sentient grove.

After a pause, I almost open my mouth to ask her about going into town



with me. But now that I feel so much more like myself, it might be best not to tread that particular territory lest she try to make me stay. Instead, I slip off the stool, hoping I have enough energy to weave a tight enough construct around myself that no one sees me leave this house.

“I think I’ll just go rest,” I tell her.

She reaches for a clean dish from the cupboard and smiles, completely unaware that I’ve just lied to her face. “Wonderful. You made my job easy today.”

Shoving down the sliver of guilt that tries to wedge itself into my gut, I head toward the door that leads to the hall. Out of curiosity though, I pause and turn back.

“Mari, what’s the key to your special recipe?”

She ladles a helping of stew for herself into her waiting dish, picks up a spoon, and takes a healthy bite. Then she says the last word I expect to hear.

“Blood.”



## NEPHELE

**T**he walk into Village Hill isn't as terrible as I imagined. I'm still a little tired and winded, but so much stronger than when I woke up this morning. My witch's marks are concealed save for the silver ones, to help me better blend in.

It's chilly out this late in the day, regardless of the sun still trying to peek through the heavy clouds. A shiver grips me every time a cutting gust blasts from the sea. Thankfully, I threw on a warm, black cloak I found in the back of the wardrobe in my room before leaving the tor. I keep the hood up tight and march on through throngs of Malgros citizens going about their afternoon.

Though he's the last thing I want to think about, reminders of the wolf are everywhere. I hadn't had reason to notice the devoted dedication to Neri in this city the last time I strolled this street with my sister. The blue and white pennon of the God of the North, a symbol I saw often enough growing up in the vale, hangs beside the green and indigo Tiressian flag on nearly every building. Small versions are nailed above many main doors while larger affairs hang from poles mounted to posts, whipping in the wind.

The wolf is a legend here. A long-dead deity still worshiped and revered.

What will these people do when they learn he's here?

As I boldly pass a group of Northland Watch officials and another of the many sentinels on duty along the street, I keep my head down, certain that Alexis will scold me thoroughly for walking into the city alone, no matter how badly he needs to see Ingrid himself. As for the wolf, he almost had me fooled into believing otherwise, but he'll scowl and growl, too, when he finds

out what I've done. And he'll do it in that cocky, beastly way of his, no less.

I don't care what they say, though. It's *my* early years here that have been lost. If I want to seek answers, that's up to me and no one else. It isn't like I don't know how to do so wisely. I'm as prepared as I can be.

My dagger is tucked in my boot, and the stiletto I found in Zahira's weapons room is safely hidden inside my jacket sleeve. I also took a detour into her study. I remembered from days ago where she left the passage papers she acquired for her soon-to-be guests from the Western Drifts, friends who haven't made it here yet. The Watch will likely turn them away at the harbor unless we take the city back from Eryx's hands before they arrive. But at least I'll appear legal if I'm stopped by a guard.

Cresting the hill that overlooks the Malorian Sea, I notice a group of people working in a wide alley near a tavern. They carry rough-hewn tables and chairs through a side door, setting them up outside as though for a party. One woman works at driving freshly made torches in half-barrel planters scattered throughout the alleyway. None of them seems as concerned as many of the other faces I've passed this morning, but I suppose life must go on, even during a coming winter by the sea, and even when living in uncertain times. In all truth, it's actually comforting.

In the next breath, I glance upward and halt, any momentary comfort gone. A wooden sign rocks on its pole over the tavern door. There are no words carved into the wood, only the crude painted and peeling image of a white wolf whose eyes are all but pinned on me.

Another wind tears at my cloak and hood as I keep moving. I catch the hood and tug it back up over my braided hair quickly, hoping that none of our crew from Starworth Tor happen to be in the vicinity, strolling home.

Especially a certain white-haired god.

Even though he's focused on Eryx, I doubt it would take much for Neri to catch my scent, even from a distance. I just don't know how close he has to be before any hopeful anonymity is a lost cause. I won't let that concern deter me, though.

If either of us is the master in this game, it's me.

By the time I turn down the sandy road where Ingrid's tall, crooked home sits nestled between more tall, crooked homes, I find myself wondering how Neri discerns between scents at all. Particularly enough to single out one person amongst thousands and hunt him down. This city is brimming with aromas, fragrances, and even fetid odors. They're strong, often pungent, but

altogether powerful. With every gust, I feel assaulted by the scent-laden air. I can't imagine what the wolf must experience while prowling these streets.

When I reach Ingrid's black door, I clang the knocker numerous times, expecting to be met any moment by either her son or her own stark, white face and those kohl-rimmed green eyes. But no one answers.

I knock again and step back from the home. The mother and son could be anywhere in Malgros.

Sitting on her stoop, I wait for a long while, watching the street as people mill about and the sun begins a slow slink into the horizon. Eventually, a dove flaps into a nearby tree to roost, startling me from my daze.

As the bird coos a sad song, I sigh at the coming dusk. It's hard to walk away after so much effort to get here, and even harder thanks to the dream about my mother. But as the light of day further fades, I get up and decide to start the trek back to the tor.

Then I glance to my left, toward the crying dove. The golden hour's light, dim though it might be, glows against the white stone facade of the Northland Watch's barracks which sit upon a hill. The base's torch lights are being lit for the evening, illuminating the garrison's command post like a beacon.

I remember Ingrid's advice the last time I saw her. If we wanted to unearth memories, we needed to stroll by the barracks and spend time on the beach. We *did* stroll past the command post after leaving her home, but I'd been so distracted by having just learned that I supposedly lived here as a child that I didn't truly attempt to make any sort of connection. Now, I have an entirely different mindset. Gone is the denial. Acceptance has certainly arrived.

But I want answers. And I want more memories.

I reach into my jacket pocket and unfold the passage papers I took from Zahira's office. Papers for one *Gabriella Gusa*, former lieutenant of the *Western Fleet*.

I'm certain I don't look the part. And if I'm questioned, I will undoubtedly encounter trouble. But I turn down the road and make my way to the Northland Watch's barracks anyway, a dove singing at my back.



“PAPERS?”

With my cloak closed tight against the wind, I hand over what I have to the guard at the barracks' main gate. Lanterns burn on either side of the window he leans through, helping him see against the falling light as he inspects the details.

"The Western Fleet? What business do you have here?"

I concentrate on maintaining the glamour I'm barely holding onto and dig up the name Fia provided in her meeting hall. "Admiral Castalan is here to meet with your leadership. I'm just part of the convoy. We're being put up in Brear Hall, but I thought I'd stop by the barracks to see a friend."

He arches a brow and looks over the papers again. "I've heard nothing about Castalan being here."

There are two types of military personnel currently inhabiting this city. One is filled with people like the guards back at the tor who simply want their city back and hope that war never touches their shores.

But there are others, too. I don't know their number, but some believe we're better together, even if that means uniting with a force like the East. They can't see past the idea of the Tiressian flag that hangs above their doors, of a unified empire.

I want unity as well, but not at the cost of living under the Prince of the East's or Thamaos's rule. We don't yet know what Thamaos has in store, but it has not escaped me that he's done all of this for a reason, one that I'm certain has to do with more than just exacting revenge on my sister.

As for this particular guard, I can't know which way he leans. One wrong word could shift the tide quite quickly.

I just shrug and decide to feign stupid. "You know how things are. We're often the last to know."

Unexpectedly, he reaches out and jerks my cloak open, revealing the absence of a uniform beneath. His eyes narrow.

Before he can say anything, I lean in and add as much coldness to my voice as I can. "Listen. I'm here on business for Castalan and Eryx. Hold me up one more minute. I dare you."

In the short moments after that, I wonder if this is worth the risk. If I'll recall anything at all about my childhood by being here. Anything that truly matters to my life in the here and now. Something whispers to my soul that it *does* matter, though. Something that says I need to be here.

I'm not given further time to contemplate my choices, because the guard returns my papers. "Enjoy your time, lieutenant." He nods me onward.

“Visiting hours end at midnight.”

I 7





## NERI

**T**he moment Thibault and I enter the front door of Starworth Tor, I know that Nephele isn't here. Her telltale scent normally drenches the air like liquid sugar, making my mouth water. Tonight, though I can tell everyone else is here, I only pick up the slightest ghost of her fragrance.

The witch who runs the house—Mari—appears at the end of the hall near the entryway, checking to see who has arrived. Wiping her hands on her apron, she smiles warmly, if nervously.

"How's Nephele?" Thibault inquires.

He unties his black cloak and hangs it by the door, paying me no mind as I stand stock-still in the entryway. Every muscle in my body tightens as I sniff the empty air.

"She's still resting. I just looked in on her about a half hour ago." I hear the innocence in her words, that she believes them to be true. "She *did* wake up, though. Earlier." The young woman's grin spreads proudly. "Even ate an entire bowl of pork stew and bread, which I have plenty of. Some of the others are eating now if either of you would like to join them for a warm meal."

"Maybe later," Thibault replies. "But in case I don't see you again tonight, thank you for caring for Nephele."

As he turns for the stairs, I note the distance in his eyes, a reflection of his occupied mind.

"Oh, Mr. Thibault!" the girl calls.

He pauses, hand on the newel post.

"Harmon was able to retrieve the books you requested from the archives.

I left them by your door.”

He presses a hand to his chest and inclines his head. “Thank you again, Mari. You’ve been so helpful.” A curious glint lights his eyes. “Can you keep an eye on Nephele tonight? And see to it that I’m not disturbed?”

Pressing her hands together, Mari squares her shoulders with new purpose, eager to help. “Of course, sir. Absolutely.”

And with that, Thibault begins steadily stamping up the stairs.

We’ve spent too much time together, because thanks to our brittle and meager conversations, I know he’s bitter that he hasn’t had much time to foolishly seek a route to reach his woman, and that the bond they share might be alive, but it’s silent. He’s also pissed that another day has gone by without any sign of Gavril, not to mention that no matter how hard I try to track him, and no matter what lead we follow, Eryx still roams free, a willing vessel for Thamaos should my old brother god decide to use him.

Which, he will. We just don’t know when.

Blood rising, I follow behind Thibault. He bends and lifts the stack of tomes by his door, no doubt for research on the phenomenon that stole Raina Bloodgood, then slips into his bedchambers and slams the door with his foot. I sense trouble, but I have other things to deal with right now.

I head straight for Nephele’s room. It’s dark, save for the warm light of a dying fire. The tray of food and note I left for her are gone. The rose is still on her nightstand, however, tilting in a slender vase.

At a glance, the mound under the covers nearby looks like a person cuddled beneath the blankets. But I can smell the ruse for what it really is.

That little trickster.

I scrape my hand over my face and glance around. If she were down at the beach or even in the gardens or lighthouse, none of this would’ve been necessary. Which means she went somewhere she shouldn’t have.

My gaze snags on a slip of linen sticking out from beneath her pillow. I cross the room and pull it free.

Her sleeping gown.

Shaking my head at her poor attempt at deception, I press the garment to my nose and take a deep breath. Not because I need the reminder of what her skin smells like, but to fully awaken my wolf who had fallen asleep after a long day and jostled to life when I walked through the door downstairs. I’ve been hunting for two days, but it’s time to change the animal I’m tracking, I suppose. And to hunt alone. Thibault would want to know Nephele’s

whereabouts, but tonight's confrontation needs to be between her and me.

There's just one issue. Sifting is growing ever more problematic. So much so that Thibault and I walked home tonight because *I wanted to enjoy the chilly air*. He seemed to question my excuse, but I couldn't care. The last time I sifted us, I left a trail of aether in my wake, lucky he was too hyper focused on finding Eryx to notice. The last thing I need right now, days before I must carry his lover's sister north, is for Thibault to witness this weakness living within me and question my ability. But I don't hesitate to use that ability now.

I summon the wind and aether, relieved when it finally arrives and carries me into the city.



## NEPHELE

I stand in front of a door to an apartment that used to be my home, the past beating inside me like a frantic second heartbeat.

I don't remember everything. I don't know if I ever will. But the mysterious mental barricade that has hidden the first eight years of my life seems to be crumbling, enough that I can now glimpse a forgotten life between the cracks.

My heart is torn between relief and discontent as I cast a glance down the quiet hall where another familiar door awaits. A door that isn't a door at all anymore, though I'm certain one used to be there. Now, there's simply a dingy white plastered wall. White and plain as everything else here.

I'd recognized this austere, sun-bleached building the moment I turned the curve on the gravel road that cuts up the hill between the first and second battalion's barracks. I knew this was where we'd lived, even through the filter of falling darkness. It's the same as all the buildings in the garrison, save for that one missing window, right in the center of the top floor. To most eyes, it simply looks like a mistake. Like they forgot a window when they erected these barracks.

I was apparently as curious about it as a child as I am now. When I saw my old home upon approach tonight, I remembered how it always caught my eye, such an incongruence in an otherwise congruent place. My little mind imagined all manner of scenarios for what lurked in the space behind that wall. Sometimes, I would even point to it when Mother let me carry Raina on my hip, trying to show my baby sister the oddity, searching for any mystery I could find in our quaint, military seaside life.

Clear as the water along the shore, I remember my father holding my hand as we walked home one evening after a day of fishing. I'd asked him why that one window was missing, because there was something about it I didn't like. Something that scared me.

Father stopped and knelt before me on the road, his blue eyes meeting mine. "There's nothing to fear here, Pelly. That's just a secret room up there. Our secret. A place filled with lovely things from many lands. It's magickal. Don't fear it."

I'd frowned at that because if there was a magickal room in our barracks, with lovely things inside no less, I wanted to see it. And I told him so.

But Father just kissed my forehead, and with a sweet smile, he said, "One day, Pel. When the time is right, one day."

I stroll down the hall where the door to that room used to exist and run my hand along the rough plaster. I don't remember when the doorway stopped being here, but it seems no one has noticed or cared enough since we left Malgros to see what might exist behind this wall.

If Neri's sliph of aether wasn't in my other jacket back at the tor, I might be curious enough to try and use it to get inside. But it *is* back at the tor, and I am not, and I'm fully aware of the late hour. There's a wolf and a sorcerer who will likely come looking for me if I don't make my way back now if they aren't searching for me already.

At least I remembered something. There might be nothing here at all. Nothing but an empty, rotting space.

But I'm not a helpless little girl anymore. Now I'm a witch with a god under her command.

And a way to get inside that room.



AT THE BOTTOM OF THE BARRACKS' STAIRS, I THROW UP MY HOOD AND PUSH through the heavy wooden door into the cold, blustery night. Down the way, the mess hall doors bang open, spilling laughter and voices and military folk into the darkness. With the sound of clinking mugs at my back, I start down the rocky hill, avoiding the busier road.

Though the wind is bitter, people are everywhere. Groups of young men on their way into the city for the night. Families heading home with food

from the market. Lovers strolling in their cloaks and gloves, holding hands as they walk in clouds of their own breath. For a moment, I consist of nothing but memories. They rush through my mind, simple moments shared on these very grounds with the people I have loved most in my life.

Taking a deep drink of night air, I pause and let the memories linger as long as they can, as if the cold might solidify the remembrance. The flood of recollection soon passes, though. When it does, I tuck my head further into my hood and move toward the main gate where members of the Watch funnel into the city.

Trying to remain uninteresting and unnoticeable, I fall in step behind a small cluster of five men, though I keep my distance. The one in the middle is tugging on his gloves.

This crew seems different. More formal than everyone else here. Their cloaks, boots, and swords are nondescript, the same as every other member of the Watch. But the way they move belies their exterior presentation. Four of the men flank the one in the middle, walking with rigid postures, their hands on their hilts. Always a single step behind, as though in respect.

They also carry the scent of sandalwood soap and sweet, earthy cologne. Or at least one of them does. It's the man in the center, I think. The one who moves like Colden. I can't see his face because they're all hooded and swallowed by darkness, but even if not for the clear protection of an entourage, his long-legged strut and square, strong shoulders speak of someone with rank or power. A commander or captain, perhaps.

Or maybe a vice admiral.

My theory that he's someone of importance is proved when we near the torchlit gate. Every sentry on duty stiffens and salutes, though they're quickly and quietly scolded and fall at ease.

As the troop lingers, chatting closely with the guards, I drop back to the shadows. The man in the middle turns a look over his shoulder, just the slightest, and I glimpse his sharply angled profile in the warm light.

It means nothing, though. He could be anyone.

Once they finally pass, I tighten my glamour and step before the gate, meeting the eyes of the sentry who questioned me earlier. I'm instantly allowed to pass with a wave of his hand. It happens so quickly and far more easily than I expected, but I take the win and continue following the men out of sheer curiosity. I'm going this way regardless.

Soon, we blend into the crowds heading toward Village Hill. I'm thankful

for the heat our walk has generated inside me. I've grown a little weaker since Mari's meal, but I feel renewed vigor after everything that's happened today. Somehow, I still feel half-alive, which is far better than the *absolutely dead* situation I endured over the last few days.

I swallow hard. I suppose I'm going to need Mari's pork blood stew recipe.

It doesn't take long before we're on the main road, surrounded by gaiety and notes of distant music floating in the air.

A choice arrives when the guards ahead of me shepherd the one man into the White Wolf tavern. I remember seeing people setting up for what appeared to be a party, and that party is now in full swing, not only inside the tavern but outside as well. In the alley, fires burn in steel barrels for warmth, while torches flicker against the wind that's partially blocked off by a makeshift knee wall. There are people in the street too, bundled together, half-drunk and laughing.

At the corner of the building, I pause, unsure of what to do next. The chances that this mysterious man is Vice Admiral Eryx are slim. If he was at the barracks all this time, Neri would've sniffed him out already. If it *is* him, then there's a greater force at work here. A force that guided me to the barracks in the first place.

And that is the thought that makes up my mind.

When I enter the crowded two-story tavern, I'm instantly met by an array of aromas and people, very few of them pleasant. The more uncouth members of the Northland Watch are clearly the primary clientele here, but there are plenty of civilians occupying tables, corners, and walls as well. People are drinking and laughing, kissing and teasing, playing cards and throwing darts.

But it isn't so innocent. The White Wolf is a rather bawdy place, which would probably make Neri quite happy to learn. The musician of the night stands near the hearth singing about a beautiful maiden sucking his lonely cock, all while two men in a nearby corner grind their hips against a lustful-faced woman, then drag her out the side door that leads to the alley.

I lower my hood and work through the cramped tavern toward the bar, scanning the room as I slip onto an empty stool. I know the men I followed are here, somewhere, but they had to have already removed their cloaks because there isn't a hooded or cloaked man in sight.

When the greasy, bulbous-nosed barkeep notices me, I lift a finger and



ask for red wine, partly to look like I belong here, but also because my body is beginning its incessant craving again.

I almost expect the man to laugh me into the street, but he gives me an appreciative glance instead, then turns toward an oaken cask and opens the spigot over a mug. I don't miss the way he leers at me when he slides the wine into my waiting hand, but I focus on my drink and ignore him.

It isn't long before I've finished the short pour, so I ask for another. Longer this time. While I wait, a loud *hurrah* sounds at the rear of the tavern. I peer that way, only to see a man burying his face in the rather ample cleavage of a laughing woman's overflowing bosom.

"Is it always like this?" I ask the rather rugged, unmarked woman beside me.

"Most of the time," she answers with a huff of a laugh. "But one of the commanders married tonight, so it seems the entire Watch decided to show up for the reception and drain the city of its ale."

Ah. Perhaps the man I saw was Eryx, then. Here for a friend's celebration.

As I return to searching faces, I lift my refilled mug of wine. The moment the tin rim touches my lips, the scent of sandalwood soap mingled with earthy, sea-salt cologne clogs my nostrils.

I stiffen and steady my mug as a line of men push past behind us, bumping and jostling everyone seated around the bar as they head toward the stairs. Even amid the revelry, all eyes seem to hang on the quintet, at least for a spared glance.

Four of the men linger near the first-floor landing like the guards they are, but one—a lethally handsome man with smooth, black hair, crystal blue eyes, and faint silver witch's marks—is met on the fourth tread by a beautiful woman and an attractive man, both wearing carnal smiles. He kisses them in greeting, though the kisses are lush and slow, far more sensual than a casual hello. I'm not surprised when they take his hands and lead him further up the stairs.

Again, I lean over to the woman beside me as the barkeep pours her another mug of ale. "Who was that man? The dark-haired one?"

Instead of a verbal answer, she gives me a look of warning and shakes her head, her eyes darting toward the barkeep, then to the stairs.

It has to be Eryx. *Has* to be. He doesn't know it, but his inability to keep his cock in his pants just got him captured.

Discreetly, I tug the leather band from my braided hair and loosen my locks. I'm not the best at seduction, but I've learned how to be persuasive.

I slip off my stool, untying my tunic, and feel for the pendant hanging around my neck. Neri will probably burst into this tavern the moment I call for him through the remnant of his heart, eyes glowing like a demon. If he does, things could go sideways quickly, so I have to be smart. I don't want Eryx or anybody else here dead. We need to question the vice admiral and weed out the snakes that have lurked in Malgros for too long.

So I head toward the stairs, quickly working the stiletto hidden in my sleeve into my hand, just in case. It'll be much easier and much safer for everyone if I summon Neri to a tavern bedchambers than into the crowded tavern itself. I just need to get past Eryx's men first.

I don't make it far enough to get the chance.

"Grab her," a gruff voice shouts over the din. I'm quickly hauled by random tavern-goers back to the bar, where the barkeep looms over the wooden counter wearing a red-faced scowl. He seizes my wrist and jerks me forward, wrenching my torso over the bar. "You didn't pay, girlie." Spittle flies as he breathes like some sort of ale creature in my face.

I pat my pocket for coin, but I must've left my pouch on the dressing table. "I can come back tomorrow with payment. I simply forgot. I'm not from here."

He crooks a bushy eyebrow at that. "They don't pay for things in your land?"

"Of course, but..." I groan and jerk against his grip to no avail. I can't tell him that in Winterhold, my money is typically no good. Something about being his king's right-hand woman and all.

Those beady, bloodshot eyes drift down to my untied tunic. My breasts are small, but twisted over the bar as I am, their swells bulge from my stays.

"I got lots of ways you can pay, pretty." He ogles the barest glimpse of nakedness I have to offer. "But I think I'll take you on your knees. Right here behind the bar."

The stiletto in my grip tempts me to bury it in his temple. He's fucking up everything, all by being a grimy little prig, the bastard.

Before I can decide what to do, the night takes a drastic turn. The remnant against my chest warms as a frigid wind rips through the tavern, blowing my hood over my head. The wind makes every tabletop lantern flicker. Some even blow out completely, casting corners in deep shadows.

But it's the slamming of the heavy wooden door that rattles the paintings on the walls and brings everyone to a standstill.

The music stops. The laughter dies. The chattering ceases. And all eyes turn toward the unmistakable presence looming at my back.

There's a wolf in our midst. And he is seething.



## NEPHELE

**M**y back is to the tavern door, and my hood is still up, blessedly hiding my hair. My mental shields are in place, too, though I can sense they're not as strong as they could be. Still, there's a foolish moment when I entertain the idea that maybe Neri can't detect me. Can't scent me over the sour, sweaty stench of ale and raw sex saturating the air. But I quickly accept that notion for the absurdity it is.

Because I know he hunted me down.

Slow, heavy footfalls sound behind me, the squelch of leather on creaking floorboards.

"You should let me go now if you want to live," I whisper to the barkeep, glancing at the meaty hand so firmly wrapped around my wrist.

He keeps his eyes trained over my shoulder, his glassy gaze growing braver and harder with every passing second.

Neri's dominating presence and heat are suddenly at my back, mere inches away. My stomach clenches as I feel him lean down and press his nose against my hood, just before he inhales deeply.

"Always such a naughty girl," he whispers.

With an annoyed sigh at my ear, he pulls back and directs his voice to the barkeep. "If you don't take your hand off the lady, you pathetic sack of horse shit, they will find your flesh and bones scattered across this city come dawn's first light."

The man scoffs and gives Neri a poorly timed and measuring once-over. "And just who do you think you are?"

Neri grabs the man's wrist and squeezes until he lets go of me.

The crush of bones that ensues is horrific. I gasp as the cringe-inducing noise crunches and crackles through the tavern. The man's mouth falls agape, and his knees give, a second before he howls in utter agony.

Neri eases me aside, takes the man's throat in a massive claw-tipped hand, and slams the side of his head against the bar top, pinning him there.

"Who do I think I am?" He growls a guttural animal sound that belongs in the deepest, darkest wilds of Frostwater Wood, not inside a Malgrosian tavern. Then he looks up at the faces staring back at him in shock and fear, his eyes glowing like orbs of sunlight from beneath his cowl, his fangs descending like blades. "I'm your motherfucking god," he says. "That's who I am."

Clusters of people tear out of the tavern in a blur, including the barkeep, clutching his arm, his face a mask of terror. Others stare wide-eyed at Neri, their half-drunk and blinking gazes shadowed with awe and disbelief at the creature before them, as though this might be a trick of their ale-addled minds.

Two of the guards waiting at the bottom of the stairs for the man I believe to be Eryx rush to the second floor, likely to alert him, while another reaches for his sword, holding it aloft.

Neri straightens and pierces the guard with an icy look, shaking his head slowly. "Don't be a fucking idiot. I'll roast you over a spit, on your own sword, no less."

The man wisely lowers his weapon, the fear inside the tavern palpable, thick enough to breathe. Everyone is too scared to move.

Neri rips a flag dedicated to his honor from the wall and climbs atop the bar in a far too graceful movement. He shoves his hood back, revealing his stark, white hair. He's so big it feels like he's everywhere, a hulk of a god who happens to look like a wolf.

"My name is Neri, God of the North." He holds the blue and white silk flag in his fist up in the air for all to see. "When you leave this place, tell everyone you know that the White Wolf has returned from the grave, but so has Thamaos." He turns in a circle, meeting their eyes. "War is coming. A war the North cannot escape. A war of the gods, no less. So go and prepare your people accordingly. Take back your city from the hands that would see you ruled by the East. Take back your ships and your harbor and your city wall and your command post. Take back everything. You are fucking Northlanders! Witch Walkers! Our land is the land of the white wolf who

*forever* roams free. Do not let the enemy make you a prisoner in your own territory. Bear your claws, your teeth, your rage. And fight against Eryx. Against the Prince of the East. Against Thamaos.”

Adrenaline floods my blood as I stare up at him, rendered breathless by his emphatic speech and perhaps a little bit enamored, much like the others still left in the tavern. But any admiration I might feel quickly dissolves as the dark-haired man, along with his guards, comes racing down the stairs.

“I think that’s Eryx,” I say, tugging at Neri’s trouser leg to get his attention.

But he’s already tracking the familiar scent, twisting toward the half-dressed man who stands paused on the stairs. “So it is.”

A sick feeling turns my stomach as I grip the stiletto still in my hand. This could end in an unnecessary bloodbath. And if it does, what will the people think of Neri then? Will they still see him as a god deemed fit for flags and worship halls? Or will he become the god that legend has tried so hard to turn into a monster?

Eryx’s eyes go wide with the same disbelief radiating from everyone else, but in the next heartbeat, he smiles, the action absolutely menacing. “Neri. I heard you’d be coming.”

“Did you, now?” Neri says, bearing his fangs. “Did you also hear that I don’t necessarily *want* to kill you, vice admiral, but I will, and I don’t require much reason beyond the one you’ve already provided, you traitor.”

“I think you might be outnumbered, my lord,” Eryx says as one dark, perfectly shaped brow rises toward his hairline. “A beast and one talented witch won’t be enough to stand in our way.” His gaze slides to me. “You can let your glamour down. I can see right through it.”

I startle at that, but I note the witch’s marks on the wedge of skin visible through his shirt. Faint silver is all I see, but there’s clearly more to Eryx than meets the eye.

Uncertainty glimmers Eryx’s men’s eyes as they study Neri, their minds no doubt racing with every story and legend they’ve ever been told about the God of the North, good and bad. But though uncertain they might be, at Eryx’s signal, the guards tear their swords from their scabbards, metal ringing through the tavern. Another dozen guards scattered throughout the building do the same, showing their union with Eryx, surrounding us.

I shove the stiletto back into my sleeve and jump up on the bar top with Neri, gripping his huge arm. “Wolf, we can’t do this. Get us out of here.

Right now.”

His eyes flare at my command, and his tone is sharp and admonishing when he bites out my name. “Nephele, you cannot order me to stand down. I’ve been hunting this bastard for two days.”

“Yes, I can!” I move my hand from his arm to clutch at his tunic. “There must be a different way. I’m *ordering* you to find a different way.”

I’m fully aware that once seventeen guards attack, Neri will fight back like the beast he is, especially with me here, and it won’t be pretty.

He isn’t a bit happy about it. In fact, worry etches his features into harder lines. But he jerks me close with a low growl of displeasure regardless, just as a chill wind blasts the tavern door open and sparkling frost surges into the building in thin streams, wrapping around us like an icy fist.

Everyone on the floor shields their faces as I sense the sifting begin. That first second when the world beneath my feet vanishes.

The last thing I see before I shut my eyes is Eryx and his men lunging for us, just as the aether swallows us whole.



“WELL, FUCK.”

At the sound of Neri’s voice, I blink open my eyes and stare up into his golden gaze. Then I look around, baffled.

We’re in the godsdamn alley. In a corner near the entrance at the main road.

“What did you do?” I scold, keeping my voice down, even though the minstrel is strumming and singing loudly enough nearby to drown me out. “This is not the tor!”

The wolf tosses up his hood, which had blown down, then yanks mine over my head again. He otherwise ignores me and cocks his ear. “Eryx and his men are headed this way. Come on.”

With his claws retracted, he grabs my hand and drags me deeper into the lover-infested wedding celebration taking place there. My pulse kicks up as we work through the writhing masses, but the partygoers are thankfully too preoccupied with their beer and each other’s bodies to notice our intrusion.

Someone—an older gentleman—slurs something about the God of the North coming back from the dead as we pass, but his friend just lets out a



hearty guffaw, slaps the man on his shoulder, and says, “You’ve had one too many tankards tonight, old friend.”

As though everything that just happened inside the tavern was a drunken dream.

Neri quickens his steps and guides me through people and tables, past one of several steel barrels where flames burn high, warming the entire alleyway. He suddenly halts and tugs me close, glancing right and left before walking me backward until I’m pressed between him and the tavern’s stone wall.

“Kiss me.” He flattens one hand on the building and curls over me to make himself smaller. “Like you mean it.”

I press my spine harder against the rough stones, anything to put distance between us, and contort my face into a disgusted scowl. “I’d rather let them kill me.”

He growls deep in his chest as angry voices drift from nearby, voices heading toward the alley. “They’re hunting for us, so they very well might,” he warns. “Now stop lying through your teeth and kiss me, woman. And be convincing about it.”

I’m struck with a sudden urge to both obey him and throttle him. It makes me check my mental wards because I do *not* need him in my head right now.

The moment I realize the wards are indeed intact, if a little flimsy, I consider forming a quick shielding construct around us. But if Eryx can see through glamours, there’s a good chance my construct will only become a beacon screaming our whereabouts.

“Just sift us back to the tor!” I whisper-shout, stomping my foot, not unlike the petulant child the wolf thinks I am.

I can see that he tries. Once. Twice. But a strange and foreign expression falls over his face. One I’ve never seen him wear before.

A mask of indignity.

“It seems I can’t.” Irritation drenches his words. “I can’t sift.”

After a small and even more confused shake of my head, I gape at him. “What do you mean you can’t sift?”

“I. Don’t. Know. What I *do* know is that you can either kiss me so that we blend in, and Eryx and his men overlook us, or you’re going to have the blood of one bitch of a massacre on your hands. Because I will not hesitate a second time. If I could sift, I could get us and Eryx back to the tor in a heartbeat and be done with this. But I can’t. So if they come for us, and if they attack, which they will, I will have no choice but to rip those men apart.”

“Fucking devils,” I grumble, but the voices get louder and closer.

I grab the front of Neri’s cloak, and after one more second of deliberation, jerk him down, tilting my head up as our mouths collide.

Gods, I expect to hate it. To despise myself for this. To despise him even more so. I also wait for the onslaught to come, expecting his kiss to be as brutal and rough as he is. Though I remember his soothing touch far too well, the press of his lips on my thigh, I tell myself that it was for show. That gods can’t really be gentle or tender or sensual, or any of a hundred other words I don’t want to attach to the Wolf of the North, no matter what he’s shown me so far.

But instead of mauling me, he pulls back, just for a moment, tracing his thumb over my lips before meeting my gaze. Softer than a beast has any right to, he takes my chin in his hand, his eyes alight, the molten gold of his irises swirling, hypnotizing. His fangs retract a little, becoming slightly less terrifying, yet just as erotic.

“This is my first kiss in three hundred years,” he reminds me. “I don’t care what’s happening around us. I mean to enjoy it.”

When he lowers his head again, my pulse thunders. I swallow hard, expectant, though of what I’m no longer sure. Certainly not the exquisite taste of him or the way his kiss is a languid, torturous perusal, as though we’ve time to learn one another so intimately. We don’t.

I let him try, though.

How easily I forget about the horde looking for us and instead become hyper-aware of the fullness of the wolf’s lips, the lushness of his tongue as it slides across the entrance to my mouth. I let him trace every curve with precision, let him nip my bottom lip with a fang, and suck the wounded flesh into his mouth.

We both rouse and moan at the thin, metallic taste of my blood slipping between us. It’s such a small taste. A single drop. And yet it’s overwhelming, such a powerful thing to share, that my nipples harden, my clit aches, and I feel like I can soar.

Our kiss turns hungrier as he parts my lips and slips his tongue inside, stroking with silky, velvet softness. I meet him stroke for stroke, taste for taste, moaning quietly, a needy whimper. The result is Neri’s ragged growl, a sound that speaks of aching, a sound that sends a shiver through my bones and even more desire rushing to my core.

Oh, how I want to curse him back to the Nether Reaches. Because just

like that, making him earn *anything* when it comes to me is a forgotten task. Because I'm utterly, completely, stupidly intoxicated by him.

Neri slips his hand inside my cloak and closes his grip around my ribcage, his thumb brushing back and forth along the curve of my breast. Possessively, he tugs me flush against him. His body is big and warm, the hard planes of muscle a wonder beneath my roaming touch.

Slowly, he breaks the kiss and takes a harsh breath of night air.

"Convincing enough?" I ask, arching a challenging brow.

He shakes his head, a smile hidden inside his deep voice. "I think you could use a little more work."

I close the distance between us, and when his tongue slides into my mouth, I suck, all while rubbing my fingertips down his thigh, dangerously close to something I know he wants me to touch.

"Careful, witch," he says when our mouths separate. "I bite. Hard. And I'll do it right here. Don't think I won't."

"I'm not scared of you," I whisper, and like the idiot I am, drag him back down, guiding his hungry mouth to mine once again, even as I hear Eryx's mob passing by, on the prowl for a witch and her beast.

A sound more animal than man rumbles out of Neri when I flick my tongue purposefully against the sharp tip of his fang. He closes his fingers around my wrists and hooks them behind his head.

"I don't want your fear, Nephele." Eyes shadowed with lust, he folds his arms around me and gathers me into a lover's embrace. "I want your surrender."

He kisses me again, and it is utterly maddening. I can't think around his gentle yet thorough invasion, the big hands cupping and kneading my ass, the rigid cock pressing against my stomach. His kiss is a slow devouring, his tongue learning me, exploring me, opening me.

And I let him.

If this isn't surrender, I don't know what is.

When he presses his knee between my legs and pushes my thighs apart, I don't resist. And when he slips his hand to the gathered heat there, teasing the dampened seam of my trousers, I stroke myself against his come-hither touch.

Drawing back, he glances down between us, watching as I roll my hips to the steady tempo of his hungry fingers. I'm already clay in his hands, but when he stares into my eyes, lifts his fingers to his nose, and inhales deeply,

my toes curl in my boots. I melt into him, like candle wax forced to soften beneath the growing heat of a new flame.

“You’re going to taste so fucking good, little bird.” His eyes flutter closed for the briefest moment, but his face soon goes dark with want. “I can take you right now. It’ll be a hard, fast fuck. Or we can walk back to the tor, close ourselves off in my room, and take our time destroying one another all night. Or both. Your choice.”

My heart lurches with stupid anticipation, and I swear to the gods, I am so drunk off him I could almost turn around, unlace my pants, and let him have me. A part of me wants to be just as indecent as everyone else in this alley tonight. But if we walk back to the tor, what are the chances we won’t encounter Eryx?

Still clutching his cloak, I press my forehead against his chest, trying to breathe and think and settle the fuck down. But my attention snags on something. A glint of silver on the ground.

A little puddle of aether.

The primordial substance I still don’t truly understand slowly drips from the air around Neri, settling into the cracks between the cobbles. I’m certain that is not a good thing.

Wordless, I slide my back down the wall, hands hiding down his powerful thighs as I squat to gather some of the aether under the cover of my billowed cloak. Neri would stop me if he knew what I was doing, but he’s so consumed right now, eyes wildly curious and locked with mine, especially given that I’m currently at eye level with the bulging cock straining against his leather britches.

“I have a trick to show you,” I tell him, licking my lips for the perfect distraction.

He laughs, a small, sensual sound. “Please do.”

With the aether squirming in my hand, I stand back up. Neri’s expression changes from guarded excitement to guarded bewilderment as I fold my arms around his neck and press my body against his.

Those strong hands grip my waist just as I rise on tiptoe, press my mouth against his ear, and say, “Close your eyes, wolf. And take a deep breath.”

The world drops out from under us, and I hear him gasp.

Then we’re gone.



## NERI

**T**he instant Nephele and I arrive back at the tor, I smell Thibault.

He's sitting on the bottom tread of the staircase, knees resting on his elbows, rubbing his hands together like a worried parent waiting for their child to come home after dark.

Nephele doesn't see him when she first opens her eyes, which is unfortunate, because she's still holding onto me, still pressed against me tight, staring up at me with such wonder.

And such raw desire.

She opens her mouth to say something to me, but Thibault speaks first.

"Have you any idea how worried I've been?"

Taken off guard, Nephele yelps and shoves away from me like my skin is scalding. "Fuck, Alexis, don't do that."

Discreetly, she slips her closed fist under her cloak, and it returns open, fingers loose.

But I saw what she's trying to hide. Just a glimpse of silver.

Silver that isn't a blade.

Thibault lifts a brow, his face all tempered fury. "Do what? Worry about you? You made it appear like you were asleep, and yet you were gone." The muscle in his jaw works. "Do you know the shit that went through my mind, Nephele? The fear? And yet you were with Neri, of all people, for a night out in Malgros. I thought you were ill."

"I am," she snaps. "I mean, I was. I mean, *I am*." She frowns, her brow drawing down with frustration and guilt. "And that's not fair. I went into the city to see Ingrid earlier because I felt better than I had in days. Then I went

to the barracks to see my old home, which was a shockingly informative and fortuitous visit. Later, Neri tracked me down because yes, I left without asking and without telling anyone, and he figured me out. But I'm a grown woman, Alexis. I'm tired of the men in my life treating me like I'm not. And this" —she gestures between us— "isn't what you think."

His green gaze slides to me. Down to my straining and quite obvious erection that would probably already be buried inside Nephele if she'd just sifted us to my godsdamn bedchambers instead of this wretched foyer.

With a scoff, Thibault's eyes return to Nephele who no doubt tracked his attention the same as I did. "Oh," he says in response. "I somehow think it is."

Her beautiful face flushes pink with heat, and I grit my teeth together, finding it excruciatingly difficult to keep my mouth shut. To let this conversation exist between them alone. To be the silent man she needs. It's even more difficult to strip off my cloak, step past Thibault, and leave them to talk about what went down tonight with Eryx without my presence.

But the look on Nephele's face...

I can see the entreaty in her eyes, and as though that isn't enough, her mental wards fall.

*"I'll explain everything tomorrow. I promise. But for now, give us time. Please."*

And so I do.



I DON'T SLEEP. BUT THEN AGAIN, I RARELY EVER HAVE.

I try, though, because I think the human part of my body might need rest to correct the problem with the aether. But all I can think about is Nephele and what we left unfinished in the alley by the White Wolf tavern.

So I finish it myself, as best I can under the dim light of a low fire.

Naked and throbbing, I prop up on pillows in my bed and spit into the palm of my hand. The contact of my grip feels so good I instantly relax. But a hand will never be the same as a woman, especially after all this time.

So I close my eyes and imagine it's Nephele instead. Her soft hand stroking. Her lush mouth sucking. Her wet pussy gliding up and down, stretched tight around my rigid cock. I picture her spread out before me like a

feast, gripping my hair in her fists as I lick her until she's panting and begging and coming on my tongue.

Aching for her, I lift the fingers of my free hand to my nose as I pump with the other. I can still scent her pussy, so much better than before. She carries a divine, sweet musk between those legs, a musk I'm not sure I'll ever get enough of.

When I come, the release almost buries me all over again. I smother my grunts and moans in a pillow, biting my teeth into the down. My muscles strain and jerk against the soul-clenching spasms that don't relent for long minutes as ropes of cum mark my stomach and chest over and over again.

I don't forget anything, but I've forgotten the intensity of rapture. Time dulls the sharpest edges of memory for everyone. Even gods. Even memories of how euphoric an orgasm can truly be.

But now I fucking remember, and it only makes me want Nephele Bloodgood that much more.



"IT'S GOOD. I PROMISE."

Nephele and I sit at a small table in a cozy room I've never seen before here at Starworth Tor. It's a reading room with deep green walls covered with shelves of books and painted flowers. A large window overlooks the rose garden, but our view is of another gray, rainy seaside day. The frigid downpours that rolled in early this morning have been so heavy and constant that returning to the barracks to look for Eryx, which is where Nephele believes him to be hiding, needs to wait. There's no scent outside save for that of rain and sea.

I lift my eyes from the bowl of steaming, brown sludge she's served me. "Can I be honest?"

"Of course."

"I'm thrilled you're feeling better, and that your appetite has returned. Truly. But I don't eat." I give her a lascivious waggle of my brows. "Food, that is."

She lifts a spoonful of the stew in question and pauses at her mouth, the apples of her cheeks reddening even though she ignores my last words. "Ever? Not even humans roasted on a spit?"



A one-sided smile tugs my lips at her reference to last night. "Not unless I'm brutally wounded, and this body needs a little extra care to thoroughly heal. Then I can eat just about anything."

"You just came out of the grave. I would say that's enough justification for feeding yourself. What's that saying? Your body is a temple?"

As I spread my napkin across my lap, I stifle a laugh. "I treated mine like a temple last night. Worshiped it like a god. Three times, in fact."

Nephele swallows thickly, gaze locked with mine. "I knew you were awfully chipper for some reason."

Her wards are up and tightly woven today, but I can see thoughts flashing across her eyes.

"I could be happier, believe me. I'd hoped you would join me."

She looks down at her stew, her voice a shade different. "I won't say the thought didn't enter my mind."

"And yet you chose against it."

"Yes. My talk with Alexis was... tense. To say the least. Bit of a mood killer."

"And now you have to talk to me."

That's why we're here, anyway. A few hours after revealing her thoughts on Eryx's whereabouts to me and Thibault, and that perhaps we could reach him without civilian involvement, she knocked on my door and asked if I'd have lunch with her so we could have that talk she mentioned last night. I wouldn't have turned down an offer to dine with her even if she were serving duck liver. Which I hate.

She sets her spoon down and props her elbows on the table. "Yes, I do. I promised. So where to begin?"

I'm a bit taken aback by how cordial she's being. I'd expected regret. Angry regret. Angry regret aimed at me like a dagger. Not lunch and conversation. The wolf in me is suspicious, but there's another part of me that doesn't give a good godsdamn why we're here. As long as we are.

"What did Ingrid say?" I inquire. "She's the Memory Catcher you and your sister saw the last time we were here, yes?"

A list of topics and questions formed in my mind last night while I attempted to force this body to sleep. I could've started this chat with the curse and its correlation to Nephele's illness that has mysteriously improved. Or I could've asked how in the bloody Nether Reaches she managed to use the aether.

But odd as it feels for me to even care, I want to talk with her. *Really* talk with her. Beyond our bickering and discussing my resurrection and the fall of our empire, we haven't had much in the way of normal conversation. So I choose an easy-to-navigate entry point and force a bite of stew.

A small, pleased smile quirks her lips as I chew. "Yes, the Memory Catcher. That's her. But I didn't actually see her. She wasn't home. I waited, but dusk started to fall, and I figured I needed to head back."

"And yet you ended up at the barracks."

Another bite. Another pleased look.

"I did." Nephele reaches for her wine glass, and a blonde curl slips over her shoulder and tumbles down the front of her blue-gray dress. It draws my eyes not only to the tender curves peeking from her low-cut bodice, but to the chain holding the remnant of my heart between her lovely breasts as well.

She doesn't turn up her glass, but instead, only worries the stem between her fingers. "I actually had a dream of my mother. That's what spurred yesterday's behavior. I had a memory of my life here, and I wanted to uncover more."

The look in her eyes pins me in place. This memory caused her great joy and great pain. I don't understand the bond between a parent and child, certainly not parents who hid so much from their daughters. But Nephele loved them. And she still does, regardless of what she's learned about them recently. That much is evident.

"The thought of waiting was torture," she goes on. "I needed to see Ingrid. And when she wasn't there, it was disappointing. But something she said the last time inspired me to go to the barracks, and while I was there, I remembered more of my life here in Malgros. So much more." She leans in a little, her eyes narrowing like a storyteller trying to hook the listener. "One thing in particular. A very *curious* thing."

I smile on the inside, because there's something so endearing about this woman when her claws aren't out. Not that I mind getting scratched. But I keep my face trained to seriousness.

"Tell me about it," I say, my voice filled with rapt interest.

"There was a secret room at the barracks. Next door to where I lived when I was a little girl. It had no window, though it had a door. I remembered my father telling me that it was a special room that housed many magickal things from faraway lands." Her eyes fall at the corners, like a pouting puppy. "But the door is gone now. So I couldn't get inside."

“But now you can.” I hold my spoon suspended over the stew. “Now that you can use the aether.”

She shifts in her chair as though suddenly uncomfortable. “Yes, I suppose so. But I was hoping you might go with me. When this issue with Eryx is sorted out, anyway.”

There’s a nervous edge to her voice. As if I would deny her.

“Consider it done. Just say when.”

She leans back and nods, a look of relief passing over her face. Everything about her softens now that she’s gotten what she wants.

“I have no explanation for the aether,” she continues, her voice almost apologetic. “I saw what looked like quicksilver on the ground the night we arrived, moments after you left the beach. I picked it up out of sheer curiosity. But then I was looking at the tor and thinking about wanting to be there, and I just *was*. It was so strange and so unexpected when that wind and that... *presence*... arrived and swept me away. And then last night, I noticed the aether on the ground around you and decided to try to make our trip... a little shorter.”

Because she had wanted me as much as I wanted her. Our kiss might have started as mere pretense, but it ended as something very, very real. I hadn’t imagined it.

I pull myself back to task and begin searching through centuries of memories. “Because of Raina’s ability with her *abyss*, I entertained the notion that the pair of you are descended from Loria. But realm walking was for Witch Walkers who moved between this realm and Eridan. Not three hundred years back in time. Besides, if you were descended, chances are you’d already have the markings.”

She takes a long sip of wine. “I know. I thought about it all night. It makes no sense.”

“Did you tell Thibault?”

Her eyes go round. “No. Absolutely not. He has enough worries. This would only make matters worse for him. And for me.”

I swallow one more bite of stew, which, if I have to be honest, is a bit addicting. But I push the dish aside and rest my forearms on the table, devoting my focus to Nephele and the subject at hand.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but he would have a right to be worried. The aether shouldn’t recognize you. It shouldn’t carry you. It shouldn’t heed your wishes at all.” I scrub my fingers across my chin. “I suppose it could

have something to do with the curse, but I can't figure out what. Why would the grove take the aether from me and give it to you? It pisses me off, and it's inconvenient as fuck, but other than that, what purpose does that serve toward real punishment?"

She shrugs one delicate shoulder. "I don't know, but it seems that's what's happening. I do have a theory, however." She drags my dish back in front of me. "I just need you to finish your meal so I can test it."

My wolf was right to be suspicious. I narrow my eyes as she folds her slender hands atop the table. "Poison doesn't work on gods, little bird. Just so you're aware."

She chuckles, and damn the Nether Reaches if I don't I love the sound.

"It isn't poisoned. Just eat. Please?"

It's the bird-like tilt of her head that does me in when she says *please*. So I eat, her watching me all the while.

Once the bowl is empty, I set it on the lunch cart along with Nephele's dishes and turn up my glass for a healthy guzzle of wine.

"Still hungry?" she asks.

"Not at all. I'm quite full. It wasn't as awful as I was expecting." She just stares at me, the bright-eyed expression on her face entrancing. "What is it?"

She smiles, enough that her teeth are revealed, pearly white and lovely as the rest of her. "Nothing. I just didn't expect you to do as I asked when it comes to such mundane things, and so easily at that." Something dances in her eyes, and a trickle of her deepening scent wafts through the air. "I might like you when you're submissive, wolf."

And there it is. The key.

I lean back in my chair, knees wide, watching her with my wine glass resting on the wooden arm. "I'm at your command and at your service, Nephele. That's the deal. I can't promise I'll always let you have the control I think you need. I'm a beast, and it just isn't in my nature. But understand that when it comes to certain things, I'm always glad to give you what you want. All you need to do is ask."

For long seconds, she sits so still, hand curled around the curved arms of her chair, like my words need time to sink in, or perhaps she's deliberating something. Her chest rises and falls a little faster, and I can hear the gentle thudding of her heart, see her mind at work behind those piercing blue eyes. But it's her scent, as usual, that gives her away.

"You need not suffer your desires alone, little bird. You can't hide them

from me. Let me ease them.”

More agonizing seconds pass. But then she pushes up from her chair and moves around the table toward me, holding my gaze as she comes to stand at my side. I set my wine glass on the windowsill.

“You’re sure you’re not hungry?” Her voice is shadowed with a sensuality I have not yet heard.

Intrepid as she is, she gathers the skirt of her dress in her hands, slowly inching it higher as her longing floods the room.

This heart of mine pounds like a war drum as I slip my hand along the soft skin of her thigh and look up to meet her gaze. “Suddenly, I’m quite starved.”

As my fangs extend, I ease Nephele in front of me and almost combust the moment she sits on the table without urging.

She slips off her shoes and rests her little feet on the wooden arms of my chair. “I want your mouth on my body, wolf.”

The boldness of those words, the need in them, sets my blood on fire.

Hands under her dress, I slide my forearms onto the table and grip her ample hips. Like the animal that I am, I drag my nose along her inner thigh, inching higher and higher and higher, until the full brunt of her aroma hits me in the face, making my mouth water.

She drops back on one elbow, her other hand threading into my hair to clasp the back of my head. I open my mouth wide and graze her pussy with a playful bite through the linen of her dress.

Even through the thin fabric, I sense her flesh. Disbelieving, I run my hands a little higher, only finding bare skin. She wore nothing beneath this gown today. Because she wanted this. Thought of this. Hoped for this.

That knowledge causes my wolf to hesitate, because for some reason, I feel a shift. Like she has just become the predator and I the prey.

But a shiver rocks through her, and a ragged moan escapes her throat, and her command rules me. “Again,” she says. “Harder.”

I give her what she asks for, rougher this time, raking my fangs over her, my hands tightening on her ass. That garners the sweetest, mangled whimper.

She shoves up from the table and tugs one side of her bodice down, revealing her breast, baring it for me. Her nipple is already so hard, a pretty, pale pink pearl begging for my tongue.

Eyes locked with hers, I drag the other side down too, exposing her fully. I show my fangs as a reminder. “I have to be careful.”

Her eyes flare at the sight, and she swallows hard. "I told you. I'm not scared of you. I want your mouth on me. And don't you dare be gentle about it."

Aiming to please, I capture her nipple between my front teeth and bite down. A louder moan rips from her chest as she arches against me, gasping and clutching me close. I suck her deep into my mouth and palm her other breast, squeezing roughly.

As I feast on her, dragging my teeth and tongue across her tip, she covers my other hand with her own, helping me, pinching her nipple while I grip and knead her flesh. The sight of her touching herself is a heady thing, something I need more of.

Before I can ask for that particular delight, she clasps my face and drags me off her breast and into a bruising kiss.

When she breaks away, she whispers, "Is your cock hard for me, wolf?"

"Fuck yes," I answer gruffly. "Painfully."

She lowers her voice to a huskier tone. "Do you want it inside me?"

A growl of desire rumbles inside my chest, rattling me to my bones. But I try to think beyond her enticing words, because once more, I feel her impossible lure. She is a siren, and I cannot resist her song.

With every part of my being aching for her, I study her, searching for any falseness. All I see is her wanton expression, those long, blonde curls cascading around her shoulders, her bare breasts, still so tender and hard, framing the glowing remnant of my heart.

She is the absolute loveliest thing I've ever seen.

"You know I do," I answer. "I want to burrow inside you and stay there for days. Come to my room with me."

"Kiss me first," she says against my mouth, dragging her lips across mine. "Show my mouth what your cock would do to it."

Hearing her speak like that makes me wild. I shove up from my chair, and she jerks back, a little startled, looking up at me with a question visible in her eyes. She's wondering if she made a mistake. Even if I couldn't see it, a thin tendril of fear reaches my nose.

"I would never hurt you," I whisper, cradling her face in my hands. "Not like that. Only if you want pain will I ever deliver it."

Her blue eyes search mine. "I know."

A thread of trust. One I cling to as I kiss her, claiming her mouth, using my tongue to give her what she wanted moments before. If it were my cock, I

would bury it deep, so I kiss her deep, plundering her mouth, but always relenting to ease the assault.

She opens for me, too, her teeth trying to catch my lip. I finally give in and let her take the reins. Like a hungry little vixen, she drags her teeth across my bottom lip, then flicks that delicious, pink tongue over the tip of my fang, staring into my eyes.

She likes the threat of my mouth, the danger so close, and though I try to be careful, as our kiss turns rougher, I nick her plump flesh.

A gasp flutters between us, and I pull back to examine the wound, holding her chin between my fingers. A shimmering, red bead sits on her lower lip.

“Fuck, I’m sorry.” A strange sensation pinches my gut. Guilt. Especially given that I just promised to never do this, not unless she wanted it. But at the same time, at the scent of her blood, desire kicks in my veins. It’s wholly conflicting.

She looks a little surprised yet pleased as she sweeps her tongue out and tastes the swollen drop, wetting her lips with a tempting red sheen. “Don’t be sorry. I asked you to not be gentle. I like a little pain.”

Well, fuck.

More blood blooms from the wound, another red pearl teetering on her lip. The beast in me howls with need, and my cock swells.

“I’m a wolf, Nephele. We like blood, and I can heal that little hurt. I still very much want to kiss you. If you want that too.”

She gives no answer, save for offering a provocative arch of her brow as she tugs me back to her mouth.

The moment the metallic bite hits my tongue, I feel ravenous. I can fuck her here, pressed against the window. Bent over this table, her breast clutched in my hand. Standing up, pistoning into her. I don’t care. All I know is I want her in every way I can have her, until she’s weeping with pleasure.

I pinch her little nipples as I suck and lick and taste her mouth, until we’re both gasping. I try to slow down, focusing on licking away the bleeding slit caused by my fang, my saliva taking far too long to seal the wound. But with every pass, I get to taste her. With every pass, a new yet smaller pearl forms for me. So I take it.

And she lets me.

I’m so enthralled with her mouth and her body I almost miss the soft knock at the door. Nephele jerks back though, and I hear the second one,

registering the first one at the same time.

I yank her skirts down, and she tugs the ruched fabric of her bodice over her breasts. We don't fully disengage before the door cracks open and Mari peeks inside.

She gasps at the sight of us. Nephele still on the table. Me standing between her spread legs with my hands on her thighs. I'm certain we look as guilty as we are.

Mari's eyes go wide, and she blushes ten shades of red. "I am so sorry to interrupt. It's just that... Zahira told me to find you."

Nephele and I finally separate, though it's the last thing I want to do. She slips off the table, but I take a seat to hide the evidence of our passion. No need to not make matters worse for the girl at the door.

"Is something wrong?" Nephele asks.

Mari gives an emphatic nod and gestures for Nephele to follow her. They hurry out the door. A moment later, I get up and trail close behind, adjusting my cock as we walk down the front hall that leads to the foyer. The door to the vestibule is open, letting in the damp air.

The others are standing outside, staring toward the road that leads into the city. We head out into the wet day to join them, rain pouring off the eaves in rivers. Everyone parts for us when we arrive, eyes wide, faces painted with worry and shock as we push through to see what's happening.

We stop between Zahira and Callan, and in truth, it takes several moments to grasp what we're seeing. There's a dark, hulking figure in the blurring rain, walking with long, labored strides. But as he nears, all becomes clear.

Un Drallag stalks up the gravel and sand path that leads to the main house, past the guards who stand under a shed, enduring the weather to keep watch. His black hair is lacquered to his head, his black clothes soaked through and clinging to his body, his face a brutal mask of cruel satisfaction.

Because he's dragging two bodies through the front gate.





## NEPHELE

**T**he eight of us sit around the dining room table, staring at Alexis.

He terrified me as a child, just the very idea of him—the Witch Collector. But ever since the early months after my collecting day, he’s never given me a single moment of fear. Nothing like what I’m experiencing right now. Right now, I’m not sure who I’m looking at. I suppose if I could imagine Alexis as Un Drallag, this might be that man.

The man my sister, a woman he sees as a foreigner and possible spy, is having to endure alone.

“What did you do to them?” Zahira asks calmly. She sits across from me, the pair of us flanking Alexis.

“I burst their hearts,” he says, face cold and hard as stone. There isn’t a single note of regret, guilt, or any emotion at all in his voice.

I don’t know why I do it, but beneath the table, I reach for Neri’s hand. He sits next to me, his hand resting on his thigh. I clasp it like a buoy keeping me from sinking, and his fingers close gently around mine.

“Can I ask how?” Zahira presses.

He shrugs, the barest movement of his shoulder. “Like I killed the Eastlanders who were in Frostwater Wood with Raina and me. And the guards who tried to capture me and Rhonin in the Merchant Quarter. I can pinpoint that power now.” He drags his hand through his dark, wet hair and leans his elbows on the table, his leather jacket creaking. “Fucking finally.”

“How did it happen?” I ask. “Was anyone else harmed?”

He shakes his head. “It took some time to find Eryx at the barracks because Gavril had him hidden under a cloaking spell. But when I did, I

made certain others saw the spectacle, so they'd know what their end would look like if they continued to side with the East. As for Gavril, I cornered him in the mess hall. He fought me with every magickal trick in the book, but it only fueled my loathing. When I finished with them, I dragged the bastards through the city, even into Brear Hall and the White Wolf tavern, rain, mud, and all, so everyone would know they were dead. I harmed no one else. But now they know I will if I have to."

"Why did you bring them here?" Keth's irritation is evident in his voice. "You just told anyone who cares where we are."

Alexus only glares. "Let them come. I'll fucking finish them too. I woke up this morning and decided I wasn't playing this godsdamn game another day. If Thamaos wants a foothold in the North, he will have to deal with me. He might've taken my memory of Raina, but I remember my old master well. I know how he thinks."

"Then you know that if and when he's able, he will retaliate," Neri says. "You just made his job here much harder. You cut the head off his snake and plucked the eyes of his crow."

"You're fucking right, I did. Eryx was lucky he wasn't hoisted in a gibbet at the harbor to slowly drown in the tides. And Gavril the Sorcerer almost had to endure being gutted by my bare hands. He knew what was coming, though, and he summoned Thamaos. His last words before I ruptured his heart were not even his own."

"What were they?" Zahira says.

A certain quiet washes over him. "*I'm coming for you, Un Drallag. You and the White Wolf, too.*"

I squeeze Neri's hand, then let go, a familiar ache swelling in my chest.

Unbearable dread.

His long thigh brushes mine, providing a different sort of contact, but still a comfort I lean into.

"At the tavern," Neri says, "Eryx said he heard I'd be coming. I figured he'd been in communication with Thamaos through Gavril."

"He has," Alexis replies. "But that's the last time he infiltrates this land. There's an entire coast filled with Witch Walkers here. Their job has always been to secure this border from land, sea, and air attacks. They failed because the prince wormed his way in and weakened us. But that's over now. Fuck the East. By the time I'm done rallying the Northland Watch, nothing will cross these shores, not even ghosts."

“All right, then.” Zahira begins rolling her sleeves. “What’s the plan?”

Alexus points a long finger down the table. “Keth and Jaega, I need you to leave for the Mondulak Range tomorrow at dawn. You’ll have to do it together, but without me. Joran and Callan, you’re staying here, as am I. Rumors are already spreading about Neri and Thamaos’s return, so I’ll help Malgros deal with the news of war. But only until I find a way to reach Raina. If that happens, you two will need to continue my work here.” He turns to the women at his left. “Zahira and Yaz, I need to meet with the officials you know and trust first thing tomorrow morning. After that, you two should leave for the Drifts to see Castalan.”

He looks at me and glances down at my lips. I dart my tongue out, tasting what remains of the wound from Neri’s fang, and tuck that side of my lip under my teeth. Last night, he’d told me that my decisions were my own, that he wouldn’t say another word to me in this regard, but that I needed to understand that Neri never has been and never will be accepted at Winterhold, deal or no. *He’s a beast, Nephele*, he reminded me. As though I’m unaware. As though that doesn’t make matters even harder. As though Alexis wasn’t a beast once upon a time too.

Even in childhood stories around the fire, I was always intrigued by the big, bad wolf.

“You two need to sift north tonight,” he goes on, though I see the understanding in the hard lines of his face. “Stop at Hampstead Loch and warn everyone there, then get to Winterhold and send word to the Witch Walkers of the Iceland Plains, especially those along the coastline. We need a shield around the entirety of the Northland Break. And soon.”

My heart starts to race as I glance to my right and catch Neri’s golden gaze already on me. He needn’t say a word for me to read the worry written across his face.

He can’t take us anywhere. If we go north, it will be on horseback, which is too slow, considering the weather will only worsen with every mile we travel.

The only other option is for me to sift us.

Alexus stands and peers at the ceiling, water still dripping from his sodden clothes and drenched hair. “Sounds like there’s a break in the rain. I’m going out to mark the dead and burn the bodies.”

He unsheathes his dagger and begins stalking toward the door. I realize then that he means to *mark* them. To carve his seal into their skin before their

souls fully leave this world, so that even in death, they are his. Unreachable by Thamaos.

“Is that some sort of ritualistic cleansing thing?” Keth inquires.

Without pausing or turning, Alexis answers. “No. It’s an Un Drallag thing.”



NERI FOLLOWS ME TO MY ROOM.

The tension between us is as taut as an archer’s string. We have a matter of hours to figure out what to do.

That pressure has taken the emphasis off our previous situation. I fear I might always feel desire in his presence, but this afternoon, even though we were so very intimate a mere hour ago, we have a much more significant concern.

Neri shuts the door behind me as I move to my dressing table. Carefully, I retrieve the small cosmetics jar I placed the two sliph of aether in last night after my talk with Alexis and remove the lid.

“This is all I have.” We meet in the middle of the room, and he peers inside.

He rests his hands loosely on his hips, and his penetrating eyes flick up. “Listen, I’m not trying to be domineering here. But we have no idea how this works for you. That amount of aether is nothing compared to what lives in the atmosphere. It might not get us where we need to go. It might not work at all.”

“It worked last night. Perfectly.”

“Yes. To sift us across the city. Not across the entire Northland Break. You’ve sifted two times. That is not enough experience with a primordial entity to tempt fate.”

I know he’s right, but...

“Do you have a better option?” I say with a bite of my usual sarcasm. “Want to see if Alexis, who is currently carving and burning the dead, will allow us to take off on Mannus and Tuck? The valley is probably covered in three feet of snow by now. I can’t imagine the slightly higher elevation in the wood and Winterhold.”

He scrubs his fingers through his white hair, but the long locks just fall

back around his handsome face. “I can always try sifting again. It might work now.”

As though offering a reminder, the cut on my lip tingles. I twist the lid back on the jar and turn toward my dressing table, where the wine and glass I brought upstairs last night still sit.

“I need to tell you something,” I say as I pull the cork, requiring a little liquid courage to speak my theory about the curse aloud. At least my part, anyway. I’m still uncertain about whether we’re enduring the same issues.

Because my test didn’t exactly go as planned. He’s a wolf. Wolves tend to crave blood anyway, something I hadn’t even considered. But for me? It’s so unthinkable. So awful. The thought of being like this for the rest of my days...

I grab the glass, wondering why wine seems to dull the need for blood. I figure it’s because it dulls *every* need when you drink enough.

I’m already trembling, but I tilt the bottle over the glass’s rim anyway, trying to be careful. But the glass slips and shatters off the arm of the chair, sending wine all over Zahira and Yaz’s exotic rug and large shards of glass across the tile and carpet.

“Shit!” I hike my dress and bend to pick up pieces, but Neri joins me.

He crouches at my side and grabs my hands. “Nephele, stop.” He holds my gaze. “Calm down. You’re shaking. Let me.”

After a nod, I stand and grip the back of the chair, trying to steady my breathing while Neri gathers all the pieces in the palm of his hand and carries the broken glass to the nearby bin. When he places the pieces in the bottom, he hisses and swears.

He’s cut himself. Even had he given no response, I still would’ve known. The scent is so potent, even from across the room, that I can already taste it.

I grip the chair tighter as he turns toward me. Save for the night I stabbed the guard in the garden, I haven’t been in the presence of a bleeding person, and his blood was quickly washed away by the rain. There’s also been the butcher’s reserve Mari used that day in the kitchen. Its scent had been hidden beneath all the others but still drew me in. In the meeting room at Fia’s, when Neri and Alexis strolled in with blood seeping from their godsdamn faces, I hadn’t known what was happening. Hadn’t realized the oddity of smelling blood so strongly. Hadn’t associated the ache in my stomach with what it was.

Now, as Neri moves toward me, a craving surges, my stomach grumbling,

my attention becoming consumed with that smear of red on the tip of his finger.

Cradling the wounded hand in his other one to prevent blood from dripping on the floor, he pauses a stride away. "Do you have a cloth?"

Gods' stars, I can't even process his words at first, but I finally snap out of it and hurry to the shelf near the tub where I retrieve a wash linen.

Once I'm standing before him again, breathing harder, I meet his eyes.

His brow draws down. "What is it, Nephele?"

"Do you smell it?" I ask.

He shakes his head and blinks in confusion. "Smell what?"

I dare a glance at his finger, the slash of crimson there, the tiny puddle of blood cupped in his palm. "Your blood."

"Of course. I can smell blood from here to the barracks on a clear day. This is right under my nose."

"I can smell it, too," I reply. "I've been able to smell it ever since the grove. It has something to do with the curse."

His face goes so still it could be chiseled from stone. "How do you know this?"

I hand him the cloth and move to the chair. Making sure there's no glass on the cushion, I take a seat, my head light from that relentless, heady scent.

"The stew I fed you today is Mari's special recipe. She uses pork blood to enrich the gravy. After eating it, I felt so much better. I wasn't completely well or recovered, as I still experienced some weakness, but I didn't feel like I was nearing death either."

A moment passes. "And you fed that stew to me to see if I had any response."

He turns on his heel to face me, using his uninjured hand to grip the cloth. His finger is still exposed and bleeding, though, his blood's aroma following me.

"And then there's the kiss," he goes on, piecing things together. "The roughness. You wanted my fang to cut you. So I'd taste your blood."

I look up at him, feeling overwhelmed and a bit guilty when I stare into his eyes. "You've lost your ability to sift. I planned to test my theory by having you try to carry us to the thermal pool at the lighthouse tonight. To see if blood could restore your ability." I lower my eyes to his finger. "But you're not healing. Is that signal enough that blood doesn't work for you like it has for me?"

Again, he blinks. Like he's still absorbing everything I've just said. "I don't know. What are you feeling right now?"

I swallow hard against a sudden dryness in my mouth. "I smell your blood, and I taste it. It's actually making me miserable."

"What is? The smell or—"

"The craving." The words rush from me on a breath, and I crumple under the weight of the need inside me. "*The craving.*"

For too many seconds, it seems I've taken him completely off guard. But then he kneels before me. The God of the North, on his knees at my feet.

Wordless, he sets the bloody cloth on the floor and lifts his finger to my mouth.

"Suck," he orders.

My heart beats a swift tattoo against my ribs as I search his eyes. I think to resist, that this is the vilest thing that can possibly be shared between two beings. But that thought flutters away the moment he pushes his finger between my lips, between my teeth, and all that lush, warm red floods my tongue, mingled with the salt of his skin.

I suck from that tiny wound as though I've been thirsting for a hundred years, and Neri is my oasis. My eyes even close of their own volition, and I become lost to this. *To him.*

There's a taste I can't place. Something sparkling and bright, better than the richest red wine. Better than anything I've ever tasted in all my life. It tastes like power and sex and magick and victory, all contained in one plump drop of Neri's blood.

He rises from his haunches and uses his weight to push me back in the chair, his size to spread my knees. Watching me closely, he leans onto the wooden arm, his free hand gripping one of the spindles behind me as he begins pumping his finger in and out of my mouth.

"There you go," he whispers as I suck with every retreat. Groan with each advance. "Good girl."

It takes a moment for me to realize that he's pressing his thumbnail into the crease of his finger to force more blood to the tip. Blood that coats my tongue and makes me dizzy with want.

He's feeding me.

Some part of my brain revolts and desperately wants to pull away. But I can't. A frenzy is building deep inside me. One that wants this. Needs this. Must have this.



I reach for the ruched fabric of my bodice just as I had earlier today and tug the fabric down, exposing my breast. Neri is on me in a split second, his hot mouth closing over my aching peak, torturing me with sinful swirls and sensual bites. All the while, he keeps fucking my mouth with his finger, the thin stream of blood enough to satiate one need though it creates another.

Ready to succumb to this temptation, I pull free and lift his face to mine, kissing him even more passionately than before in the reading room. He groans into my mouth, and I have to wonder if that sound is for me or because he tastes blood.

I'm given an answer fairly quickly. "I need to fuck you, Nephele. I need to claim. I need to see my cum dripping from you."

A shudder quivers through me at his words, the image they create one of him spreading me wide after he's finished with me, his molten gaze hungry. It's a brave move, but I lower my mental wards so he can hear what it's doing to me. What it's making me want.

Gripping fistfuls of linen, he helps me tug his tunic off his broad back and over his head. I'm not surprised when he stands and picks me up, forcing my legs around his waist as he carries me toward the bed. He all but warned me with a thought a moment before.

*I'm still dressed*, I tell him.

He laughs low in his chest. *I'll deal with that issue soon enough, little bird.*

He lays me down and crawls onto the bed between my legs. Only one glance is spared at my day gown, a glance that says it offends him, before he grabs hold of the material at the neckline and jerks, ripping it clear down the center of the bodice. The effort is powerful enough to jolt a breath from my lungs.

When the tear catches on the seam, he growls in irritation, then pushes up to his knees and finishes destroying the dress, muscles rippling as he tears it away from me, revealing nothing but nakedness beneath.

Utterly roused by the animal in him, I take in the view. The curves of muscle across his shoulders and down his arms. The sweeping fullness of his chest. The veins traveling the length of his forearms, leading to the strong hands and fingers gripping my thighs.

My attention drifts lower, though, and my mouth, parched before his blood soothed it, now waters as I linger a look on the outline of that thick, long cock pressing against the laces of his trousers, straining them apart.

Hungry as ever, I meet his gold gaze, which darkens to the color of whiskey as he looks down at me. Slowly, he leans in and drags those fangs along the inside of my thigh. He exhales, and a warm breath caresses my skin, forcing a thought into my mind.

*Gods, I need your mouth closer.*

He answers that plea by burying his nose in the small triangle of hair at my apex and inhaling deeply. “Fuck, Nephele. The things I’m going to do to you are absolutely depraved.”

With my pulse skittering, he drapes that big body over me, his forearms resting on either side of my head, and stares into my eyes.

Finally skin to skin, I see the wolf in him staring back at me with a look that promises a calculated attack. Ready to become his prey, I sink my fingers into his hair.

“Are you certain you want this?” he asks, his deep voice low and rough with need.

I roll my hips against him. Against all that hardness pressing between my legs. “Yes. You don't know how much.”

“Or was it the blood?” he adds after a moment of hesitation.

When I blink out of the haze surrounding me, I notice his contemplative expression. But though the answer feels as though it should be obvious, it isn’t so easy to reply. Because now that he’s asked, I honestly don’t know. I questioned this very thing about him just moments before.

Neri rests his forehead against mine and sighs. “Have you had birthbane recently?”

That question hits me like a hammer to the temple. How had I not considered that? Had I been that caught up in the moment—or in a blood haze—that I would take such a risk?

“Not since before we left Winterhold,” I answer honestly. “I often don’t need it. My body just doesn’t do what it’s supposed to do. And I didn’t need it for anything else at the time.”

“All right. That’s okay.” He takes a deep, calming breath. “As hard as it is to fucking say this, we probably need to figure things out before we do this anyway. It wouldn’t be right for me to take you until we know if what just happened had anything to do with the fact that you ingested blood or if it has something to do with our curse. And I fear it did.”

My body all but screams as he makes to get up, and I hold him to me. “You get a conscience now? Now that I could die from want?”

It's weak, but a smile curves the corner of his lips. "I don't want you to regret anything with me. And you certainly don't want a godling in that little belly of yours. Understand that, like it or not, once I give in and join with you, I'm going to *take* for as long as I can, which is more extensive than you realize." He leans into my ear. "I'll be running down your legs when it's over, Nephele. I will have consumed you."

My heart trips over itself, and a chill races over my skin. "You can't talk to me like that and then just leave, wolf."

He crooks a dark brow. "This coming from the woman who set me up for a *test* that left me raging hard. You had no intention of finishing things, you little trickster. It wasn't until this" —he holds up his healed finger— "that you decided you needed my cock inside you no matter what. So perhaps it's my turn to test things."

Gasping, I shove him back and sit up, grabbing his finger. The deep red gash is gone.

We look at one another.

"It worked. It took you longer to heal after your fight with Alexis, yes?"

He studies his unmarked fingertip with a frown. "Yes. It took days for the bruising to go away. But this could be a result of time as well. I was newly resurrected then." He lifts his stare and lowers his hand, casually resting it on my very naked hip, as though it belongs there. "We do need to test things before we're standing in front of everyone tonight looking like fools because we don't go anywhere when the aether is called. If I can sift at all, then I suppose I'm going to need to eat a fucking bucket of Mari's blood sludge." He glances at my lip, where there's nothing left of the cut save for a tender place, and I hear the words that would naturally come after that. *Or your blood*. Only he doesn't say them. Instead, he adds, "We need to test a location with at least a little distance to make me feel somewhat better about this. Somewhere we can return from on foot if the aether doesn't hold around me, and if you, for some reason, can't sift us back."

I sigh, thinking, and the answer enters our minds simultaneously. "The secret room at the barracks," we say in unison.

"Good enough. Get dressed, then." Neri works his way off the bed and gets to his feet, grabbing his discarded shirt from the floor. "We don't have much time."

Reconstructing my mental wards, I reach for a pillow and use it to cover myself, suddenly feeling like someone poured a bucket of cold creek water

over my head. “You’re really just going to leave? To walk away like I’m not sitting here naked and—”

“Horny as *fuck*?” He tugs on his shirt and twists to look at me as he shimmies the fabric down his rippled abdomen, cocking his head with an appreciative once-over that drags from my head to my feet. A wicked grin spreads across his face. “I am. Actually, I’m going to walk next door while you prepare for our little outing and jack off my throbbing dick until I am thoroughly and utterly spent of every waiting drop of cum in my extremely blue balls.”

I glare at him, not believing this. “You are evil, wolf. I hate you.”

Laughing, he moves to the door but turns back with a wink. “I’m a god. We might be greedy bastards, but we know how to wait for what we want. Experiments are fun, don’t you think, little bird?”

With a growl of my own, I launch the pillow at him, just as he vanishes into the hall.



## NERI

**N**ephele and I arrive on the grounds of the Northland Watch barracks an hour later, but not thanks to me.

A sigh of relief leaves her as she slides her hands down from around my neck and peers up at me from under her hood, raindrops already dripping from the cowl. We stand under a wide-limbed tree providing too little shelter from the early afternoon downpour.

“You did it,” I say, a note of pride in my voice even I can hear.

I *am* proud of her, though I don’t know how this impossible ability to control the aether is even a thing to be proud of. More an anomaly to be dissected and scrutinized. She didn’t even require the sliphs. The aether just came to her.

But I can’t stop thinking about what I’m feeling. I’ve never known pride for anyone outside myself.

It strikes me that I’ve been feeling a bevy of human emotions I’ve never known before. Worry. Empathy. Concern. Protectiveness. And so many more. Desire is normal. Lust, too. Aggression. Envy. Dominance. Anything selfish or that serves my needs has been all that’s ever mattered. Feelings that affect *me* and *my* balance of power within the world.

Never have I felt more for another being than for myself.

Until now.

Nephele takes a deep breath of damp air. “Yes, I did it. But I didn’t get us *inside* the secret room. Or even inside the barracks. I tried, but I obviously missed.”

“The aether is sometimes difficult to wield when it first learns you. I had

the same issue when I came into being. But once it does, it becomes a friend. Always there when you call.”

With a glint of something like sadness in her eyes, she glances at the ground around us.

I already know the aether is rejecting me. Not as severely as before, which tells me her theory on the blood curse is very likely correct. But perhaps I require larger doses of blood than what I received today in a bowl of stew and a kiss to restore the power being taken from me by the grove’s curse.

“I’m sorry this is happening to you,” she says. “But you have to let me try to take us North tonight. Please.”

Again, I’m struck by feelings I shouldn’t have. Worry, for one. For her safety.

“We’ll discuss it later,” I say over the wet hush washing across the world. “Let’s get to your secret room for now. We don’t have much time before Thibault finds us missing and loses his godsdamn mind.”

“He’s beginning to scare me,” she says, as though she needs to speak that truth aloud.

“Because he’s becoming Un Drallag again. He’s facing a looming war. Thamaos is back. People are threatening his land. And now his woman is gone, his best friend is gone, and his old friend Fleurie is gone again, too. The only control he has over protecting his pack is with you. And you’re consorting with me, his enemy. So much as I hate that fucking bastard, I can understand his plight.” My words seem to soak into her as she stares up at me, raindrops collecting on her long eyelashes. I wipe them away and say, “Go on. Give it a go. Let’s do this.”

In seconds, we’re standing in a long hallway where a woman exits an apartment. We dip our heads in greeting as she passes, but I can sense her wariness over two strangers wandering her dormitories. She moves on regardless and hurries down the stairs before shoving through the wooden door and into the rain.

Nephele guides me past a few apartments before she slows to a stop in front of a blank wall. I press my fingertips to it, sensing. Curious.

“Your father wasn’t lying.” I lay my palm flat. “There’s certainly magick on the other side.”

She lowers her wet hood, revealing damp hair, every curl a bit tighter around her delicate face. She’s fucking lovely. And adorable. And I just want

to kiss her and make her laugh so I can see that bright smile again.

The fact I'm thinking such a thing takes me aback. I'm beginning not to recognize myself anymore. What has this woman done to me?

"How do I get us through?" she asks, disrupting my thoughts.

I lower my hand. "You use your mind to sift us through, which takes some work since you don't know where we're going. Or I bust through."

She lets out an exasperated sigh and drops her head to the side, staring up at me like I'm an idiot. "And then what? Do we leave it open and exposed? I don't think so, wolf."

I lean my shoulder against the wall and cross one foot over the other, folding my arms over my chest. "Fine. Then work your magick, witch."

"You're a terrible teacher," she scolds. "You know that? You could be a *bit* more explanatory on how I'm to get us through a *solid wall* to a place I've never seen."

I shrug. "You need to focus on the magick on the other side. I'm certain something in your witchy arsenal will allow you to feel the power permeating through this wall. Just latch on to that and sift. Try not to make it more complex than that."

When we end up standing inside the pitch-dark room, I'm even more stunned than when we arrived outside earlier. With her heartbeat thudding in my ears, Nephele glides her hands down and rests them on my chest. Enjoying the closeness, I grip her waist, her warm breath so close to my lips, her scent like roses and rain.

"Hmm." I press against her. "Remind me to take you in a blacked-out room when we reach Winterhold. This is erotic."

"Do you *always* have an erection, wolf?"

I crook a grin, smelling her instant desire. "When you're around, yes."

"I'm going to be around a lot. Get used to it. Besides, you had your chance today. You didn't take it. So I hope that big hand of yours feels good because you'll need it."

Before I can quip back, violet-tinted light splits the air between us. I blink against the unexpected brightness, watching a swirling orb hover over Nephele's palm between us.

"Well, that's handy. You see, *this* is the kind of shit gods have to deal with. Watching you witches have all the fun."

She rolls her eyes and holds her hand toward the room as she steps out of my grasp, the orb growing brighter as she directs it around the small space,



turning in a slow circle, revealing every nook and cranny, of which there are hundreds.

“Oh, my gods,” she breathes, taking it all in.

Rowan Bloodgood’s room is not a tidy space. Rather, the walls are lined with crooked and cluttered wooden shelves, each brimming with objects of all manner, along with random stacks of mismatched books. Crates sit around the floor, too, overflowing with absolutely ancient wooden-cased scrolls and what appear to be dozens of rolled maps. On the far wall, the wall where there would’ve been a window had this room been given one, sits a wide oak desk, also cluttered, but with dusty ink pots and quills, and a matching chair.

I nudge one of the crates with the toe of my boot. “Was your father an antiquities dealer?”

“Not that I’m aware of. But then again, it seems my parents were many things I knew nothing about.” She moves to one of the shelves, leaving the orb of light hovering behind her. I poke it with the end of my finger, amazed when it roils at the contact.

“What is all of this?” Nephele asks. “I don’t even recognize some of these things.”

I turn and move to her side, careful when I touch a few of the objects. “This is an amphora from Persei.” I pick up a dusty yet obviously ornate vase and rub my thumb over the painted art. “They’re known for this very glasswork.” I set it aside and pick up another object, one shaped like a horn, though it still bears some of its tell-tale green stain. “Ah. An old bru pipe.”

She frowns. “A what?”

“A bru pipe. From Mapor.” I open the chamber at the end, sliding the disc that covers the place where the weed goes, and take a sniff. Any evidence of the hallucinatory plant is gone now. “You haven’t relaxed until you’ve smoked some bru from a pipe like this. I once smoked one with Mapor’s goddess for ten days and nights in her sex hut.” I grin at the memory and set the pipe back on the shelf. “That was a fun time.”

Out of nowhere, Nephele jabs her elbow into my ribs. Hard.

I clutch my side and lean away from her. “Ow, what was that for?”

She cocks a brow. “There are just some memories you need to keep to yourself, wolf.”

“My, my. Are you jealous, little bird?” I can’t help but grin again.

A look of absolute irritation twists her pretty face. “Let me put it this way. Would you like me to tell you about Joran fucking me against a tree

after a lovely outdoor wedding? Or all the times and ways I slept with Colden? I have a few more names on my list if so.”

The territorial wolf in me quickly rises and readies its claws. “First of all, I wasn’t so descriptive. So thanks for putting those images in my head. Second of all, no. I would not like to hear about that, but you obviously already told me. Point taken.”

“Thank you,” she replies, reaching for an artifact that seems to have caught her eye.

Needing to shake the wolf off my back, I let her examine it for a moment, twisting the small weapon in her hand, studying the antler hilt and the rusted steel blade.

“That’s an ancient Smeg scythe,” I finally say. “The Smeg were a tribe of women who lived in the Omalli mountains to the west. They protected the holy ground there. These small hook scythes were made for ease of attack.”

She tests it, hacking the air with the blade, and quickly finds its true purpose, even if she doesn’t realize it. Because she turns the blade toward the ceiling and sweeps the weapon in an upward arc with the perfect wrist movement.

A smirk tempts my lips and wins. “Leave it to you to know a ball hook when you see one.”

She looks at me with those wide, blue eyes. “Is that really its purpose?”

“Yes. The Smeg were gifted at hiding in the forest. If men tried to reach their villages, they were stopped, and swiftly. It doesn’t take much else once a miniature scythe splits your balls or rips off your cock.”

She makes a pained face.

“Smegs became known for hooking and leaving their wounded victims to bleed to death or be eaten by a bear,” I say, adding to the legend. “Some men tried wearing metal guards around their cods, but the Smeg would just hook the artery in their leg or the one in the neck or arm. They were vicious but intelligent warriors. None I’d ever want to meet.”

She shakes her head in wonder, likely imagining the weapon’s history as she looks at the blade again. “I wonder how my father came across this, then.”

“Who knows? But I doubt he found it on a ship here in Malgros.” I glance at the shelves. “Most of this other stuff could’ve been collected that way, I suppose. But some of it is just so old.” I bend down and pick up a scroll. “Like these. They’re from the Eastland Territories, but I recall these types of

housings when Thamaos was in power.”

She sets the scythe aside and takes the scroll, carrying it to the desk where she sits in her father’s old creaking chair. Her orb of light follows her without so much as a jerk of her head. It just perches itself over her shoulder so she can better see.

I step across the room and stand behind Nephele as she sets the casing aside and carefully handles the antiquity. I’m curious too.

“This parchment had a light waxing before storage to keep moisture out,” she says. “Alexus taught me that. But it’s still in far better condition than I would’ve ever dreamed because you’re right. I recognize some of this language. The ink has faded too much to decipher, but it’s old Elikes. The dialect that Alexus always translates in his journals.” She looks up at me. “It’s definitely from the Eastland Territories and probably about three to five hundred years old. How did my father come across so many?”

I glance back at all the filled crates. “They could’ve been found at sea,” I reply. “I’m sure at least a few Eastland ships ended up in Northland waters while your father was head sentry here. Perhaps these things were confiscated. Although, sailors will trade for just about anything, too. So it’s hard to tell. Your father seems the type of man who might’ve been all about some bargaining.”

With a sigh, she re-rolls the scroll and places it back in its housing. Then she just sits there, running her hands over the desk. Without really thinking about it, I lean down and, for the most inexplicable reason, kiss the top of her head.

“If you want to stay for a while, I’ll deal with Un Drallag when we return.”

Her hand slips over mine and squeezes gently. “Thank you for the offer. But we need to get back. We have a trip to make.”

As difficult as it is, I release her and force myself away, turning toward the shelves again. My eyes catch on two small, golden urns sitting side by side on the middle shelf, the metal reflecting the orb’s light as it moves back to the center of the room, following Nephele.

“Oh, what are those?” she asks from my side.

I reach for one and frown. “I’m not sure, though I swear I’ve seen something like this before. Something...”

Fuck. The memory sinks inside me like a boulder to the bottom of the sea.

“I recall a dinner party at Thamaos’s great hall,” I say as I face her. “A party I attended with Asha during a time of attempted treaty. At that party, Thamaos ripped all recollection from one of his people, a man from the dungeons, as entertainment for the night. We’d all watched, most laughing, amazed at his ability. I just sat there, leaned back in my chair, loathing him. Because though I didn’t understand humans, and there were plenty I didn’t like, this held a cruelty unsurpassed.”

“My gods,” she says, lifting her fingers to her cheek. “That’s what he did to Alexis.”

“Yes. But when he finished with the man, when the guards came to carry him away, Thamaos twisted the iridescent threads of memory into a sphere and placed it into a waiting urn.” I hold up the urn in my hand. “Just like this one.”

With a careful hand, I remove the urn’s lid. I can hardly believe my eyes when I see a sphere shimmering inside. How in the Nether Reaches did her father come across this?

Nephele reaches for the other urn, but her hand freezes once she grasps it. I track her wide stare, my gaze landing on an engraving.

The Elikesh form for *Alexi of Ghent*.

“This can’t be real,” she says.

I rotate the urn in my hand, only to find more Elikesh on its opposite side. I lift it for Nephele to read, and her eyes go glassy in the light.

*Elias Gherahn*. And it, too, contains a sphere of memory.

I look at Nephele, watching understanding dawn as tears trail down her cheeks. She turns back to the shelf, looking for more urns, but all she finds is an old, yellowed note, folded across the middle.

Every thought in my mind narrows to one thing when she brings the note closer to the light. The word *Nephele* scrawled across the front.

With wide, confused eyes, she opens it, her fingers trembling so hard the paper shakes in her grasp.

*Dearest Pelly,*

*If you’re reading this, your mother and I are gone, and the future I saw for my girls is finally coming true. I have*

written you letters a thousand times, letters where I explain everything. But the problem with knowing the future is that I'm still unsure if anything I say to reveal the truth to you might change or destroy the path you're meant to walk. And so that truth lives in me, and it will die with me.

I've tried testing it. I've sought counsel. But the future I see for you and Raina in the North isn't one I would dare alter. There is pain ahead for us all. But there is also great joy. And in truth, I believe my journey is part of a grander design than I can understand. So forgive me for my silence but know that I have only done what I felt I had to do for the sake of my family.

Knowledge is power, Nephele. But if a man knows his fate and tries to change it, what other lives might he impact in his efforts? Are one person's decisions enough to truly alter history or the future? Or are there simply too many forces at work for it to matter? Too many catalysts created by too many decisions to be made by too many people? History is a sea that millions of rivers feed. If one dries up, the sea is still the sea.

This has been my dilemma here in Malgros. A dilemma I don't think I'll ever have an answer for.

Your mother isn't happy. She worries that you and Raina will hate the North. But we're leaving for the valley today, to take you girls where my visions say you both need

to be. And so I write this. I write this, and I will seal it away until you find it. I have already seen that you will.

Everything in this room is for you and your sister. For the journeys we could not make together. You will later understand how I came to gather these treasures and why, but know that time, for your sister and I, is a much different entity than for everyone else. Don't fear it when Raina finds that part of herself. Remember what I said. Knowledge is power, and knowledge is found in our journey. Some of us just have more interesting methods of travel.

These urns are for you, as well. I already know you will do with them what is needed. There is a journey for the memories held within, too, and I'm assured they will see their way back to where they belong.

Because of you.

As for all else, there is one vision I never shared with your mother. She would never have survived it. Just remember what she used to say when she read you the story of Cila and Thaddius. Beautiful things can grow teeth. It only makes them that much more powerful.

I have always held your hand, Pel. Yours and Raina's too. Know that I am holding both of you even now. There will not be a moment where I am too far. Just look to the sky, my darling girl.

Look for the dove.

*With all my eternal love and blessing,  
Father*

When Nephele meets my gaze, her sky-blue eyes filled with heartbreak and pain and so many tears, I swear a crack splits my hardened heart.

“Come here.” I draw her into my arms and against my chest and just hold her while she weeps, soothing her as best I know how.

Eventually, her trembling and sobbing cease, and she pulls back to look up at me. “My father was a time walker like Raina, wasn’t he?”

I glance around the room, at the hundreds of items from around this world, from many different eras. The maps, too.

“It bends my mind to imagine such a thing,” I tell her. “But I think you could be right.”

She nods, as though accepting some silent command. “We have to get back to the tor and leave.”

I frown at that, shocked she doesn’t want to stay after finding all these things. “Are you sure?”

“More than ever. My family was leaving Malgros for the North the day my father wrote this. Tonight, you and I are to leave. Something awaits us there. I don’t believe for a second that finding this letter isn’t a sign that I need to follow in my father’s brave footsteps. I will return here. Father will guide me.”

“All right. If that’s what you want.” I take Thibault’s urn from her and hesitate. Much of the letter seemed important, but one part did stand out to the wolf in me. A part I have to mention before we leave this room. “Cila and Thaddius, eh? I knew of Cila and her beast. Many, many moons ago.”

Even in the low, violet light of Nephele’s orb, I see her blush.

She folds the note, slips it into her jacket pocket, and then wraps her hands around my neck. I barely know what to do with myself when she rises on her tiptoes and presses a sweet, tender kiss to my mouth, and says, “I never could resist a rose. No matter how many thorns it bore.”

I do my best not to grin at that. But I do.

Nephele bestows me with the warmest look I’ve ever received from her and buries her hands into my hair. “Hold on, wolf,” she says with a gentle, teary-eyed smile. “You know what to do.”





## NEPHELE

“**M**y mind simply cannot process this.”

Alexus sits across from me on a large leather footrest in Zahira’s study. A crackling fire burns beside us in the hearth, the amber light shimmering against the tears streaking his exhausted face. One hand clasps the golden vessel that contains his stolen memories of Raina, while the other holds my father’s letter.

“He knew about Raina and me.” He holds up the letter. “How long? Her whole life? A few years? Did he know about you? That you would come to Winterhold because of me? And he just let you go? For what?”

He did let me go. Even told me to stay in Winterhold and devote myself to studying and learning my craft. He’d said I would be needed one day, and now I feel the power of his sacrifice. Of my own. Even if I hadn’t understood, I was being prepared for something.

For now.

“He did it because there is a grander design at work,” I remind him, repeating the words from Father’s letter. “Something bigger than we can imagine.”

“But this also means he knew Thamaos took my memories, Nephele. And not only that, but he knew where they were kept. And he was skilled enough to steal them from Min-Thuret and live to tell about it.”

“Only he didn’t tell.”

Alexus stares at the urn, his mind working so hard behind his green eyes. “I can’t decide if I think he should have told me or not. I only know that I wish I’d known Rowan. I wish he were here to explain everything. From how

he was the Keeper of the God Knife to how in gods' death he found *this*." Again, he focuses on the urn, clinging to it tightly. "Even from reading his words," he adds, "I feel we all could use his presence right about now."

"He was so wonderful, Alexis. I wish he were here, too." My voice breaks across choked-back tears. "Because I don't know how to guide you with this."

He shakes his head and wipes his cheek with the back of his hand. "You've done enough. I'll figure it out. If I can access these memories, there's no telling what I might learn. Like your father said, knowledge is power, right? And knowledge lies in memory."

I recall something then. "He always taught Raina and me that, with the right hands, most any magick can be undone. This is not a permanent state for you. You *will* remember." I reach across the small distance between us and touch his face. "See Ingrid. Before I go, I want you to promise me that you will. I don't know if she can help with this, and I know you're scared of what you might find. But... just go. Please? Take the urn."

He nods and leans into my touch. "All right. I'll go."

Satisfied, I gather my pack and sling the strap across my body. "I'll keep the prince's memories safe. Once I reach Winterhold, they'll go in the hold beneath the castle, straightaway. I just pray to Loria that Colden gets him out of Min-Thuret so perhaps we can get the chance to meet Elias Gherahn."

The look on his face isn't one of promise, and he says nothing in response about his old friend. I know there's much to work through when it comes to the prince, things we may not be able to see beyond, no matter who he was in the past. But more than a thread of memory was stolen from him. He doesn't even know his name. He was stripped of everything that made him Elias Gherahn and left an empty, lonely, roaming vessel for three centuries. No matter what he's done under Thamaos's poisonous command, I can't place all the blame on his shoulders.

Alexus hands me Father's note and pushes his hair back from his face, pausing with his elbow on his knee, his fingers sticking out of his dark locks. "I know I said I'd drop this, but I hate letting you leave with Neri."

A sigh leaves me. Not that I believed I would get out of this conversation without *some* mention of the wolf, but I no longer know what to say. That he's so very different than I imagined? That perhaps three hundred years of viewing the human world from within Alexis's cage changed him in some way? I don't sense cruelty in Neri. I don't sense evil, no matter what jibes I

throw at him. He is everything I didn't want or need him to be.

But I can't say those words to Alexis.

"I can see that you've found comfort with him," he goes on. "That's a struggle for me for obvious reasons, but I also feel a duty to take care of you for Colden and Raina. And I can't imagine either of them being all right with this arrangement. But I won't say anything else except *please be safe*."

I squeeze his knee and try to ease him as best I can. "I *will* be safe. Believe it or not, I feel no fear for the wolf. He hasn't overstepped any line I've drawn. If anything, he wants to protect me just as much as you do."

Again, he says nothing, watching silently as I fold the note and put it away in my pack.

With the quiet suddenly so thick, I'm left to wonder if I should tell him everything we've learned about the curse. I decide against that quickly, though, because the tension in him visibly eased at my words. I can't leave him here alone, even more worried than before.

Hand in hand, we head to the great room where everyone waits for us, each face solemn. I'm nervous and worried. The return from the barracks wasn't the smoothest. It was noticeable enough that Neri and I devoured the last of Mari's stew, just to be on the safe side.

Alexis and I pause just inside the doorway, and I lean over to kiss his cheek, my hand around his wrist. "Thank you for trusting me to do this. I swear I'll do my very best to lead our people."

"I have no doubt in you," he says. But his gaze slides across the room. Because he does have doubt in the god who's traveling with me.

Gripping the strap across my chest, I meet Neri's golden gaze. He stands from his chair and walks toward me, dressed in black, his white hair a stark contrast against his leather jacket. My heart pounds with his every booted step, knowing that we might make it to Winterhold, and we might not.

But that worry is for *us* to deal with. Us and us alone.

He stops a stride away, hands tucked in the front pockets of his leathers, galatine sword and a pack slung across his back. "You ready?"

I take a deep breath and blow it out. "As I'll ever be."

Everyone gets up to say their goodbyes. When Callan reaches me, they linger, holding my hands. "Will you please tell my family I'm all right?" they ask. "And give them these? They hand me two thick letters sealed in pretty envelopes.

"Of course I will." I accept the letters and place them with my father's

before reaching up to wipe a tear from Callan's cheek. "I will keep your family safe. I promise you that."

They nod, and I feel the trust granted me.

Then it's just me, Neri, and Alexis standing there as everyone else looks on.

"Take care of her," Alexis says to the northern god. "If you meet with any trouble, just get her back here."

"No harm will come to her so long as I'm breathing," Neri says in response.

He reaches for me, takes my hand, and draws me to him. My face burns at the intimate action, even more so when he slips my hands behind his head, tugs me close, and leans in to press his lips against my ear, as though there's no one else in the room.

"Fly me home, little bird," he whispers.

And with the ice around my frozen heart melting, I do.



## NEPHELE

When I was a girl, I fell out of a tall tree while playing with Raina. I remember feeling like I was falling forever. Fear gripped me in a cold fist of panic as I primed myself for the inevitable impact. That same terror is what I'm feeling right now, only intensified as Neri and I plummet, cast from the aether's dark embrace.

Eyes squeezed tight, wind whistles and wails around us, the air bitter cold.

"Legs!" Neri shouts, and I instinctively know to wrap my legs around him.

His arms tighten as we tumble head over foot, his big hand splayed around the back of my head, holding me close as though to protect me from the brunt force I know awaits.

We hit trees first, crashing through evergreens, the stiff limbs barely slowing our descent as the needly boughs slice at our faces. Birds erupt from their nests and creatures of the night scream as we're tossed and tipped through their nocturnal world what feels like a thousand times before we're ripped apart. Finally, I free-fall, the collision softened only by a snowy forest floor.

When I strike the ground, all the wind bursts from my chest and my vision goes black for long seconds. But a gasp hits me, and I inhale deep breaths of frigid winter air.

My heart lurches to life, pounding. Having landed on my back, I blink up at a snowy haze, a billion streaking flakes blurring out a canopy of tree limbs and a night sky beyond. Even through the gray obscurity, I can see the aether

shimmering in the trees, dripping like quicksilver.

A groan snaps me out of my daze, and I turn, my head splitting with pain along the back of my skull as I look for Neri.

He pushes up from the snow and claws toward me, hovering over me and touching my face. “Are you all right? Is anything hurt? Broken?”

The snowfall is so thick I can barely see his face. But his golden eyes are impossible to miss, bright as stars.

“I’m... I’m good, I think. The snow saved us.” Already shivering, I hold out my hand, and he takes it, helping me sit up. Icy wind tears at my braided hair, making my head throb worse, which is distracting. But I instantly notice a loss. “My pack is gone.”

He glances around, and though the strong wind provides resistance to his effort, he pushes through, stalking several strides away to what looks like a mound of snow. I would’ve never found it, but he retrieves my pack.

“Night vision?” I ask when he returns, wondering how that works. I’ve never seen his eyes so reflective.

“Yes. It’s a bit more intense than usual. I’m not sure why, but I’m glad. Because I think we’re going to need it.”

“I don’t know what happened,” I say over the cutting wind, strapping on my pack. “What I did wrong.”

We even ate Mari’s stew before we left. I didn’t feel too weak to carry us.

He shakes his head. “It isn’t you. The aether rejected *us*. Very likely because you’re carrying me, and it seems every godly power I possess is rejecting me now, and I don’t understand why. We’ll have to figure it out later. Right now, we must find shelter, and I think I know of a place.”

I look around, confused. “How can you possibly know of a place? Where are we?”

He wipes snow from his eyes with the back of his hand and sighs. “The fucking Gravenna Mountains.”



OUR WALK IS GRUELING.

We’re on the northern side of the mountains, moving downhill on a dark, snowy night. Neri found a rope in his pack and tied it around our waists to keep us together because I can hardly see. My mental wards are down so we

can communicate, and the wolf uses that open connection to help guide me. I also hold on to the rope, but I keep my head down and angled away from the harsh wind so I can squint my eyes open to see yet another snowy blur.

There shouldn't be this much snow here, nor should it be this painfully cold. We're too far south. In the highest elevations? Or further north in the valley? Perhaps.

But not here.

Yet at least four feet of snow has accumulated in places, if not more, and more is steadily falling and rapidly building. There's no explanation for it. Just a weather anomaly. But something sets me on edge at that notion. Neri, too.

Because he can't control it. Hard as he tries, his usual power over the northern climate has vanished, the same as his ability to sift. Worse still, when I try calling the aether, I can sense it nearby, but it disappears as if it refuses to come near us.

For so long, we move together through the trees, staying to the shallow drifts, the spitting snow unrelenting. I've endured eight brutal winters at Winterhold and plenty of white winters in the vale. And though I've been through worse, this night chose to deliver its own brutality.

My clothes aren't meant for being trapped outside in frigid weather. My pants are fitted homespun, my jacket a nice brocade. But my cloak isn't fur-lined, and I have no gloves. Only my knee-high leather boots are somewhat adequate protection.

I try not to think about it, because Neri will make a matter of it, and we don't have time for him to fuss over my comfort.

Eventually, the snow and wind slow their assault as we near the base of the mountain. But now that the howling blizzard has quieted, I also hear other sounds. Sounds beyond our crunching steps. Sounds that make the hairs on the back of my neck prickle.

Neri pauses, causing me to stumble to a halt. There's a moment of dead quiet as he reaches back to grab the rope and tugs me close against him. Slowly, he turns his chin over his shoulder and presses one long finger to his lips.

Dread swells inside my chest as I scan the night around us. All I can see are trees and more trees and a little silvery light reflecting off the snow. There must be something more only a wolf can detect because Neri reaches over his back and silently unsheathes his sword.



With alarm flooding my veins, I carefully slip *my* sword free. Then I hear it.

Low grunts. Hooves stamping. Quick snorts.

*"Great Horns,"* Neri says into my mind.

I swallow hard. I've never seen these beasts, but I know hunting them requires skill. I also know they're this area's apex predators, and the herd stalks prey together, guiding it to a place where they can surround their victim.

They're carnivorous and lightning fast, their antlers sharp as spears, their mouths filled with razor-edged teeth. If that's what's out there, and if they're surrounding us, it will require a miracle of magick to construct a cage that size in this forest. One that we don't get trapped in as well.

*"They know me,"* Neri says. *"They even bowed down and offered sacrifice the last time I was here so I could feed you and your friends. So let's keep moving. They're probably only curious. Just try not to spook them, be quiet, and stay alert."*

*"Traveling with the God of the North has its advantages,"* I say. *"The big dick of the forest."*

I imagine him laughing at that, the low, deep sound he makes in his chest.

*"Yes, I suppose my big dick is a blessing when you're not falling from the sky because it's in your presence."*

I'm not entirely convinced that's why the aether abandoned us, and I know he hears my thoughts on the matter. But our mental conversation falls silent as we move on, eyes peeled.

Being physically quiet is impossible. Every time a booted foot crushes through deep snow, I cringe. So we start moving in unison, cutting the sound by half, though I'm beginning to doubt it matters, save for not spooking the animals. The Great Horns have seen us, yet they stay to the trees, hopefully, because their god is in their midst. Regardless, I still feel like a walking, warm-blooded meal.

Neri pauses again. *"There's a clearing ahead. That's where they want us to go, but not for any other reason than we're being herded in that direction. For an attack."*

My stomach drops. *"Well, don't fucking take us there."*

*"I don't have much choice. They're everywhere. And they aren't responding to my mental commands to leave."*

*"Do they normally?"*

*“Yes. How do you think I got them to sacrifice one of their herd for food? They must know me. Yet I can sense their aggression. The hunt. They’re just waiting.”*

I turn a look around the wood. Amid the flurries, I see eyes much like Neri’s, reflecting the snow light.

My mind races with thoughts of what to do. *“If we get to the clearing, it will be easier for us to fight and easier for me to use the wood against them.”*

He’s silent for too long, long enough for me to hear the grunts, stamping, and snorts increasing in loudness and closeness, making my pulse kick up a notch.

I know Neri doesn’t like this. His first thought is endearingly about my safety. But I remind him of one thing.

*“I can take care of myself, wolf. Haven’t you seen me with a sword?”*

*“Yes. It’s a lovely, terrifying sight. But there are at least two dozen of these bastards, and I’d rather keep you whole than in pieces.”*

*“I feel the same about you,”* I tell him honestly. *“But it seems we’ll have to fight our way out of this whether you like it or not.”*

An annoyed sigh leaves him as he begins moving again. *“I’m preparing you now,”* he says. *“You haven’t seen me in my true wolf form. But at least I haven’t lost him. He’s raging inside me, sensing the threat. If they attack, I’m letting him out to play.”*

Another chill prickles the back of my neck. I am but a witch in a forest with beasts.

The clearing comes into view too quickly, a pale circle illuminated by reflected moonlight. I try to keep my fear at bay, any thoughts of it suffocated under the line of consciousness Neri can only hear above. But my heartbeat pounds in my ears, and my breaths are coming so hard and fast that cold plumes surround me.

Neri stops us dead center of the clearing and swiftly slices his blade through the rope between us. I already loathe the idea of being untethered, but I wasn’t given a choice in the matter.

He faces me, his eyes on the surrounding wood, where dozens of glowing eyes come closer and closer, growing larger and larger.

*“Put yourself in a cage,”* he orders. *“Then sit down, cover your ears, and close your eyes.”*

Frowning, I shake my head. *“Absolutely the fuck not. I’m fighting with*

you.”

His bright gaze settles on me, and everything about him suddenly changes. His broad shoulders and powerful arms—already so massive—only grow wider, stretching the seams of his leather until they groan against the strain. His human ears grow points, and his fangs are out too, though they grow longer and sharper, deadlier. Even his forehead begins to bulge, and his sharp cheekbones and nose start morphing into the snout of a wolf.

He drops his pack and passes his sword to me with a hand that soon won’t be a hand at all. The claws are already so long. Longer than normal. Like the blade on the hook scythe in my father’s secret room. They could slice someone open with one swipe.

When he speaks, I shiver at the power in the sound, the gravelly huskiness so low and deep I feel each word reverberate in my belly.

“My little bird needs a cage. Please. Just do it.”

“I’m not scared of you,” I tell him, as I have told him before.

But this time, his answer isn’t anything tender. This time, he bares his fangs and says, “You should be. I haven’t shifted in three centuries. I have no idea what this will be like for me. So *go*. Please, Nephele.”

I hesitate, and I almost refuse him, no matter what’s happening before my eyes. But then he stumbles back and roars at the sky, a cry of sheer agony that tears through the forest and cleaves my heart with his misery.

Arms outstretched and head thrown back, the beast that has been contained within Neri all this time bursts through his clothes, leaving them in shreds on the snow. Its chest swells and heaves as the bones contort. Throughout the struggle, he inhales great breaths of winter air, exhaling massive clouds that hover above us.

The Great Horns enter the clearing’s arena then, stamping and blowing. They look positively evil, their snarling mouths hanging open and dripping with saliva, lips drawn back over two long rows of razored teeth.

Neri was right. There are at least two dozen beasts, and they are enormous.

I don’t want to obey and protect myself, but Neri lifts his head and glares at me, a wolfish monster if there ever was one. When he howls, an unholy sound that splits the night, I tremble with true fear. Not for myself. But for him.

At his war cry, the Great Horns close in, stalking toward us with menace in every step. This cannot be my physical fight. They will slaughter me in

moments, and Neri will go down trying to protect me.

But not all fights are physical.

I drop our swords and summon the wood. Fallen limbs crawl and skitter across the clearing, across the snow, and begin weaving a cage around me.

Before I can do anything to prevent it, a Great Horn bolts across the clearing in a blink and rams into the cage, destroying one side. Splintered pieces of wood fly by my face, one stabbing into my shoulder.

I stumble back, gripping branches to stay upright as the animal rears back and rams the wood again, almost reaching me with those deadly antlers. I meet its gaze. It looks wild. Crazy. Demented.

And it smells like putrid death.

Like brimstone.

A white blur whips around my cage and slams into the Great Horn's ribs, knocking the animal across the clearing where it tumbles and lands before other members of its herd.

My eyes meet with Neri's honey irises, ringed in brightest gold, as I jerk the wooden shard from my shoulder. "I'm okay," I tell him. "I promise."

More Great Horns attack then, and they focus on Neri. His beast drops to all fours and launches itself from the snow at three Great Horns that charge him at blinding speeds.

I'm not certain what I expect, but to see him clamp that massive mouth around one animal's neck and snap it with a flick of his head, all while grabbing the other two by the antlers and slamming them to the ground, is utterly heart stopping. Not only because it's such an impressive demonstration of his power.

But also because I smell the blood from here.

As a strange keening cry fills the night, my thoughts get distracted. I catch a glimpse of movement to my right, only to see a Great Horn pawing at the ground, preparing to attack my cage. Quickly, I repair the damage, and more limbs hurry to help, but it won't be enough.

It's only temporary, but with Neri's galatine sword in my hand, I call on a bit of skill and watch as the metal all but melts and begins ribboning through the twined limbs, reinforcing the wood.

This time, when a Great Horn crashes into my cage, its horns get stuck in the tangle of indestructible metal.

I reach for my sword and drive it through the beast's enormous chest, jerking my head back as hot blood sprays. I rip my sword free and lick the

blood from my lips, leaving the Great Horn's lifeless body to slump against the wood.

I'm shaking, partly from battle, partly from fear, and partly from the craving building inside me with that warm, rich scent floating in the air as blood drips upon the snow.

I force myself to turn away, even as my gums begin to ache like they did those first days of the curse and search for Neri instead.

Panic hurtles through me as I turn in my cage. He's gone.

At the same time, the Great Horns seem to notice that he isn't here, and in his absence, all focus falls on me. They surround my cage, heads low, teeth bared, maws pouring with drool like they're starving.

Their odor is beyond anything I've ever faced, and I can't imagine what it is. It's so far from the smell of beast, strong enough to make me gag and nearly vomit on the snow.

The Great Horns begin tearing at my cage. They use teeth, hooves, and antlers to gnaw a hole or kick through or gore me.

I dodge every attempt and even kill a few by driving my sword through their mouths. Still, the others are relentless.

With a horde attacking, my cage begins to rock. Side to side. Side to side. As though they understand what they're doing, the animals work harder to tip it over. It happens so fast I don't have a second to prevent it.

On my back, I finally scream. The animals climb atop the cage, their weight and stabbing antlers tearing away at the wooden barrier. The galatine holds, but there's so little of it. If one of these goddamn bastards gets a hold of me, they will drag me from this cage, piece by piece.

There's a moment of sudden pause. The Great Horns fall still and cock their ears.

But they're too late.

Neri comes out of nowhere, plummeting from the sky and landing on my cage, rattling the whole thing, and sending pieces of wood raining down on me.

Above, he suffers a swipe of an antler across his side, cutting deep enough that blood pours down his white fur, streaming down his leg.

In a rage of fury, he rips the throats from two Great Horns at once, punching his fist through the chest of another, and yanking out its heart. He throws the bloody organs and tissues into the clearing, all while those same keening wails from before fill the night.

It's then that I grasp a new fighter has entered the arena. Through a wedge of visibility between the dead bodies of two Great Horns, I glimpse two more white wolves. I have to blink, because they look just like Neri, and they attack so quickly that two Great Horns, fast as they are, don't have time to react before they're dragged from my cage, and the slaughter begins.

More wolves pour from the wood, smaller though. Normal wolves. A dozen swarm a single Great Horn and take him down, flinging innards and blood across the snow. More follow the same pattern, dropping the deadly beasts by use of their numbers. It's a gruesome sight to behold as the God of the North's wolves rise to his defense.

But a few Great Horns at the cage still come after Neri and me.

I grip my sword in both hands, one fist in a reverse grip, the blade pointed to my right where a Great Horn snaps its maw at my cage. The thing growls at me, and the strangest thing happens.

It speaks.

"You will not win, Bloodgood." Its voice is slithery and malevolent. "Neither will your White Wolf. Thamaos *seeee* you both. He watches you. *Weeee* watch you. And we will only come *baaaack*."

I struggle to breathe, realizing the smell is because we're surrounded by wraiths who have possessed a herd of Great Horns. Raina told me of the smell that wafted from Helena, of the sulfur, the brimstone.

Fear and loathing stab my heart like a knife. Thankfully, loathing wins.

In the span of a heartbeat, the Great Horn closes the short distance between us and shoves his snapping snout through a gap in the limbs. I jam the tip of my sword into the creature's eye.

"Tell Thamaos to go fuck himself!" I twist my blade as hard as I can.

The animal screams and thrashes and falls back, flinging itself free of my blade. When it charges a second time, I catch it in the mouth like the others, pushing my blade deep until the thing finally jolts and jerks and blessedly dies, but not before I hear that keening cry again, as though it's flying away from us.

The wraith fled before I could trap it within the beast and send it back to the Nether Reaches. Godsdamnit.

Neri takes care of the others. He swipes his claws across a throat, sending more blood spilling into my cage, then he rips the head off another and tosses it into the clearing for his friends. I look for the two beasts that look like Neri, but they're gone.

White chest heaving and the entirety of him covered in blood, my wolf looks down at me with that beastly face, his golden eyes intent on me, and somehow, I fucking swoon for the beast and the god within.

He throws his head back and howls, this time a sound of victory, and my tight, tense muscles release, even as I lie in the bloody snow, buried under the weight of realization.

Thamaos already has a hold in this land.

When the night quiets and the wolves retreat, dragging their kills into the forest, Neri stares down at me again through the cage, studying my handiwork. I recall the galatine and watch as it reforms into his sword, the hilt in my shaky grip.

Carefully, he rips away the wood and extends a clawed paw that's already changing back to the lovely, strong hand I have learned so well.

"Come, little bird," he says, his voice rough, deep, and comforting.

Without a second of hesitation, I reach for him.





## NEPHELE

**I**t takes Neri over an hour to return to his human form.

The pain is unbearable to witness, how his wolf form seems to want to dominate and remain, fighting him from the inside out. He howls and struggles on all fours in the snow, facing away from me, as though he doesn't want me to see. But I cannot look away from him. The bones contorting and shifting under the pale moonlight, the battle of skin and fur, of beast and god.

I want to help. And I tried, only for Neri to roar in my face, ordering me to leave. But I didn't go far.

I sit a few strides away atop our piled packs, huddled in my cloak, doing my best to hold a small construct to shelter us from the bitter wind. My strength is already waning, and the scent of blood is everywhere, making me crave.

Especially Neri's blood. Now that I've tasted it, it seems my body could pick it out amid the gore of a battlefield if needed. It makes me feel little different from the beasts that were in this clearing tonight. The only difference is that I have the form of a woman, and I don't have fangs and claws. Yet. As my gums and teeth ache, I realize I'm not entirely certain that change isn't coming.

Neri slams his fist into the snow and roars again. Every muscle in my body tightens at the sound. For a moment, I'm not sure he can win this fight.

But then his back changes. The curved spine straightens, followed by his broad shoulders snapping hard, like they're moving back into place. His legs change too, the bunched, thick muscles shifting to the slightly smaller legs of a powerful man. The fur that still covers him in places vanishes, leaving

behind a naked Neri, light gold skin glistening beneath a sheen of sweat in the moonlight.

I retrieve what clothes he has in his pack—a wool tunic, trousers, and his leather slippers—and hurry to his side. When he looks up at me, I see worry shining in his eyes.

“You’re still here,” he says, his voice rough and raw.

I cup his handsome face. “Do you really think I’d leave you, wolf?”

He sighs, then collapses in the snow, rolling to his back. The bloody antler wound across his side is coagulating, but the gash seems deep, and the scent is making me ravenous, which turns my stomach. The thought of wanting him when he’s hurt feels wrong.

“I didn’t want you to see that,” he says. “My beast has never been so difficult.”

Though it pains me, I sit beside him, glancing at his nakedness, and do my best to act unbothered by the blood. “Well, I did see it. And it changes nothing. So let’s agree to discuss it once we find shelter.” I hold up his clothes. “Right now, we need to get you dressed before you freeze your bits off.”

He peers up at me, and thankfully, a small smile quirks his lips. “Worried for my bits, are we?”

I take his hand and help him sit up. Bloody as we both are, and even though I have to tamp down my need, I lean in and kiss him. Just a soft kiss. A press of our cold lips. I need to feel him and let him feel my relief that he’s here.

“I’m worried about *all* of you,” I say when I pull back. “But the bits especially. They’re lovely bits.”

With those whiskey eyes bright, his grin widens, just a little, and he slides his hand into my hair. “I’m glad to hear you think so. Now let’s get to that cabin.”



THE CABIN NERI SAW FROM A DISTANCE WHEN HE LAST VISITED THIS WOOD with Alexis and Finn is a modest dwelling. More like a hunting shelter. Best we can tell, it’s empty of people and it has a roof and a chimney, which is enough for tonight.

Neri and I stare at a stack of chopped firewood near the main door, but it's half-covered in a snow drift like the rest of the cabin, including the door.

"I can dig our way in," I say, fully aware that he cannot help me. Or *should* not help me, at least. He has to be weak after the battle he just fought, and he's still bleeding.

The moment I begin the work, he stalks around the cabin and, after a *bang* rattles the night, returns with a brow arched high. "I found a window. Broke the shutter clasp. Bit easier than digging, little bird."

I toss the skinny piece of wood I was using as a shovel aside and roll my eyes at myself for not thinking to look for a window. "Don't make fun of me. I'm tired."

He doesn't even chuckle as I grab an arm full of firewood from the top of the stack near the door and stalk past.

"I would never," he says.

After dumping three armloads of firewood into the cabin, I force him to enter first so I can help him. He's so big that his wide shoulders barely fit. Once he finally squeezes through, though, I toss our packs inside and slip across the window frame with ease, landing on my feet in the darkness.

Neri closes the shutters and wedges a small, flat piece of wood in the broken hardware to hold them closed. I'm immediately thankful for the shelter from the wind. Unfortunately, the small cabin is as cold and frozen inside as outside.

Pretending not to notice Neri wincing from the pain in his side, I drop our packs on the plank floor and stifle a sigh at the release of weight I refused to let him help carry. But he seems to want to be useful even now, and though I would rather him just sit down and let me tend to things, I know he won't.

He grabs several pieces of wood from the floor and, with a slight limp in his step and another wince, kneels by the hearth, stacking the logs. "Can you work some magick on this wet wood and search for a tinder box?" he asks. "There has to be one."

Weeping water from wood is a small task. Afterward, I hunt in the darkness, worried I might not find anything. But when my fingers flutter over a cold metal case atop the mantle, my worry is relieved.

Neri lets me start the fire, not a word shared between us. He's been too quiet since we left the clearing, slipping into long stretches of deep thought. His mind is in turmoil over this curse and Thamaos and the wraiths, as mine is, but he's shut me out for now while he works through things, I suppose. I

try to respect his boundaries the way he has tried to respect mine.

Once a spark finally catches, and flames take hold, I stand with my hands over the fire, soaking the rising warmth into my bones. Neri remains on his knees at the hearth's edge, eyes bright as he stares into the firelight.

We stay like that for several minutes as the heat begins thawing the room, until I can bear the silence no longer. Odd that as much as I have despised Neri's arrogant mouth these last days, I desperately want to hear his voice right now. Even one of his lewd remarks would do. Anything to shatter the brittle quiet.

I turn my back to the fire to assess our lodgings more closely. My stomach tightens at the sight of a single bed, large enough for one person, something we'll have to worry about later. There's also a lone oaken table, just big enough to sustain the weight of a brawny god while I perform a quick surgery on his injured side.

If I can bear it, and if he will let me.

His blood reminds me of an earthy, rich wine, the flavor a little sweet on the tongue. It tortured me in the clearing while he dressed, it tortured me while we walked to this hovel, and it will torture me when I must come face to face with it. That's all I've thought about for the last hour. Still, it must be done.

"You should let me tend your wound. Perhaps sew the gash shut unless you want to try the other option. I have the necessary tools in my pack. I can at least clean up the damage."

Too many more wordless moments pass. "Other option?"

I face him, clutching my elbows against the cold. "After having ingested blood, your finger healed. It could help you now."

His forehead pulls down in the middle. "You're suggesting I drink from you?"

I shrug a shoulder. "Better me than some wild animal, no? That we'd have to hunt for? You tasted my blood in the reading room. And now I've tasted yours. I know it heals. I know it gives strength. Like it or not, the curse the grove placed on us has to do with blood."

"That it may. But I can't feed from you, Nephele. I won't. Curse or no curse."

"Why not?" I ask, genuinely curious. "It could ease your pain. And it isn't like we haven't already done it. You fed me and enjoyed it. You kissed me and tasted it, and I know you relished it."

“That was *passion*. That was *desire*. That was mere *drops* of blood spared for you and by you. I have a *beast* inside me, Nephele, and far more than a cut across the tip of my finger. I cannot risk tempting my wolf like that. If I hurt you... If I lost control...” He shakes his head. “I’ll heal on my own. It might take longer than usual, but I *will* heal. We’re not discussing the *other option* any further.”

“Oh really?” I fold my arms, hands balled into fists, and raise my eyebrows toward my hairline. “Because you say so? I hear the worry in your voice, you know. And in your silence. Your godly power isn’t answering, your beast is harder to control than you hoped, and your ability to heal is not improving. If not part of the curse, these things would be getting better. Not worse. It might serve you well to at least try. I don’t know what the curse wants from us or what it’s doing to us, but you need strength. If Thamaos launches another attack before we find a way out of here, you certainly need to be whole, and I assure you, strength can be found in *me*. You just have to take it.”

He turns back to the fire, face hard. I’m not sure what strikes me then. What makes me need to return us to bickering, bantering fools so badly that I become brazen, but I do.

“I know one part of you that functions just fine. Actually, I’m not sure there’s a moment when it isn’t functioning, except perhaps now, when I finally wouldn’t mind it.”

His tight face softens just the slightest but remains expressionless. “Only you would make such a coquettish quip to change the subject.” Once more, he looks up at me, eyes narrowed. “Or perhaps you’re just trying to get what you want.”

My skin flashes hot. “And what do I want, exactly? Are you certain you know?”

Neri slips his hand across his side and stands. Though the effort makes him clench his jaw, he takes a shallow breath and straightens to his full height until he’s looming over me.

His usual wicked grin is absent, but he still tries to meet me halfway. “Oh, I’m certain. I smell your want even now. You want me, of course. Naked.”

I raise a brow, relieved to hear a bit of teasing after so much coldness and seriousness. “Too right. Shirtless anyway.” I cross to the small table and pat the chilled wood. “Come on. Let me at least have a look. I can handle it. And

we *do* need you well, sooner rather than later.”

He hesitates, but like the frost quickly melting from the room, the chilly exterior he erected at my mention of helping him by letting him drink from me begins to fade. Slowly, he joins me and slides onto the table, the wood groaning beneath his weight.

Glancing at my hands in the firelight, I cringe at the gore dried to my skin. “We need water to clean up before we do anything.”

I grab the kettles hanging from the hearth and head for the door to gather snow. Minutes later, I have two pots of hot water and several strips of linen for cleaning cloths, torn from one of my shirts. I also retrieve a sewing kit from my pack and locate two deep dish pans and a lump of soap so we can wash our hands without dirtying a kettle of water. We get right to it, scrubbing and washing until our hands are clean.

I change out the water, and as Neri washes his face, I stare at his bloody shirt.

“The fabric has dried to the injury,” I tell him. “Removing your tunic might hurt.”

Without a word, he reaches for the hem and rips the shirt over his head. He grunts, but that’s the only signal to pain.

“I’ve endured worse,” he says. “Believe me.”

“I’m sure. But next time, warn me.”

I won’t say why, though I think he knows. I’m sure he can sense my heart beating harder as I begin cleaning the freshly bleeding wound, going through several cloths to absorb the seepage.

“It’s not as deep as I thought,” I say, carefully inspecting. “I can try to sew it shut, but I fear it’ll be difficult with all this blood. We must stop the bleeding and perhaps try again in a few hours.”

I rub the back of my hand across my brow. I’m so exhausted, and I feel lightheaded. The fact that the thought of licking my fingers is a consideration that’s anywhere near entering my mind makes me want to cry. I haven’t had time to sit with this curse’s implications. That blood is now the *only* thing I hunger for and will possibly *ever* hunger for.

Save for the god sitting before me.

Neri touches my face, his eyes tender. “Wash your hands and go look in my pack for a pair of sleeping trousers.”

I frown, but I do it.

When I return, he takes my dagger and shreds the pants into long strips

that he begins wrapping around his torso, atop a thick stack of the torn linen from earlier, placed right over the wound.

I help him, standing between his legs, wrapping him up tight until we've used every last piece from his trousers.

As I tuck the end of the final piece behind the others, Neri rests his hand on my hip. I straighten, realizing how close we are.

With his other hand, he takes one of the smaller pieces of linen from the table, dips it into the still-warm water, and begins cleaning my face with gentle, short strokes.

Instinctively, I flinch and give an embarrassed gasp. "I must look a sight."

I try to take the cloth from him, but he stops me, gripping my wrist lightly as he stares into my eyes.

"You cared for me. Let me care for you."

Heart thumping, I relax and let him return to his task. I don't look away from him as he works, his face attentive. He tenderly cleans every spot of blood from my skin, even the bits in my hair and splatters on my neck.

It's impossible to stop my already pounding heart from racing when he sets to unfastening my bloodstained jacket one button at a time. Or when he pushes the garment over my shoulders and lets it fall to the floor.

He takes my face in his hands. "You look so tired. I don't sleep, but I would like to lie with you while you do. If you want that."

I fold my fingers around his wrists. "You know what I want. I know I can't hide it. I even took a dose of birthbane from Yaz's apothecary. But now we're here in the middle of nowhere, being hunted down like literal animals, and you're injured. I'd say I have terrible luck."

His lips quirk on one side as he slips off the table and, holding my hand, leads me across the room to the bed. Much to my relief, the bed linens look clean and well cared for, if still cold.

Neri kicks off his leather shoes as he reaches for the thick wool blanket and folds it back, revealing white sheets beneath. In truth, we would've slept in this bed, crushed together, regardless of cleanliness. But this makes the event far easier.

He crawls into the bed on his uninjured side, his back against the wall, and motions for me to join him. "Come here," he says softly.

He looks so inviting lying there, and though the room is still warming, I don't want a barrier between us. I want to feel his skin on mine.

I let down every ward around my mind and remove my tunic, hanging it

from the short bedpost. Underneath, I wear nothing but the green silk undergarment I took from my things at Starworth Tor.

Neri's eyes turn molten at the sight of me, and I can see his fangs extend by their simple push against his upper lip. The lowest growl rumbles in his chest. "You're trying to murder me."

I smile. "Actually, I was hoping to entice you to my bedchambers once we reached Winterhold," I tell him, my chest rising and falling on shallower breaths. "I wanted to invite you to do all those depraved things you mentioned."

When he looks into my thoughts, he offers a small smile when he finds nothing but honesty. "Come here," he says again. Gruffer this time.

I kick off my boots and slip beneath the covers, facing him. He folds his arm beneath his head, staring at me as he trails his fingertips back and forth across my collarbone and up the curve of my neck.

"I'm telling myself I need to let you rest," he says. "That we have a dozen worrisome things to discuss if you're going to stay awake. That I'm in no condition to do the things I want so badly to do to you." He slides his fingertips from my collarbone down to my breast, lingering at my nipple where his thumb circles the hardened tip through the silk. "I tell myself these things, yet I can't stop touching you."

I close my eyes as he pinches me hard, the way I like it. "I don't want you to stop."

"I know." He flicks his fingertip over my nipple. "Your little heart is flying, and you smell like the most delicious want."

Unexpectedly, Neri slips his hand between my legs. I gasp as he rubs me, then sets to loosening the laces of my trousers.

"Your side," I remind him, as though he needs me to do so.

He works deftly at the laces. "There are many ways to fuck, little bird."

I shove out of my pants and undergarment so fast it's almost embarrassing, but the moment I'm facing him again, he drags me close and slides his hand back where I need him, gripping me hard as he looks into my eyes.

"This is already my pussy." An even firmer grasp. "You understand that, yes? Mine."

My heart stutters, and something inside me that feels as ancient as the grove unfurls with glee at the thought of being claimed by him. Of being marked as part of the God of the North's territory. Of being taken and had



and fucked by the White Wolf. It might not happen the way I want tonight, but it will soon, and I am ready.

“Take it if it’s yours,” I whisper against his lips. “Give me relief.”

With our eyes locked, he slides a thick finger through the slick heat gathered between my legs, then deep into me.

“So fucking wet.” He pulls out and sucks his finger into his mouth, savoring every drop, growling at the taste before plunging back inside me, then tasting again. “Gods, you’re even better than I dreamed.”

He kisses me then, finger slipping back inside my pussy, and I suck on his luscious tongue, tasting myself, my need. I curve my hips toward him, unable to stop the absolute feral sound that escapes me as he curls his finger repeatedly over that tender spot deep within, making me want more, making me want to take him so deep it hurts.

Injured or not, he leans down and bites my nipple through the silky green fabric, tugging the sensitive flesh between his teeth over and over as he begins pumping his finger in and out of me in more punishing thrusts.

I reach for the strap of my undergarment and slip it from my shoulder, offering him my breast, needing him to ravish me while he fucks me, wishing he would bite down and drink.

Neri drags his teeth more roughly over my bare nipple, and I realize he can hear my thoughts, my every desire. I show him the fucking I ache for, to be taken in every way by him. In response, he groans as he licks me, swirling his tongue over the taut peak of my breast, sucking it into his mouth as he inserts another thick finger, stretching me wide. His cock twitches against me, and I stroke my hand along its length through his pants, reveling at the unyielding hardness and that throbbing, swollen head.

“I can give you what you want,” he whispers, just before he licks his way up my neck, his fingers fucking me with an expert touch. “You are my every fantasy, too. Every single godsdamn one. Believe me when I tell you that I can be yours.”

I grind shamelessly on his hand, chasing the need that started building the day he first came into my presence. When he adds his thumb, setting to work on flicking my clit, I grip his shoulder, sure that I will lose myself in seconds and come on his torturous fingers.

He rakes his teeth across my nipple, then drags them up to my throat again, hovering over my pulse, the scrape of his fangs *right there*.

For a weighted moment, I think I’m going to get what I want, that he will

finally penetrate my flesh and suck again, filling me with the same euphoria that trickled through me the two times I've shared blood with him.

Instead, he lets out a growl that shatters the quiet, and he's ripped away from me, as though a mighty hand reached down and snatched him from our bed.

He crouches in the corner, shrouded in shadow. His breathing has changed, from the ragged-edged breaths of a human caught in the throes of passion to the deep, raspy inhales dragging through the chest of a beast.

I shoot to my feet, all but naked, panting from a strange mix of desire and fear. Neri didn't fully shift, but he's close.

"I need out." His voice is a desperate, guttural plea. I move closer, hoping to calm him, my hand outstretched, but he snaps. "*Get back, Nephele. Listen to me.*"

I only keep moving, taking small steps as his chest swells and falls with heaving breaths. "How many times must I tell you I don't fear you?" I say. "Not even like this."

Another low-rolling growl resonates through the room. He's on me in an instant, flashing across the room, hand around my throat, pinning me to the bed before the chill crawling up my spine can reach the nape of my neck.

I gasp, taking in the light of his eyes, irises like liquid fire.

With fangs bared and glinting, he leans close on a whisper. "And how many times must I tell you that you should?"

"You told me *once*," I remind him, willing my heart to slow, trying to remain calm in hopes that it will help him. "Before tonight—before your *beast*—you said you didn't want my fear. You said you wanted my surrender." I let all the tension in my body go, even with his hand wrapped firmly around my neck. "And you can have it. As Neri. Your beast, however, gets every bit of mettle I possess until it learns how to fucking behave."

The fire in his eyes doesn't dim as he says, "Then say my name. You never say my name. If you're willing to surrender, say it."

I can hear the beast in him speaking. See it challenging the god within. And challenging me, the opposition keeping Neri fighting. It's like what happened with the aether. Maybe the gods' quintessence never stopped recognizing Neri at all. Maybe he lost the godly power to control it. *And* to control his beast.

Godly power that is ever so slowly shifting to me.

My mind whirls. How different Neri has been than I ever imagined. So

many moments when I've seen selflessness in him, for me. When I've seen glimpses of humanity. I'm gaining traits of Neri's godliness, while he's gaining traits of my humanity. It's why Thamaos can control wraiths. Because he's taking on some of Elias's power.

But what does that mean for the prince?

True fear burns through my blood. The curse is a trade of power. With a god's essence, I have no need for food, but as a *wolf*, I crave blood. Neri may not even realize what he needs yet, his mind changing to become more human before his body catches up, his godly power slowly fading. And these last several days? They're likely only the beginning, for all four of us.

I grit my aching teeth. What will I become before this is all said and done?

Holding my gaze, Neri drags his mouth over my breast, teasing my nipple with a fang, his beast caring not about my thoughts. "Say. My. Name."

I meet his gaze, unsure of what to do. I only know I can't let the beast fully take over again, or Neri might not win this time. He just isn't strong enough to fight the wolf anymore. What's worse, I know what he needs—the blood of a god, *his blood*, because the power he requires now flows in my veins. And yet I can't make him take it.

Or maybe I can.

I lift my head against his grip, looking him square in the eyes, and offer a dare. "You want me to say your name? *Make me.*"

Neri's beast roars and throws his head back, just before he sinks his fangs into my throat.



## NERI

**N**ephele's blood floods my throat, red bliss captured in my mouth.  
I clasp her wrists above her head and sink my fangs deeper at the urging of my wolf.

Her taste is divinity, her scent my master, both creating within me a hunger I have never known.

She doesn't protest as I drink. Instead, her little body writhes beneath mine, stroking me with want, the curves of her naked shape pressing into me, her pulse hammering in my ears with every powerful push of her heart.

The pulse in her wrist is a lovely rhythm beneath my fingers, one I use to time each long pull from her vein. But I sense the pulse in her tender thigh. The one near her delicate ear. The one at the inside of her slender ankle.

All of them. Calling to me. Red rivers of delight.

She shivers as I groan against her throat, my cock growing brutally erect between her spread thighs. I roll my hips against her, the god and the beast in me wanting to sink deep and never come out.

She thrashes, arching her spine, curving her hips as she tries to reach me. When she frees a hand from my grasp and slips it between us to loose my cock, I cannot stop her. I don't want to. I want her touch, and when I get it, it's so perfectly greedy it only stirs my need, so much that I leak in her hand.

She strokes me, that little stream of fluid enough to make me imagine the wet of her mouth, the tight clench of her pussy. The silky slide of her heat awaits, so, so close, and I drag my cock through her desire, longing to lose all control, to bend her over and claim her until she screams my name.

I don't know where that desire comes from in the moment. Me or the

wolf. Or both of us. All I know right now is that something inside me is changing as my body absorbs her blood.

And then I have my answer, because the wolf begins to quiet, the beast tamed once more, and I ease back on my draws from Nephele's vein, listening as her heavy and shuddering gasps slow, until it feels safe to remove my fangs.

But I still want.

I've seen her fantasies now, and I want to fulfill each one.

Lessening my grip on her wrist, I lick at her throat, at the puncture wounds, and feel them heal beneath my tongue. My side is healing too, and she must detect it, because she begins unraveling the linen from my torso, tossing each strip to the floor until there is nothing but smooth skin revealed.

I don't know if we healed because of me, or if we healed because of her. Right now, I can't care. I'm only glad that I won the battle with the wolf. It didn't feel so impossible once her blood spilled down my throat.

Braced above her, I meet her gaze, and it isn't as bright. Beneath her eyes lie bruised crescent moons that weren't there before.

I took too much.

"Nephele, forgive me." I touch her face with such suffocating sorrow inside me, a feeling I haven't experienced before. A feeling I now realize I only know because Nephele has given me the humanity Un Drallag talked about when he spoke to his friend Rhonin.

Power lies in the greatness of humanity. Because of Nephele, I now know how to *feel*.

Even though she looks so tired, and though I know I crossed a line, she brushes the backs of her fingers along my cheekbone and says, "I knew you'd win."

Something in my chest tightens painfully. "Thanks to you. My little trickster."

She takes my face in her hands and kisses me. I lose myself to her, her mouth welcoming and warm, the flavor of her blood mingling between us, a heady drug only heightening our need.

Until I catch my tongue on something sharp.

I draw back, and Nephele stares up at me with worried eyes.

Then she curls her lips back over her new fangs.

My stomach sinks. "I will fix this. I will find a way. I will—"

She presses her finger to my lips. "There's nothing to fix. I don't know

that this is something we can change. It's been coming since the day we left the grove. And I don't know if I want it to change. We need to live with this for a while. Figure out what's happening and how to best deal with it." She pauses, and a note of uncertainty fills her voice. "I just need *you*."

Hard as I am between her legs and drenched as the air is with the aroma of her longing, I know she doesn't mean sex. Not yet.

I push off her, strip away my clothes, and move to sit with my back against the headboard. I grab her and drag her onto my lap, understanding what she wants—what she needs—without having to listen to her mind.

And so I push my hair back and bare my throat.

In truth, she could take blood from me anywhere, but the intimacy of this closeness makes it such a powerful experience. I want her to feel that.

She looks at me with wariness in her eyes, her chest rising and falling faster. "This is... different."

I caress her face, her neck, her breast, her arm. "It's okay. Don't be afraid. Just do it. In the next heartbeat, you won't regret it. I promise."

Hesitance shines across the ice blue of her eyes, but she lowers her head, if slowly, as the pounding rhythm of her pulse roars in my ears once again.

When she finally succumbs, when her little fangs pierce my skin and she takes that first needy drink, the pleasure that courses through my body is just as exquisite as before.

I don't expect the moan that leaves me on a gasping breath, or the way I fist her hair and draw her yet closer. I don't expect to grip the bed's wooden head frame, or the moment when she straddles me for better access. I don't expect to feel vulnerable beneath her, either. But right now, just like I felt in the reading room, I am the prey, captured by a little bird who grew teeth.

And I want her to have me. To take me. To drink me down until there is nothing left.

When she eventually stops, I'm amazed I can feel her fangs retracting from my body. It isn't painful. It feels as sensual as a tongue slipping past plump lips.

I slide my hands down her back to the full curves of her ass as she kisses my throat, flicking her tongue over the hollow there, then the knot that bobs at her perusal.

"Please, Neri?" she whispers, her voice rough with desire.

Everything inside me lurches at the sound of her finally speaking my name, and my entire being wants to answer my siren's pleading call.

But I'm uncertain. Feeding has an arousing effect. Does she really want this? Want me? Or is it just a blood lure?

"Nephele." Her name leaves my lips as though I've ached to utter it for a thousand years. "I'm not sure you know what you're saying, little bird."

"I do." Her soft words brush against the shell of my ear. "I want you begging me to fuck you. Begging me to never stop. I want to make you feel so good it hurts."

I tighten my grip on her ass as she rubs against my cock. "I've never felt so conflicted. I want you, Nephele. Fucking stars and saints, I want you. But I want you to be—"

"Sure? Look at you, so noble," she says with a smile. "I am sure. I wanted you before all of this, Neri. I wanted you when you were in my room at Fia's palace. And even before. I think I would want you in any form. *You* are what makes me mindless. Not the blood. The blood only makes what I feel that much more intense."

As much as I love hearing that, I still open my mouth to say something that she clearly doesn't want to hear, because she shuts me up with another kiss, one that's deep and hungered, the kind of kiss that erases every worry and thought, our problems extinguished by the fire between us.

I fall into Nephele Bloodgood like I've fallen into the vastest of all darknesses, lost and untethered and a little... scared. Not of what she might do to me physically, but what every second in this cabin with her is doing to me emotionally.

Because I can't resist her, even when I fear I should. Even when I know she's about to change me in yet another unfathomable way.

Instead, I shift my hips for her and let her begin the slow journey of working her pussy down my cock. Staring deep into my eyes, one hand gripping my shoulder, she gasps roughly at the feel of my broad head entering her body.

I reach for her, slipping my hand across the back of her delicate neck and draw her down into a kiss. "You asked for this, little bird," I whisper against her mouth. "Now hurt me."

I let go then. I let go and let her be the first to claim, to grant her that power over me, the God of the North who now worships at a witch's feet.

We move together in the fire lit darkness, smothering our devotion and our cries in a kiss that swears to steal what remains of my cursed soul as she rocks and rocks, arching her body just so, the friction enough to edge me to



the precipice of bliss.

Her lips are red as wine now, her nipples hard as pebbles, I crash my mouth to both, devouring as she fucks me with relentless abandon, taking me harder, faster, deeper—so deep I know it hurts.

But if it does, she doesn't care. It only fuels her need, her hands clawing at my scalp, fisting in my hair as I give in and start pumping into her with long, brutal thrusts, meeting her every descent with an assault that jolts her entire body.

I slip my hand over her hip and touch her where I know she wants to be touched. She showed me, and I can give her that.

I push a single fingertip into her tight, puckered hole, and she shudders from the sensation, gasping and begging, fucking until I can feel us both nearing the line of no return. I inch back from it, just for a moment, and seize her lovely hair in my clenched hand, holding her trapped, pinned by my fist, my finger, and my cock.

"Look at me," I tell her, and she does, a plea in those stunning eyes.

And I destroy her. Destroy *us*. Pounding into her, that tender white throat bared for me, that pulsing vein thumping.

I drag her to my mouth and bite gently, just enough to fill her blood with blinding euphoria, to drive her mad when we finally break.

The cry that rips from her chest when I carry her to orgasm is a living thing set free in the night. Again, she begs and pleads and so do I—*never stop, don't stop, fuck me, please fuck me*—and I do. We do.

For the longest minutes, she endures her orgasm and mine, my swollen cock throbbing with every long spurt of cum into her body, her pussy clenching tight with each load until we are both trembling from the aftershocks, finally spent and drained of months of yearning.

We lie side by side, coming down from the high of it all, her shaking, me caressing.

When she stills, I push up on the small bed and lift her knee. She eyes me curiously but then realizes what I need. I have him tamed, but the wolf in me marks his mate, and I need to see it, need to see myself in her.

I slip my finger inside her, eliciting a gasp. When I spill from her body, it only makes me hard again. This time, she lets me bend her over, and after a long look at our pleasure, slick on her thighs, I plunge deep, and take her again.

Until she screams my name.

# IV

A PROMISE FOR A PROMISE



## NEPHELE

Late the next morning, I sit at the table across from Neri, watching him rotate the urn of memories belonging to Elias Gherahn in his hands. I've tried to sift us, but the aether doesn't answer. Only when it's me—alone and absent of Thamaos's urn—does the quintessence arrive.

I sifted to a snowy Hampstead Loch shortly after dawn. Warek and Mena and the whole crew from the month before were still there. I had to tell them about Finn and where Helena and Rhonin are.

Warek broke down at the news of losing his son, but Mena listened to my tale and offered me scavenged clothes for Neri. In light of the looming war and threat of Thamaos, they will be making the journey through Frostwater Wood to meet me at Winterhold for safety.

But now that I've returned to the cabin, my thoughts center on a different concern.

"I'm not leaving you here."

"You have to, Nephele. The aether will never carry anything belonging to Thamaos. And we cannot leave something as precious as Elias's memories here in this hovel and pray that Thamaos doesn't find a way to reach them."

I don't know how I didn't think of it. When we left the barracks to return to Starworth Tor, we'd had a rough landing. I'd thought I was just weak from not properly *eating*. But perhaps the aether needed time to decipher the owner of the magickal items we carried back from the secret room. And once it finally did, it dumped us on our asses.

"I'm not leaving you," I tell him again.

Neri reaches for my hand and threads our fingers. "Do you trust me?"

“More than I ever thought I would.”

“And like you said to me in the clearing: Do you really believe that I would let something like a little distance stand between you and me? I won’t be far behind. I promise you that. And I will take care of this.” He gestures with the urn. “But you need to get to your people before Thamaos does. We wasted enough time last night. The people at Winterhold need a veil up now. Thamaos wants me out of the picture, clearly you as well, and I imagine he knows what this curse is doing to me. He will just keep coming until we find a way to send those wraiths back to the Nether Reaches. Until then, matters will only get worse.”

I shake my head. “You’re asking me to sift to Winterhold and leave you here with no way to travel. I know that journey. And in the winter? And what if Thamaos attacks again?”

He leans forward, sets the urn aside, and takes both my hands this time. “I will be right behind you. I promise you. Thamaos is clearly utilizing some of the prince’s abilities with wraiths. But he is bound to have a weakness too, just like me. I only need a few weeks to get back home. A month at the latest. Trust me on this.”

“Neri.”

I can’t say anything more than his name. I know he’s right. I know we have no other choice. But I don’t want to do this.

He stands and rounds the table, sitting on its edge in his borrowed black clothes, and takes my hand, guiding me to stand. He tugs me between his long legs and rests his clasped hands at the small of my back.

“I’ll tell you a secret,” he says, his brow crooked up at a slant.

I rest my hands behind his head, admiring the sweep of his cheekbones. “Tell me.”

“I have a cottage in Frostwater Wood. About five miles from Winterhold, actually.”

I jerk my head back. “You do not. I know that wood like I know my name.”

He smiles. “You very well might. But it’s there. It’s probably still hidden by the magick that protected me so long ago. I didn’t use the home so much as a shield as a place of retreat. To get away from the war and soldiers and —”

When he cuts off his words and his eyes flicker with uncertainty, I instantly know what he was going to say. It makes me grin that he didn’t

want to or at least thought better of it.

“Asha?” I supply.

He lets out a breath. “Yes. Her.”

“But I’m going to stay there,” he goes on. “Get back to thriving in my little wedge of the world. I look forward to living again. It hasn’t escaped me that I have been afforded something so many people wish for. A second chance at life?” He kisses me, softly, and says, “I won’t fuck this one up.”

It strikes me then to think about his immortality. About my *mortality*. But I can’t go there right now. I can’t even begin to think about that. About whether we’ve exchanged those particular traits as well.

“So what does your cottage mean in regard to this *leaving you* nonsense?” I say, burying my other worries deep.

“It means I have something grand to look forward to. Something to drive me to endure and make it to Winterhold. Because not only are *you* there, but my *home* is there as well. And I want to show it to you.”

“But you won’t tell me how this miracle will take place.”

He shrugs. “I’m not entirely sure yet. But I believe in myself. I just need you to believe in me, too.”

It takes another half hour before I can make myself do it. A half hour before I can gather my pack and strap on my sword and stand before Neri, ready to sift alone.

“One month,” I tell him, knowing that so much can change in that amount of time. “That’s it. If you don’t show, I’m calling for you with this.” I hold up the remnant of his heart. “And if that fails, I’m coming back here, and I will hunt until I find you.”

A crooked smile makes his eyes sparkle. “Deal.”

I give him a look at that word, but he clasps my face and kisses me before I can say anything sarcastic about it.

When he pulls away, he lets me go and moves to the far side of the cabin, holding the urn of Elias’s memories to offer distance so the aether will answer.

When the wind arrives, Neri winks and says, “I’ll see you soon, little bird.”

“Thirty days,” I remind him, just before the aether takes me.

I think he replies, but I’m gone too fast, his voice lost in the wind.





## NEPHELE

Three weeks pass at Winterhold, and there's still no sign of Neri.

To keep my mind focused on the important tasks here at the castle, I work on the veil daily with the other Witch Walkers after my business meetings and village rounds. I also spend time in conversation with some of Colden's closest advisors, people he turned to for things like the North's spy chain and managing efforts along our border. I'm learning. Or I'm trying, at least. Worrying every day that Thamaos will attack, loathing that I didn't inherit an ability to see like Raina.

I could sift south and talk to Alexis. I think that would make me feel better. But my magick is much of what's holding the veil around Winterhold, and I won't dare leave for a moment until Neri is here. Not knowing about those who matter to me is killing me.

I try to sense the wolf in any way I can. Morning, noon, and night, I stroll down to the barrier's glistening edge and wait for a while alone in the cold and snow. The villagers from the valley arrived after two weeks, but my wolf never shows, and the remnant around my neck never warms.

To survive physically, Rowena helps me make a version of Mari's stew every few days, and after a bowl for supper and a glass of wine, I usually feel like I can finally rest.

But when the fourth week begins, my nerves win the battle I've been fighting, and sleep evades me. I only drift once exhaustion sets in, then I wake each dawn, half expecting to see Neri lying next to me.

Rowena can tell I'm not feeling well, so she prepares a hot bath almost nightly during that final week, replete with lavender oil and dried rose petals

from last summer's gathering. She even brings a cup of chamomile tea to my room each night, doctored with a heavy dose of honey and whiskey—to make it tolerable—and sits with me, until every last drop of her concoction is gone. All I can think about after I slip into my bed every night is how the whiskey and honey remind me of Neri's eyes.

When I wake on the thirtieth morning of this torturous month, it's with a sense of dread in my gut.

I dress in dark pants and boots, and a red velvet longcoat, then I set out to begin my day of leading here at Winterhold. I have a meeting about sending a second retinue to the Iceland Plains, and another with Joran's bowyer apprentice about our archery defense. Eight years at Colden's right hand *did* prepare me for something. Something I think my father understood.

That there would come a time when I would have to help lead Winterhold and the Northland Break in war. Possibly alone.

As I sit in the library, reading up on anything I can find about Thamaos and the Land Wars so I might better learn his defense practices and godly war tactics, I notice a sudden warmth at my chest.

I grip the remnant, my own heart fluttering like a little bird inside my chest as I hurry into the main hall and rush outside without grabbing my cloak. It's frigid out, the snow thick and coming down hard, but I can't care.

It's hard to believe I feel so much right now at the simple thought of the wolf's arrival. I've spent a month in his absence, but it feels as though he's been gone to war for a year.

As I scan the barrier and the snowy forest beyond the village for any sign, my chest aches for Alexis and my sweet little sister. To be so impossibly separated seems a far more painful thing than I ever truly realized. So many impossible circumstances surround them. Will they conquer them?

I'm almost ready to give up when one of the men in the watchtower says, "Miss Bloodgood! We got a lone wolf out there! Coming up Winter Road."

"I'll handle it," I tell them, my pulse racing. I borrow a sword just in case this is some sort of trick, though I don't believe it is.

I feel my wolf.

Still, I say, "Watch my back, but stay here."

The relief that pours through my veins at the thought of it being Neri is overwhelming as I break a portion of the veil, seal it back up, and head out in the snow toward Winter Road.

I haven't sifted in front of anyone yet. In fact, I haven't mentioned

anything that happened with Neri outside of him being alive. Everyone will find out that the wolf and the witch are a team eventually. But right now I just want to make sure he's okay. That Thamaos didn't touch him. Because if he did...

Before I can swear to kill a god for a second time, I round a curve in the road and come to a halt, breathing clouds of frosted air, only to see my wolf stalking toward me in the falling snow. He's donned in the same black leather and boots I left him in, his galatine sword and bag strapped across his back. A pack of white wolves all tied to a sled stand at a distance behind him as he approaches.

At the sight of me, he smiles, a smile that stretches across his handsome face, and it takes everything in me not to run or sift as I walk toward him, hands fidgeting with the pockets of my coat.

But I remind myself that I have a kingdom to lead for now, and there are men in the watchtowers, eyes peeled on me and the stranger coming up our road. It's one thing to reveal that we're a team, but I'm not sure how they'd feel to learn I'm a little in love with the God of the White Wolf. I'm just realizing it myself. I need time for this to just be ours. *Mine*.

When I reach him, when we stand boot to boot in the snow, he grabs my waist with one hand, and I don't stop him.

"Missed me?" he asks, and I smile like a fool.

"I would've mauled you like the she-wolf I am if my men weren't watching. They might think me in danger."

His gold eyes glimmer even in the gray light of this snowy day. "Or that *I'm* in danger," he says. "Perhaps *I'd* be the one needing the rescue."

I crook my brow. "You might once we're alone." As his smile widens, I glance over his shoulder at his wolves. "You have very dedicated and loyal friends."

He nods. "They saw me through. It was a long journey, and I won't say it was easy. But it was good to be back on my land. To reunite with a pack. To just be one with the Northlands again."

I clasp his hand. "Come to the castle with me?"

I don't expect the look of uncertainty on his face. "I think I need to go to my cottage first. But when it's ready, I can come for you?"

I don't want to feel rejected, but I'm not sure how else to feel.

He must see it in my mind because he tilts my chin, thumb caressing my lips as he forces my gaze to collide with his. "I'm still your wolf, little bird."

But that means something very significant. I spent nearly three centuries watching life happen inside that castle from within my prison. And more recently, I watched *you*, inside those walls for eight years, yearning for a man I despised. I would see you through Un Drallag's eyes some nights. Watch you follow Moeshka into his bedchamber while Thibault quickly looked away. I can't simply walk into that castle as though it means nothing to me. Because it does." He leans close, his lips a breath away. "I will want *our* scent everywhere, Nephele. I will want to erase every molecule of another man's odor where it mingles with and sullies your fragrance. That castle will require a cleansing for my territorial nature to ever survive stepping across its threshold." He kisses me softly, watchful eyes be damned, tracing his tongue across my lips. "I would need to fuck you in every room, in every dark corner, against every wall. Until we can do that, I won't be visiting you there."

Breathless, I grip the leather of his jacket, my knees already weak. He's been here less than five fucking minutes. I have to understand, though. There's no way I can't.

"But you *will* come for me when the cottage is ready?" I ask.

He smiles. "Yes. Just a couple more days." He brushes his mouth across my neck, making me melt against him as his fangs scrape lightly over my skin. "And I will make the wait you've endured so worth it."

There's certainly an animal inside me. Even if only a ghost of one. Because I could fuck him right now, right here in this wood against a tree, snow and cold and bitter weather—I don't care.

But we go our separate ways instead.

When I enter the veil and pass the watchtowers, I can feel my men staring down at me with a thousand questions. One is actually brave enough to speak up.

"Who was that man, milady?" he asks.

"He's no man," I call as I stalk toward the castle, keeping my eyes straight ahead. "That's Neri. White Wolf of the Northland Break."



## NEPHELE

**T**wo mornings later, Rowena comes to the library door and knocks on the wood frame. “Miss Nephele. Mr. Neri is here to see you.”

I look up from my work and try not to act too overly moved by this news. Internally, my stomach flips. I’ve prepared for this day. Took a scouring bath this morning. Dabbed lavender oil behind my ears and ran it through my hair. Found a lovely set of undergarments at a shop in the village yesterday. It’s time.

This time I throw on my red longcoat *and* a cloak, and head out into the cold day. The snow has turned to flurries, and the wind has died down, thankfully.

I don’t expect to see Neri upon a horse, but there he is, perched on the back of a stallion that has a coat as shimmery white as the snow around us.

My wolf reaches for my hand as I stare up at him in disbelief. “How?”

He just shakes his head and laughs. “Magick.”

In minutes, we’re riding through the forest, his arms around me, his big body curled around mine. We’re both quiet for the entire trip, just enjoying one another’s heat and presence and the silence of the snowy wood.

When the cottage comes into view, I gasp. It’s a small affair, made of stone with square glazed windows, an arched doorway, and a tall chimney where tendrils of gray smoke curl toward the sky.

Neri swings down from the horse and leads us to the stables. Once the animal is put away from the cold, he walks me into his home.

Comfortable isn’t a good enough word. It’s cozy and tidy and warm, a home where a family might live, not a god.

I smile at the books that line the shelves. The blankets stacked by a long, well-cushioned divan. Elias's memories sitting on the mantle above the hearth, safe and sound and under a wolf's care.

And the table where a meal awaits.

I blink up at him. "You cook?"

He helps me out of my cloak and coat, hanging them by the door. "I do many things you might find mundane for a god. I suppose I was more human when I lived here than even I remember."

We sit and eat, a brunch of bread and warm winterberry compote along with salted meat he attained from the village butcher. We talk, like normal people, about his journey here, how he hunted to stay strong. I tell him about the veil and how the villagers took the news about him and Thamaos, and about those from Hampstead Loch staying at the castle. I also tell him what I've worked on at Winterhold for the last month, the research and reading, the war talk, and defense planning.

"I can help you," he says. "With whatever you need. Your leadership here is much appreciated, I'm sure."

I know it is. And I'm glad I can be of service. But I don't want to talk about Thamaos or duty anymore.

I get up and sit on Neri's lap, folding my arms around his neck.

He gazes up at me as I drag my fingers through his silky, white hair. "Is this a goodbye?" he asks. "The temporary queen must return to business?"

"Does it feel like a goodbye?" I say with a grin. "I mean, I *should* probably go."

He drapes his arms around my waist. "Why?"

"Because I have work to do today and a meeting with the blacksmith later, and you're already making me disoriented enough to consider doing nothing but you."

His lips quirk up on one side, wolfish as ever. "Just by sitting here? Barely touching you?"

I arch my brow. "As if that isn't enough."

Still smiling, he tugs my arm down and threads his fingers with mine. "But you don't want to go." He presses his nose against my ear. My heart begins a gentle pounding as he inhales the scent of this impossible desire I feel. "Mmm." He draws back to look me in the eyes. "You very much want to stay, little bird. And I want you here. All night." Tenderly, he lifts my hand to his lips for a kiss. "So stay."

I do stay. And for most of the day, we simply lie together on the divan and rest by the fire, sharing gentle touches and soft kisses, easy caresses amid stories of our lives and memories shared. I even sleep for a while, nestled against his chest.

When I wake, I'm in his bed, a massive affair to suit Neri's big body, made of twisted tree limbs. It looks like something *I* would build.

I curl up under the covers, realizing that the late-day sun is splitting the last of its rays through the window.

Neri appears in the doorway, leaning there like the sexy god he is. His shirt is soft but fitted, his trousers snug in all the right places.

"Come here," I say to him.

With that smirk I'm beginning to love, he stalks across the room and sits on the edge of the bed beside me. I pull the covers back and draw his hand to my breast.

He squeezes, then he tugs my shirt up and over my head, smiling at the black lace beneath. "My, my. Someone knew exactly what she wanted today."

He leans down and mouths my nipple through the fabric, teasing and tugging. When he peers up at me, his fangs are out.

A chill chases down my spine. I'm so ready for him that I can already hardly stand it. "I need you naked, wolf."

Without a second of hesitation, he stands and starts stripping. "This is me being submissive, Miss Bloodgood. You can order me to get naked any time."

With a girlish giggle, I come out of the rest of my clothes too, then Neri is standing at the foot of the bed, ripping the covers free and casting them to the floor.

"We're going to need room and no entanglements but each other."

His cock is already standing hard and proud as he stares at me, naked in his bed save for black lace.

I spread my legs and pull the fabric aside to touch myself, running a finger over my clit, opening myself for his eyes, an invitation. "Want a taste, wolf?"

He reaches forward and with a single protracted claw, tears away my undergarments, yanking them from my body. He then crawls onto the bed, slowly, the muscles in his shoulders flexing and rippling. I feel stalked, and I love it, especially with that look in his eyes that makes me ache.



“I want more than a taste,” he says. “I’m going to memorize every godsdamn part of you. With my eyes, with my fingers, with my tongue.” He leans down and drags a long lick up my center, the look in his eyes feral. “And with my cock. Later.”

My heartbeat grows frantic as he pushes my knees wider and studies me in the dusky late-afternoon light. Even my pulse races at the inspection. My breaths, too.

“Have you seen yourself?” he asks, as though caught in utter disbelief. “You’re so perfect.” Slowly, he traces a warm fingertip up and down and around my slick entrance. “Pretty little petals blooming just for me,” he whispers. “Reminds me of your roses.”

I can't help but smile at the sheer wonder on his face. “You act like you've never seen a woman so intimately before,” I say. “And I know otherwise.”

He smiles in return, a fangy grin. “It’s been a long time, granted. But there is no comparison to you. I doubt there ever will be.”

Something in my chest twists at the tender sincerity and honesty in his words, but before I can linger on the thought, he pushes his fingers inside me, the action drawing my spine into an arch off the bed.

I can't stop my body's response, the way I grind against him as he fucks me with his hand, the way I breathe his name like a plea with every retreat, needy and desperate, aching to have those long fingers deeper.

“Mmm. And this little bud,” he says. “So fucking sweet.”

I'm brought to a frozen halt when he leans in and flicks his tongue back and forth over my clit, because he pins my knees back to the bed and curves over me, as though he’s about to devour me.

Though his fangs are out, he confidently drags his front teeth over that bundle of nerves anyway, sucking it fervently into his mouth as he lifts his gaze to meet mine. Again, that tongue flicks my flesh captured in his mouth, working at a rapid speed that threatens to annihilate me. He finally relents before it can and makes me a promise I won't soon let him forget.

“I'm going to do so many naughty things to you, Nephele Bloodgood. So. Many. Naughty. Things.”

The plunge of his tongue into my body forces a cry from my lips and sends my hands reaching for anything to hold onto. I grip the twisted limbs of the bed as he presses so deep, flicking that long tongue until I’m doing everything I can to lift my hips under his hold.

But he doesn’t let me. He just keeps assaulting me, licking and fucking,

sucking my clit, that tongue a magickal entity of its own as he stares into my eyes and feasts, every movement a precise dance leading me very quickly toward coming in his mouth.

“I want to bite you,” he says, teasing my pussy lips with his fangs.

Every breath in my lungs shudders out of me. “Please do. Just be careful about important bits down there.”

A deep laugh reverberates through my flesh, and his fangs slightly retract. “I’m sorry. You bring out the animal in me. The most primal part of me. And I’ve missed the taste of you.” He presses a kiss to my inner thigh, swirling his tongue here, making it hard for me to think and speak.

“I don’t want you to handle me like glass,” I tell him. “I don’t want you to hold back at all. If anything, I want you to shatter me.”

“Do you understand what you’re saying to me?” He licks me again, clear up the center, and nibbles my clit. “I don’t think you do, little bird.”

I groan and ache, catching his gaze. “What I know is that I want everything you have to give, wolf. I’ve told you before. Don’t you dare be gentle about it.”

“That’s asking for a lot,” he replies. “If I give you everything, come morning, there will not be a part of your body I haven’t tasted, nor a manner in which I haven’t claimed you. Multiple times. In multiple ways.” He crawls over me and trails his tongue up my throat, his cock heavy and hard and a little threatening between my legs. “*At the same time.*”

My eyes go wide at that. “I don’t understand.”

He lowers his head and takes my nipple into his mouth, releasing it with a loud pop. “In the clearing. Did you see the other wolves that looked like me?”

My heart tumbles as he keeps sucking and biting. “Yes.”

“That’s because they *were* me.” He lifts his head and looks into my eyes. “That’s one ability that hasn’t left me yet, and I would give anything to share it with you in case it does.”

I shake my head, confused.

“I can fuck you in three forms, little bird.” He grips my wrists and holds them to the bed as he rubs his cock against me in long strokes. “I saw your fantasy. Of me in your pussy. Your mouth. Your ass. I can give you that. All at once.”

My skin rages hot as fire. “And you can... you can feel it all?”

He nods and kisses my throat, scraping with his fangs. “All of it. Every

orgasm I give you. Every clench, every suck, every stroke.” He leans close to my ear. “I can bite you three times. In three different places, fucking and sucking you at once. And I can come inside you three times. In three ways. I can fill you up with me, Nephele, and fuck, I want to.” His eyes darken. “You once said I am not your god. But I bet I am before this night is over.”

Chills rush over my skin as I all but pant beneath him, needier than I have ever been.

“Do you want that?” he asks. “Do you want me to claim you, little bird?”

Though it might be my undoing, and though I’m not certain I can survive the unthinkable pleasure that awaits, I answer the only way I can.

“Yes, Neri. Fuck, yes.”



## NERI

**I**t's a strange and wonderful experience watching Nephele from beneath, the way my second form clutches her throat, fingers hooked in her lovely mouth. With her head tilted back in ecstasy, she rides us so hard, her perfect little breasts and the sleek curve of her abdomen glistening in the firelight, her porcelain skin illuminated by a thin sheen of sweat.

"You're fucking taking me so well, Nephele," I whisper through the lips of my second form, pumping into her from behind. "Taking all this cock so godsdamn deep. Do you want more, little bird? Because I can give you more."

With a whimper, she shivers when I lick the shell of her ear and reach around to tease her clit. But then she nods in answer, sucking on the fingers in her mouth as though all life depends on it.

My second form releases her, and she collapses against my chest. Fuck-drunk, she presses her hands into the mattress and pushes up to meet my stare. Clasping her face, I lift my head and capture her mouth with mine. She sucks on my tongue, making it clear what she wants from me.

But then she tells me. "I want you in my mouth. Please."

Her expression is hazed with lust and hunger, inspiring me to give her all that she desires.

My third form appears then, kneeling near my shoulders. Nephele glances up with sweet surprise, as though she didn't think I would answer her request so quickly, which makes me smile. She doesn't hesitate to take that rigid and jutting cock into her hand and mouth.

The sensations that ripple through me at her touch are enough to destroy

me. She's everywhere at once—sucking the head of my cock, licking my balls, stroking my length, fucking me. Her scent is all-consuming, so powerful and invading, that I can barely take it anymore.

As my third form moans under her ministrations, I cup her breast and take her hard little nipple into my mouth. I feel the blood rushing under her skin. Smell it. It's too delicious not to taste.

With her hand still wrapped around the base of my third form's cock, she drags her mouth free and cries out as I tenderly bite down, my fangs puncturing, leaving only earth-rattling pleasure in the wake of my assault.

"Please don't stop," she begs. "Please, Neri." Her eyes roll back, and I fuck her harder from beneath and behind, giving her every thick inch I possess.

Needing to fill her every hole, my third form opens her lovely mouth again and slips an aching cock between her pouty lips. She returns to feasting and stroking, lost in complete euphoria, even as she lifts her pretty blue eyes. I love that I can gaze into her icy stare as I smooth her blonde curls back from her face and thrust in and out of her throat. I could watch her full lips, stretched wide, sliding up and down my cock for hours. But I can also taste her nipple in my mouth, her blood flowing freely as I suck and flick and bite that tender bud.

Through my second form's vision, I follow the long line of Nephele's arched spine down to her narrow waist and the pale globes bouncing against me. But my focus lingers on the sight of two cocks impaling her slick, pink pussy and her tight ass, an image I brand into memory. I close my eyes and revel in every heady sensation bombarding me. It's all so good—so right—that I almost give in to the need throbbing inside me. Almost succumb to a multiple orgasm that might end me when none else could.

Instead, I simmer a little and retract my fangs from the curve of her breast, thankful for the control to unlatch. In response, she drags her mouth off the cock between her lips and lowers her gaze. I see not only the promise of an impending orgasm on her face and in her eyes, but I can also feel it building inside her, that sweet heat tightening around me.

Time for a finale, I suppose.

In my third form, I slip one hand into her hair and turn her head back to my cock while I begin stroking myself with the other. "Open that beautiful mouth for me, little bird."

She obeys so readily, so quickly, that it takes three seconds to stroke out

my release, my body jerking with each spasm as I spill every last drop on her luscious lips and tongue.

Like she's starved for me, she swallows, then takes my cock into her throat, deep, making me tremble as she sucks and groans. All the while, I'm still fucking between her legs. Still trying not to die from bliss.

I tug at the roots of her hair, pulling her mouth off my dick. Just as needy as she had been, my third form leans down and kisses her.

The sensual, salty taste on her tongue hits me so hard, a ricocheting effect that spears each form, one after the other. It's the wolf in me. The need to mark what's mine. To smell and taste nothing but me on her.

Suddenly, her eyelids flutter closed. She gasps, the sound a stuttered inhale, and then cries out my name.

"I'm right here, little bird." Lifting my head, I capture her mouth with mine. Her pussy clenches my cock in relentless waves as she grinds, pushing my second form's cock further into her ass at the same time, making restraint ten times more difficult. I could let go. Let go and do it all over again if she could take it. But I don't think she can.

And so I release, filling her with my pleasure as she comes, my cock pounding through two simultaneous soul-sucking orgasms, spilling all that I am into Nephele Bloodgood's body.

When it's over, she lies draped across me like a piece of silk, so languid, I'm not sure she can move. I slip out from beneath her and work at preparing a bath. When it's ready, I check on her. She's lying there, fully satiated and spent, staring up at me with a look that grips my heart.

She lets me pick her up, and I carry her to the tub. I sink in behind her and just hold her in the warmth, moving water lazily over her breasts, soothing any aches I can.

"You all right?" I finally say. "You're awfully quiet."

"I just had sex with three gods," she replies. "I'm trying to remember my name." I laugh, but then she says, "Do that to me always, all right?"

I kiss her temple. "I will certainly try."

Once the water grows tepid, I dry us both and we crawl back into bed.

"Your maid and guards are going to come looking for you. Hunting the beast that stole their queen."

She rests her arm across my chest and looks up at me. "Rowena sort of knows not to expect me back. No one will come screaming with pitchforks, I swear. Which means we have an entire night left. Alone."

I can hardly believe she has a drop of desire left, but she darts her little pink tongue out over my nipple, making me flinch.

“Yes?” she asks, and I realize it’s her turn to learn *my* body.

“Yes,” I answer.

She arches a brow and sucks on my nipple, making my cock twitch.

She moves lower, licking and kissing down to the trail of hair beneath my navel. “Yes?”

“Yes,” I answer.

She moves lower still, settling between my legs, and licks the inside of my thigh. “Yes?”

I try, but I cannot swallow the laughter that escapes me. “No. It tickles.”

“It *tickles*?” She pins my legs and swirls that wicked tongue along the same spot.

I try to jerk away. “Stop that, you evil, evil woman.”

She smiles so big and so sweetly that it makes my stupid heart swell to bursting. And again, she twists her tongue at my thigh, tickling me to the point I have to scoot up in bed to get away from her.

“She-devil,” I hiss as she follows, crawling toward me, naked and painfully beautiful.

With an arched brow, she grips my erection, that one dainty hand controlling me better than any magick ever has.

“Tell me what you want,” she says with a naughty grin. “And I might give it to you.”

I slide my fingers into her long, silky curls. “I want you to suck my cock,” I answer honestly with more laughter and a resounding groan. “Aren’t you tired? Or are you just doing this to get back at me for something?”

She strokes me from root to tip. “Of course, I am. I’m going to show you just how little it takes to bring the God of the White Wolf to his proverbial knees.”

“As if I don’t know,” I tell her. Gripping her hair tight, I lean over to kiss her, and she meets me halfway. “Do your worst, witch,” I whisper, smiling against her mouth. “Make me suffer.”

“Oh, I intend to, wolf.” She drags that sweet, pink tongue across my lips and bares her fangs as she kisses her way back toward my cock. “I’m going to find out what it takes to make you howl.”



3 I



## NEPHELE

The next morning, I wake in Neri's strong arms, only his arms look quite different. I peer up at him to find that he's groggily awake, actually having slept.

"Are these your marks?" I trace my finger over the archaic and somewhat runic lines covering his arm and chest, even flaring up the sides of his neck like black wings. "They're beautiful."

He smiles, and it makes something low in my belly curl. "They are. My adurna. I noticed them last night when you first went to sleep." He holds up his hand. "I can't honestly say why they returned. I only know that adurna are earned, so perhaps I've done something to put me back to rights in that area. Even if the aether can't recognize me, maybe I'm not so ungodly as I imagined."

We've still so much to learn about this curse. So much to navigate and explore. And I know that we'll do it together.

After a sweet kiss, Neri gives me one of his mischievous looks. "Get dressed. I have a surprise for you this morning."

I frown. "When did you have time for surprises?"

"My house is magick," he says. "It's a home that was made for a god. It still listens to me, and it listened last night while I was trying to go to sleep, which took longer than expected given our rather exhausting activities."

I narrow my eyes at him playfully, but then I get dressed, more excited than I want to admit.

It's early. Pre-dawn early. A peek out the window reveals the usual flurries. When I step out of the bedroom, Neri's standing by the rear door off

the kitchen.

“Out there?” I say, pointing toward the door.

He grins and nods. “Out there.”

With a flourish, he opens the door, and I step out onto a flagstone path that cuts through the snow and follow it to the most beautiful walled rose garden I could ever imagine. Roses shouldn’t exist here this time of year. Not for most of the year, actually. And yet there are thousands of blooms, Blood Red Roses, covering thorny bushes and climbing on vines, over the wall and gate and even draped over an arbor. All cradle a little snow in their petals. Candelabras sit atop the surrounding wall, candles burning to fight the morning gloom.

Tears wet my eyes as snow clings to my lashes. I can’t help but cover my mouth with my hands.

“Do you like it?”

I spin around. Neri is right behind me, his gold eyes shimmering with something I’m now realizing is happiness.

“I absolutely love it. Is it for me? Really?”

His crooked grin widens into a broad smile as he draws me close. “Yes. Really. I want you to come here all the time. I’d have you here permanently if I could. But until that day comes, I have this garden to lure you back to me.”

Trying not to sob like an infant, I reach up and touch his face. “You don’t need a garden, wolf. But it doesn’t hurt.”

He laughs at that. “I somehow didn’t think it would.”

We linger for a while, smelling the roses as I tell Neri my mother’s version of Cila and Thaddius’s story.

“It’s like she knew you’d meet me,” he says. “Even though your father said he never told her what he saw for you.”

I pluck a single rose and hold it to my nose. “I know. Even in death, I think she knew I needed that story. And she delivered it to me in a dream.”

“I’m glad you had that connection with her. And that she helped make dealing with me a bit easier for you. Even from the Empyrean Fields.”

I try to smile at the notion. But the truth is that if she’s watching me and Raina like I think my father is, I’m sad for much of what she’s having to see.

When the sun comes up, Neri takes me back to the castle. The day feels no different than every other day of this last month. Everyone is milling about the castle grounds, and in the distance, the village is beginning to bustle with life.

Neri helps me down and stands before me, looming and handsome and fucking irresistible. “I’m going to spend the day in your village,” he says. “If you decide you want to kick everybody out of the castle for the day, I can make that happen and make good on my promise. If not, I can fuck you with everybody there, sneaking you into corners, locking doors to fuck you on tables. It could be fun. Either way, we can cleanse that place. I can do it in a day if you can keep up.”

He smiles and winks, and my breath catches. That smile is dangerous. It sparkles in his golden eyes and curls one corner of his wickedly beautiful mouth, promising mayhem, mischief, and an utter lack of morals.

It’s fucking delightful, damn him.

“As much as I would like nothing more,” I reply, “I did sleep with three gods last night, and I feel like it today. So a little rest and work are in order. But tonight—”

I don’t get to finish my thought.

Something slams into the veil, something I feel resonating through my magick. Someone screams down the way.

Neri and I mount his horse and start riding toward the commotion. In the near distance, near the castle well where a group of villagers work to dislodge the ice, people stand with their necks craned, their eyes on the sky facing south.

Red blotches paint the veil.

I look up, only to feel another vibration. And another. And another. Followed by more red explosions.

That’s when I see it. Coming down Winter Road.

Doves. Hundreds upon hundreds of doves screaming and flying straight toward us.

My heart crashes against my ribs as they slam into the wall, dozens at a time, their necks breaking against the solidity of the magick. More burst into bloody splatters, but they just keep coming, thudding against the force of our power, like a thousand arrows launched at once.

Over and over and over, blood explodes against the veil, until we’re facing a curtain of red death.

I feel the magick weaken.

“Hold the veil!” I shout down the meager line of witches that have formed on the grounds. “Fucking hold!”

More people rush from the castle and some from the village. They come

from everywhere, and they start singing, holding the wall between us and what I already know is Thamaos.

Even through the veil, I can smell the wraiths. A thousand at least. And he's willing to lose those that die upon contact. Willing to see them sent back to the Nether Reaches. Which means that *this*? This game with the spirits of the dead?

It's nothing to him but theatrics.

Neri's arm tightens around my middle, and I can feel him breathing harder. We're still upon his steed, still watching the veil of red death, but then Neri speaks close to my ear.

"Nephele. Read it."

It takes a moment to discern what he means. Read what?

But then I see it. It's plain as the day itself, right before my eyes, written in bold, bright, blood. *My name*. My family's name. Those I fear Thamaos has already taken from me in some way or another.

My father's name. My mother's name. My sister's name.

Bloodgood.

My heart all but stops as I see this for what it is. A promise. Of death and blood and destruction.

"You know what this means," Neri says, and I nod, angry, cold tears spilling from my eyes as I shake with newfound rage.

"It means that war is coming," I tell him, my soul darkening with hate for the god of the East as I make a promise of my own. "And we're going to be ready when it does."



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Until then discover [A NIGHT OF WINGS AND STARLIGHT](#), by City Owl Author, Alexis L. Menard. Turn the page for a sneak peek!

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SNEAK PEEK OF A NIGHT OF WINGS  
AND STARLIGHT

BY ALEXIS L. MENARD

There were only three rules in the world I lived in: be quick, be quiet, and be careful.

I meditated on these truths daily, allowing them to become my life's mantra, my creed, and my religion. To an outsider, they were simple rules, but to the runners of West Mirth, they were what kept us alive.

Carefully constructing their fundamentals into the framework of my soul, I let these ideals fashion a mold I hid easily inside, forgetting any personal desire I once entertained. The dreams of my youth faded into something more rational, more attainable. Hopes of a family, a future, anything unrelated to the mountain I was sold to at birth was blotted out like a blazing wick between two wet fingers.

I sat blindfolded, as I have done hundreds of times in the past ten years of my training, willing away the fleeting thoughts of the life I was rescued from and discouraging any somber distraction tearing my focus away from the task at hand. The thick fabric in front of my eyes left nothing to the imagination, merely a searing blackness heightening the only senses that mattered—sound, smell, and fear. Because out there, outside the granite walls of the mountains veiling us from the night, our sight was the enemy.

"Focus, Arya, center yourself. Let me know when you're ready." The steady voice of my instructor echoed against the stone walls of the training room. The stillness of the air spoke to me; the gaps in my running leathers provided space for my skin to sense any slight change in the atmosphere. I took a breath, silent and slow, grounding myself in my seat on the floor and numbing any emotion still vibrant inside me. Rising in stealthy quiet, I shifted my weight into my toes because this next part required me to be light on my feet.

"Ready," I whispered and waited for the test to begin.

There was nothing for several minutes, causing doubt to strip away at my focus. But just when I was about to call out once more, the air stirred ever so slightly to my right. The tiny hairs in my ear caught a movement, but I



remained still to study it further. My fingers spread wide to increase the surface area of my touch in reaction. Judging by the ever-so-quiet sound of a string stretching against tension, I had only one guess as to what was coming my way.

An instant later, my hand flew to the right side of my face, grasping the tail end of a very real, very lethal arrow. The hum had given it away. I dropped it leisurely at my side. Footsteps approached my left, slowly at first, before breaking into a charge. I crouched into a shallow squat, then leaped, letting the air from an unsheathed blade guide each reaction to avoid being sliced open by the double-edged sword. The blade swung away from under my feet, and in the same jump, I thrust my kick to the left and let my heel connect with the wielder.

His body gave against the weight of my blow, striking him firmly in the chest, and his footsteps stumbled away with an echo of sharp surprise. Landing lightly on my toes, I twisted the length of my body to close the distance created between us. My other leg carved high in the air and met his skull. The sickening sound of a jaw knocking teeth was like music to my ears, the rush of breath leaving his chest added reprise to the melody. His weapon crashed to the floor along with the heavy thud of his body, but I did not go for a final blow, nor did I reach for his weapon. He was down, surrendered to the fight, which meant I had no need to pursue him any further. I was not an assassin—I was a runner.

The test consisted of more of the same, attacks in the darkness only anticipated with the practiced trust of my senses. After a lifetime of sharpening them, I relied more on my hearing, perception, and intuition than I did on my eyes. The darkness could conceal a multitude of threats in its obscureness, but actions could never hide. Not from the queen's most skilled runners—definitely not from me.

The world beyond the blindfold grew quiet as the Pit stilled. Nothing made a sound beyond the pounding of my blood in my ears before a soft voice interrupted the steady beat. "Your test is over. Congratulations, Arya, you have passed."

A wave of reprieve washed over me, unsurprised yet relieved nonetheless, and I untied the blindfold I had been wearing for the past few hours. I blinked, letting my eyes adjust to the well-lit training room and the sudden brightness that ambushed them. At my feet were four men, currently unconscious at the expense of my training. Here in the pit, we learned to fight

and defend ourselves against the immortal night demons, the vampyres, existing just outside our mountain solitude. Nearly impossible to kill, the only chance to survive an encounter with one was to fight like hell and pray the heavens would take us if we failed.

I shook out the tightness straining my muscles and immobilizing them in their deprived state. My trial had followed one of my weekly, long runs, and I pushed myself far too hard knowing I had a trial later that day. But I had to get better. There was a desperate need in my heart to feel the outside world with each one of my developed senses. Passing this test had brought me closer to my goal, but not close enough. There would be more to train, more to work on, and more hurdles to jump before I would feel fresh air against my face.

Instructor Mallo entered the room from one of the arena entryways, a hidden area where she orchestrated my trial like a divine. If Mallo was the god of this Pit, then I was her most devoted patron, desiring nothing but her approval and blessed favor. Her short frame only came into sight after passing dozens of pillars designed for the concealment of turrets and brutes meant to harm me. One of these brutes roused, groaning at my feet, and I smiled down on him victoriously as he clutched his bleeding temple.

"Don't get overconfident," she snapped, noticing the obvious satisfaction in my smirk. "You did well, but this is only the first of many trials. Each test will be more difficult than the last but will display your skillset in a way that will give us a complete picture over your abilities." Words left her tongue as sharp as the arrows littered at my feet. I nodded in submission, wiping the grin off my face as quickly as it had appeared.

"When will the next test be?" I asked.

She shook her head and ran an eye down my arm to the growing shake in my fingers, raising a curious brow at the nervous tic I'd started to develop over the last few weeks. I balled my hands into fists to cease their trembling, coercing her attention back to the conversation. "That is for us to know and you to find out, so you should be ready at all times."

I nodded again and took a deep breath, audibly revealing my frustration. Mallo's pointed features softened, noticing my displeasure. "Patience, Arya. You are one of the finest runners we have. Stay on this track, and you will no doubt be called up soon if skill has anything to do with it."

I bit back the retort building in my throat and gave a tight smile. Chosen. I trained like I had a chance. No woman had been chosen since...well, no one

could recall exactly. Our queen had a type, and it didn't include the delicateness of the finer sex. But Mallo dismissed me, and I gratefully left the pit to find the dressing rooms, feeling further than ever from my goal. My time was quickly running out here under the mountain—only one year left to prove I had what it took to face the darkness beyond our obsidian walls. One more year, and I'd age out of the system and get sent to a lower kingdom to find other work. One last birthday before I was transferred to another prison, trapped behind more walls, and forced once more into an unflattering mold.

I wouldn't let it happen. There was no way I was going to live the rest of my wasted existence in a lower kingdom learning a new trade, tending to the Last Livestock, or weaving fabric to clothe the rapidly declining population. I knew I was good enough, and I had put in the work to become one of the fastest, leanest, and most agile runners in my class. While other girls my age seduced the runner royalty and rose through the social ranks here at West Mirth, I trained. I buried every hunger created in my young heart for love or affection, for attention or popularity.

I didn't care if I received any notice from those lean-bodied, brooding, unnervingly handsome male runners. I could care less if one of them was currently tracing my body with his almond-shaped eyes as I changed out of sweaty leather and damp clothes and into something more comfortable. Nor did I notice the water dripping from his wet, auburn hair and down his contoured cheek as a playful smirk danced across it. There was absolutely no heat in my cheeks or my hips as I slammed my locker door harshly and left the dressing rooms.

Nope. I didn't care about them at all. I'd buried those needs years ago, along with all the other adolescent urges naturally arising from youthful bliss.

The day stretched late, and although time was more of a concept than a reality determined by the eternal night, the exhaustion in my bones demanded rest. The tunnel leading back to my sleeping quarters was now nearly deserted. A few other runners were returning to their classes and retiring for the night as I wandered alone in the stone hallway. I tried—and failed—to ignore the message board as I passed it, the latest post the face of yet another Chosen who had fallen victim to the wastelands.

His name was Grisham, and he had occupied the bunkhouse across from mine. He was called up just last week, receiving his note during our regular tempo run, and hadn't bothered saying goodbye to anyone before he left. His death followed two other runners just this month—an alarming statistic even

by our standards. Running was dangerous, a truth well known. But what kind of mission was so dangerous it claimed the lives of not one but three runners? And why in the blight were we continuing to send runners out so quickly after the last one had fallen? Perhaps being kept in training was a good thing—for now. I may have longed to leave the confining granite walls I'd lived behind my entire life, but I didn't have a death wish. I only wanted to have a purpose, to know the past twenty years weren't a complete waste. My time in this cursed realm would be more than just chasing after men or working a meaningless job in the lower kingdoms. As a Chosen, I would be essential, necessary to the survival of my people.

I would matter.

I neared the tunnel leading to the Darrow Class, the highest-ranking unit named after one of the original runners nearly a hundred years ago. Passing the other bunkhouses, quiet conversations spilled from the archways leading to their cots, their hushed voices silenced completely as I passed. Something was off about the way they hid their voices from my approach. The steps of my leather boots lightened as I quickened my pace, eager to leave the attention of their whispers.

I rounded the corner to my own bunkhouse and found Loren sitting on his bed, hovering just above my own, his long feet dangling over the side. His cot had been made up and folded at the end of the bed, sheets pressed in a thin stack forming a shallow pile at his side. In his hands was a note, and he didn't tear his eyes away from the words even as I entered.

"Loren?" I asked, hesitant. "Is everything okay?"

He slowly lowered the note and finally met my gaze.

"I've been chosen."

A mixture of self-pity, angst, and sadness lingered inside my heart, competing for dominance as I sat with Loren under a black granite sky. We snuck off to our usual hideaway, an unused, forgotten training room lying at the end of a twisted meshwork of tunnels. We stumbled across the secret spot years ago as the result of being hopelessly lost, new runners, just trying to find our way back to the courtyard in time for evening stretches.

Ever since that fateful day, Loren and I would sneak to the private room and discuss the wounds that scarred our souls, deeper and more painful than the ones decorating our skin. When I failed or if I had a bad run, I walked away from it all and strolled far down the winding stone corridors to the

isolated room. It was the furthest I'd ever traveled from my home in the mountain, and even though we were only a meandering tunnel away from our problems, it felt like another world. Here we were once more, one last time, clinging together in a final farewell to painfully haunting memories and forgotten whispers of traumas past.

We sat there for a long time, not talking. Not that anything needed to be said. My feelings concerning the situation sat plainly between us.

"We won't be parted long, Arya. She'll choose you soon. There's no denying your talent." His voice was like gravel against my temple as he attempted to reassure my doubtful heart. I opened my eyes I'd been squeezing shut, if only to will back tears imminently building behind them. Loren's free hand ran through the loose braid trailing low down my spine. The naturally tanned skin of his fingers mixed with the ash blonde hair falling out of the leather binding at the base of my back. My temple dropped into the space between his shoulder and his neck, the spot perfectly molded for my head—the spot I would miss the most.

"I'm a woman, Loren. We all know I have a slim chance of making it as it is. That's why none of the other girls even try." I bit back the bitterness, if only to spare myself the sting.

"So, you're just going to give up? That doesn't sound like my best friend."

I smiled against the curve of his neck. "You're right. It doesn't." It's not like I wanted to surrender to an unexceptional fate, but I was already twenty years old, and very few runners were chosen after that age. The closer we got to the age limit, the smaller our chance at grabbing the queen's attention. Guilt replaced my pity an instant later. Loren didn't deserve this reaction. He had worked equally as hard and deserved every bit of this honor. "I'm sorry, Loren. I'm happy for you, truly. You deserve to be called up, and I know you'll make a great Chosen."

His breath snagged in his chest. "I feel like I should be more excited, but to be completely honest, I'm terrified to go on a real run. I don't understand how I got picked. I was deliberately trying to do worse so I wouldn't be called up."

I lifted my chin to look him in the eyes, but his gaze was straight ahead, staring at the large crevasse in the corner of the room. I followed his stare to the fissure splintering through the mountain rock—a small window to the world beyond. It didn't reveal much, but it gave us a glimpse of the outside. Tiny white flecks winked against a black backdrop, a beautiful tease of what

laid beyond my stone prison. I secretly wished I could grow wings and fly far, far away from this mountain, forgetting all the haunting memories while the darkness swallowed me whole.

"Look at the bright side, at least you'll finally get to see the stars," I whispered. "You'll know what it feels like to sense the breeze against your face, smell the air, see the world. Lor, you get go outside! I'd face a thousand demons and let them rip me apart just to get a minute out there."

He kissed the top of my head affectionately, paying the desperation in my voice no mind. "Your curiosity will be the death of you, Arya."

"There are worse things than dying," I mumbled.

"Like what?"

"Like never truly living." My teeth bit the inside of my cheek, flustered at the very thought.

"Aye, you have a point," he shrugged. "At least I won't have to run the same endless lap sequence for a long run. Just one long, unending stretch of land as far as the eye can see."

I groaned, the guilt was replaced with envy. "Ugh, don't remind me. I still get dizzy nearing the hundredth lap around the flats. The other day, during our recovery run, I lost track of my lap number. Mallo made me start all over again."

A breathy laugh escaped his lips. I shifted my gaze from the wall to find his mouth only inches away from my face. Many of our friends believed we were secretly pining for each other, but there was nothing further from the truth. Loren and I had a love for each other that was special, going beyond superficial romantic feelings. Our love was familial, bound together eternally by tears, blood, sacrifice, and suffering.

"I love you, Loren. Please, be cautious out there." He didn't reply as his face lowered to meet mine, until all I saw were glossy, jade eyes and messy blonde hair. "When are you leaving?"

"As soon as we walk back. The letter said I had time to say a few quick goodbyes, then I had to report to Instructor Tarsus."

"Shit, I'm sorry. I didn't know you had such little time or I wouldn't have stolen it all for myself." His body shook slightly against mine, muffling a laugh at my lie.

"Aye, because there's a long list of people I like well enough to tell goodbye," he replied in a voice light with sarcasm, floating on the tension between us on an imaginary breeze.

I forced a small smile, but it felt hollow in my chest. We never had to say the word before to each other, and I wouldn't start now. "This isn't goodbye, though."

"No. It's not goodbye. Just do me a favor?"

"Anything."

"Get called up soon, because I don't think I can do this without you." His confident mask fell away in a moment of vulnerability, revealing the fear and uncertainty lying hidden behind his emerald eyes. I forgot myself in the hues for a short moment, losing all my troubles and coloring over my pain with the various shades of green.

"Be quick," I whispered.

"Be quiet." He replied.

"Be careful." We said together.

He pressed a long kiss to my forehead before standing up to leave, but I didn't follow him. Instead, I pulled my knees to my chest and set my chin on the bony parts, staring into the abyss calling out to me beyond the mountain wall. I didn't hear him leave for the last time. Didn't believe in my heart it was the last memory I would have of him. Nor did I think he would perish like the three runners before him. There were no tears shed as he walked out of my life forever, and I didn't feel like a part of my soul had been torn from my spirit.

Because lying to myself was much easier than facing the truth.



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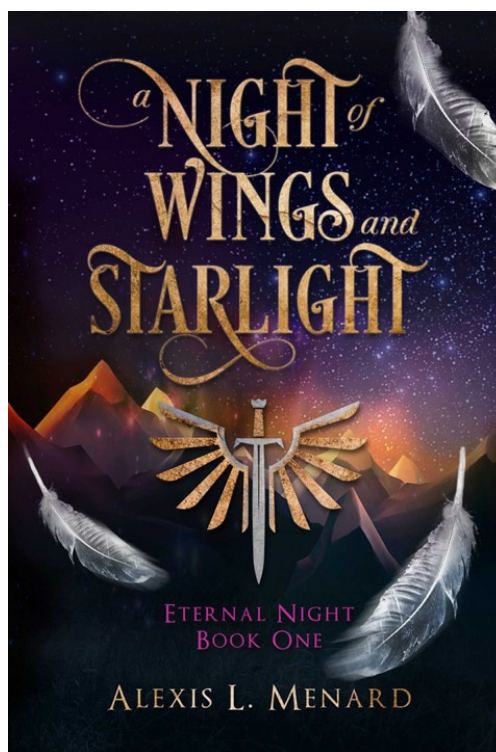
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CHARISSA WEAKS is an award-winning author of historical fantasy and speculative fiction. She crafts stories with fantasy, magic, time travel, romance, and history, and the occasional apocalyptic quest. Charissa resides just south of Nashville with her family, two wrinkly English Bulldogs, and the sweetest German Shepherd in existence. To keep up with her writing endeavors, and to gain access to writing freebies and book giveaways, join her newsletter, [The Monthly Courant](#) or her [Rebel Readers group](#) on Facebook.



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