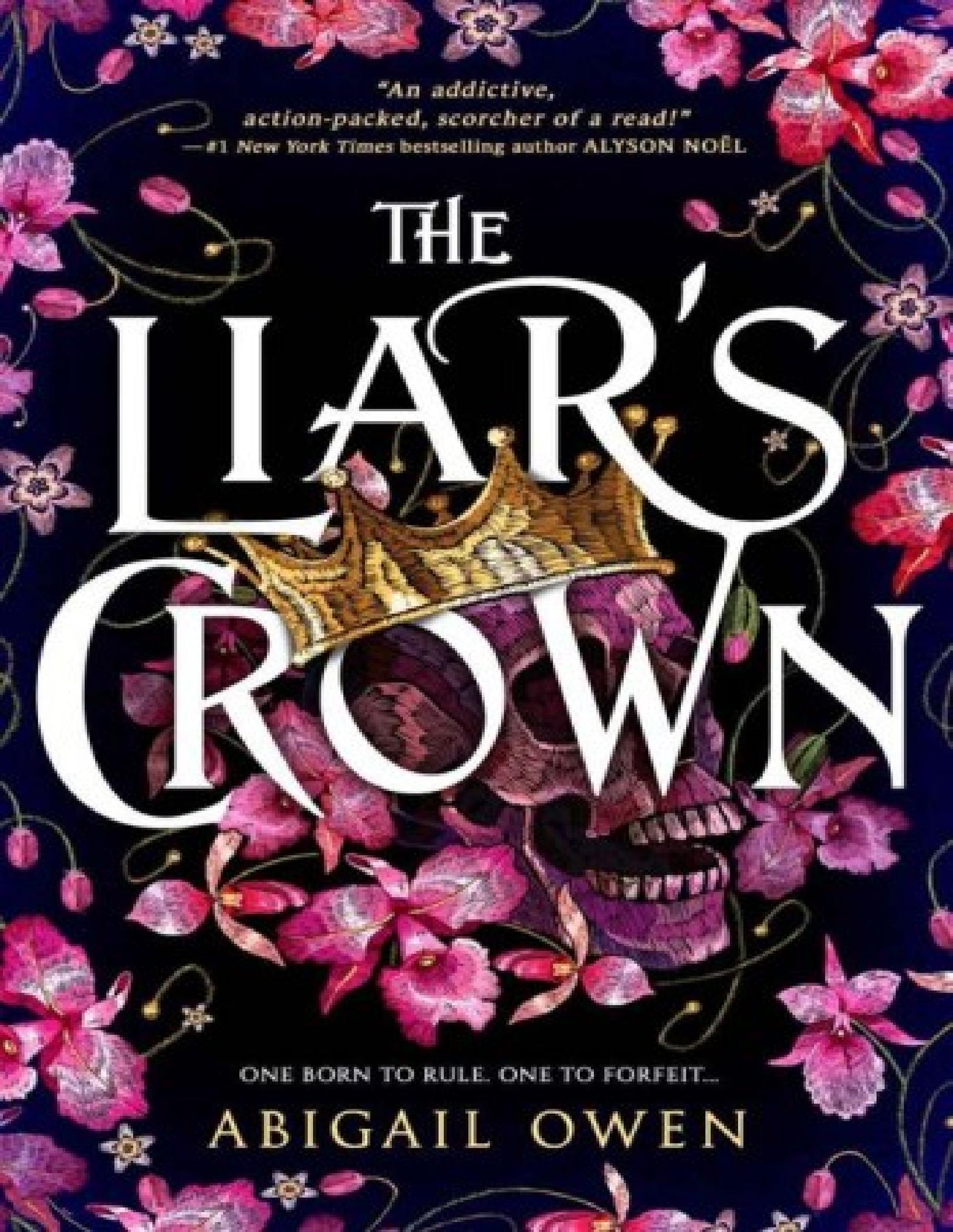


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THE LIAR'S CROWN



ONE BORN TO RULE. ONE TO FORFEIT...

ABIGAIL OWEN

THE
LIAR'S
CROWN



ABIGAIL OWEN

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rights@entangledpublishing.com

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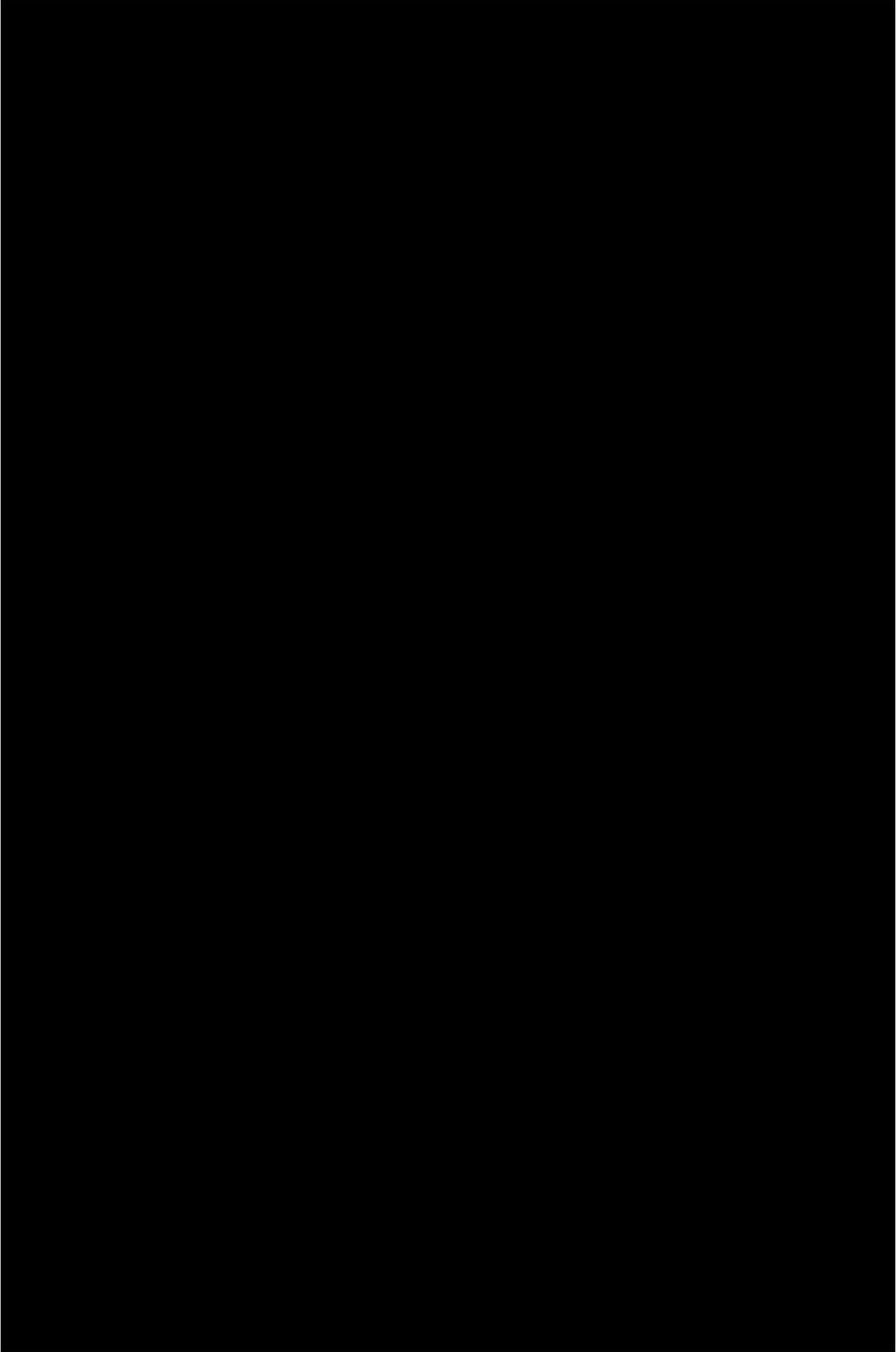
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*To Heather—for living in this world with me (for years now) and still loving
it as much as I do.*

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<https://www.entangledpublishing.com/books/the-liars-crown>



To resist is human, to tempt is divine.

Prologue

Once Upon a Curse

Eighteen years ago...

The first cry of a newborn infant pierced the heavy night air, and the women in the room heaved a collective sigh of relief. Except for Hesperia.

She checked the shadows instead.

Was the king watching? Lurking? Confirming that she completed the task he had commanded?

As a sand nymph, Hesperia was called upon to bless newborn life in the dominion of Aryd. She had been coming to the palace for centuries. On behalf of the goddess of this dominion, she had sanctified the birth of every royal child. The women in the room would assume she was a revered acolyte, skin painted in the colors of the deserts from which her kind were made.

They didn't know she was also a spy.

Or that the reason she'd come tonight had nothing to do with blessings.

After severing the umbilical cord, the midwife cleaned and wrapped the child in a soft blanket. But she didn't give the baby to its mother, wife of the Crown Prince, who was still sitting, limp and coated in sweat, legs splayed open on the birthing stool. Instead, the child was passed to the Queen of Aryd. Hesperia's sovereign, technically.

Only Hesperia didn't serve this queen. She served *him*.

Eidolon. The King of Tyndra. A cold and brutal man, lurking under the veneer of a charming liar.

"What is it?" the mother demanded past chalky lips as a servant wiped her brow with a clean linen dipped in cool water.

The queen didn't even glance her way. Instead, she stared at her precious legacy, so tiny, hardly a wisp. "A girl," she said in a voice much harsher than the moment should warrant. "The Princess Tabra Eutheria I of

Aryd.”

“A girl?” the mother sobbed. “But my husband wanted a boy.”

The queen’s narrowed blue eyes sharpened. “My dead son wanted a boy?” She sneered. “*Queens* are what keep this dominion alive.”

Judging by the state of the desert dominion under her reign, Hesperia wasn’t so sure about that. Aryd had become a poorer and more desperate place to live. However, she’d foolishly pledged herself to the wrong sovereign long ago, so to her, none of that mattered.

At the queen’s nod, Hesperia stepped forward.

She bent over the child. An Imperium, just like all the queens before her. This one she could sense was *Enfernae*, one with a rare soul ability passed down only through this line.

The one the king wanted.

The one she’d been ordered to curse.

Hesperia started to whisper over the child, but she only got a few words out before the glimmer of a rare vision stopped her. A horror of a future flashed across her mind, a chilling warning of the world she would help to create if she kept going.

She jerked back. Was this the future that the king had planned? *Eidolon* had grown more desperate in recent years, and for reasons he would not share, he wanted this particular *Enfernae* bound to him the moment her powers manifested.

Behind her, the mother moaned, doubling over her still-swollen belly, and shock whispered through the helpers in a series of gasps.

Another baby.

Unlike the others, Hesperia wasn’t surprised. This line of royals had twin queens every other generation. The best-kept secret of Aryd. Her mind spun for a different reason. Because of the vision she’d just seen...and a new possibility.

Do I dare defy him?

The queen thrust the firstborn closer. “Finish your rite.”

Hesperia made her choice, and, instead of the curse, she whispered a simple blessing and marked the child’s forehead with her fourth finger.

When she finished, she slowly backed away, fighting to hide a tremble threatening to take hold of her body at the realization of what she had done...and what she was about to do. Did he see? He seemed weaker lately. Maybe he wasn’t watching from the shadows. Regardless, she knew she’d sealed her own fate. She listened as violent screams ripped through the mother’s throat, one after the other, a symphony to her own damnation.

“The babe is turned,” the midwife said to the queen. “I must move it the right way, or we’ll lose both the mother and the child.”

The queen showed no emotion—she never did. “Save the child,” she commanded in a low voice.

The screaming went on and on until, suddenly, silence. Then a new cry filled the room. This child’s wail was sharper, as though furious with the world already.

Hesperia didn’t wait for the queen to signal her. She stepped over to the baby, still slick with birth. Just like each set of royal twins before these, one child was *Enfernae*, the other *Hylorae* and nothing special. Which was perfect for what Hesperia had in mind. She whispered words over the child, imbuing every syllable with power.

“No need for that,” the queen said, unaware of what was truly happening.

Hesperia touched a finger to the tiny princess’s hand, completing the ritual through touch, and the sharp burn of magic passed from nymph to babe. A curse bestowed.

Did King Eidolon see that coming? *I bet you didn’t, you ageless bastard.*

It was done, either way. He wouldn't discover her deception until he sought out the future Queen of Aryd and felt...nothing.

The full truth would be revealed when he locked eyes with her sister.

Without so much as a glance at the second infant's face, the queen flicked her gaze to the corner of the room. A woman stepped into the light. Heavily cloaked despite the sweltering desert heat, with the hood pulled low over her face, the woman took the baby from the midwife, who swung a wide, questioning gaze to the queen.

Her words dripping with the threat—no, the promise—of vengeance for any who would defy her will, the queen addressed the room. “The second child was stillborn,” she declared. “Dead. Do you understand?”

Hesperia doubted she would live to breathe a word of this to anyone, not that she had in generations. No one in this room would talk, either. Only a fool would ignore that command if they wanted to live.

But the curse...a day would come when that would not be so silent.

PART 1
The Pawn

1

A Hovel and a Hag

Now...

Time is measured by a single star creeping across the sky outside my tiny, glassless window. I watch it, waiting.

I'm always waiting. Waiting to sneak out. Waiting to be called upon to fulfill my duties. Waiting for Omma, who has raised me since birth, to tell me what to do. Waiting to be anything but who and what I am.

Mereneith Evangeline XII of Aryd.

A second-born princess in a long line of royal twins—one to rule, the other to serve as nothing more than a secret body double in dangerous circumstances.

Which means, of all the waiting I do, I'm basically just waiting to die.

I pull my knees to my chest, watching the night sky. Not much longer now.

I've been sneaking out since I was a child. Foolish and reckless? Maybe, but the desert is the only place where I get to be *Meren*. Where Cain lives.

Cain is a Wanderer, part of the nomadic people who travel the deserts, stopping by the city periodically to trade their wares. Between his travels and Omma's sharp eye keeping me in place, it's been ages since I've escaped this house.

My blood thrums with excitement at the thought of seeing him again, not just because he's my only real friend, but also because Cain teaches me things that Omma would never allow. Things that might give me a chance to survive if the king of Tyndra ever comes for us.

Eidolon: the goddess-damned reason I'm so stuck.

The stories Omma and Grandmother have told us are terrifying. The immortal king has been stealing and murdering queens of Aryd for

centuries. Only a handful of generations have been spared, which is how our grandmother retains her throne and Omma her life.

He is always coming for us—we just don't know when or why. And that unpredictability is what scares me most.

I sit up straighter. No. I refuse to think about the cruel fate the mother goddess and her six daughters have woven for me. Not tonight. Tonight is *mine*.

Or it will be, if I can get out of this damn house without getting caught.

The instant my star disappears from view, I'm on my feet, adjusting my disguise. A black body-hugging top, breeches, and worn calfskin boots, all threadbare, as would be for a poor city waif and not a princess in hiding.

Some days, I wonder which is the disguise.

After checking for the knife I always hide on me somewhere, I pin my headscarf into place, leaving only my eyes exposed. I wear it any time I'm out of the house and in the city. Goddess forbid anyone mistakes me for Princess Tabra, heir apparent to the throne.

As Tabra's identical twin, I have the same long black hair, same golden skin that can freckle in the sun, same unusual shade of amber eyes and stubborn chin. I am an exact copy, down to each mole and scar.

You don't want to know how I got the scars.

I eye the window. I haven't tried escaping that way before for a good reason, but the Hag has caught me every other way and I'd like to save my coins if I can. As I swing my leg over, my stomach pitches, and I grip the windowsill hard. Heights and I do *not* get along.

I huff out an irritated breath. Princess Mereneith, Imperium and fearless body double to the future Queen of Aryd, afraid of falling to her death from only one story up.

If Cain could see me now, I'd never hear the end of it.

Not looking down, I scoot across the tile-covered roof to the corner and

the drainage pipe bolted to the wall. Black dots freckle the edges of my vision. Is the air thinner up here? Or maybe I forgot to breathe. Ugh.

I grab hold of the pipe and, without letting myself think about it, make my way down into the alleyway below, taking a shuddering breath when my feet finally hit the ground.

Never doing that again.

At least I get lucky. The alley is empty. No sign of Omma's watchdog.

I scrunch my nose in disgust. It always smells like piss out here. The small, weathered hovel where Omma and I live is tucked between two taller inns, like a tiny child squished between broad-shouldered men in a pew at temple. These are establishments for the rougher sort of travelers, drunks, and whores. That's what Omma calls them, at least, though the women who work there have always been kind to me. Except for the selkie, but she's mean to everyone.

Ignoring my shaking hands, I pull my pack from the pile of trash where I'd stashed it earlier. *Never go into the desert unprepared*, Cain always tells me. He would know.

Sandrats skitter out of my way, baring tiny, razor-sharp teeth. The menaces have gnawed a hole in the canvas. Typical.

Bag secured over one shoulder, I move quickly to the end of the alley. The street ahead is quiet. Perfect. It's safer if I get outside the walls before the city fills with people out to enjoy the cool of the night.

But when I go to take a step, a gnarled hand wraps around my arm and tugs me back with surprising strength. A string of frustrated curses crosses through my mind, but for once I manage not to voice them.

The Hag—I've never heard anyone call her anything else—glares in my general direction. For years, my great-aunt has paid this blind old beggar woman to monitor the house—and me—when she's gone. But Omma is cheap, even when protecting the royal quasi-princess, and the Hag is only a

Vex.

Her lack of powers doesn't make her any less intimidating, though.

"You shouldn't go out tonight," she says in a voice only a mother could love, hooked fingers twitching against my arm.

No one is talking me out of this. I shift from foot to foot, antsy to get out of there. "Listen—"

She holds up a hand to stop me and huffs out a sigh. "Just...watch yourself tonight, girl."

I frown. She's never bothered to warn me before, much less let me go. "Why?"

"I may be half blind, but my ears work fine. Talk of more folk disappearing. Taken in the night." She pauses, then lowers her voice to a hush. "I believe the Shadowraith walks among us again."

Shadowraith.

A shiver races along my spine. Everyone in my city of Enora has heard of someone who knows someone who's gone missing. They call them the Vanished. Is this the reason?

I think back over the words she said. "Wait. Again?"

She shakes her head. "It's not the first time shadows have come."

It's not? Why has Omma never mentioned it?

"But this is different."

I breathe out through my nose. I have so many questions, but the Hag has already given me more than I expected. "Thanks for the warning. I'll be careful," I say. And then, whether to reassure her or me, I toss her an overconfident smile and add, "The shadows and I have a certain...fondness for one another."

And it's true. The shadows are the only way I can ever escape. They hide me, and, in return, I tell them all my wishes.

Mostly wishes for a different life.

Maybe I would feel differently if I came face-to-face with the Shadowraith, though. A girl of eighteen summer solstices, an Imperium whose underwhelming powers to control sand wouldn't make a dent. I mean, what could I do? Throw sand in its eyes? If it even has them. I shudder at the thought.

I'm not supposed to use my powers, anyway—especially not in public.

Hard rule. One of many.

I square my shoulders. I already have enough worries just getting out of the city, but the Hag's warning is more than most would bother to do for me. Rather than hand over the tiny purse of coins I always bring in case she catches me—which she often does—I pull out the last of the storm-asps I snuck out of the palace last time I was there. It was supposed to be a gift for Cain.

“Here,” I say and place the sleek, pewter-scaled snake into her hand. A rare delicacy usually reserved for authorities' tables.

Her crow of delight follows me around the corner and into the darkened cobbled streets where the Shadowraith may well be lurking.

2

Stranger in the Night

In the darkness, it's harder to see the decay, but I know it's there. Everything around here is chipped, broken, or falling apart. The deterioration isn't contained to the poorer parts of the city anymore, either.

During the day, these streets are haunted by the people going about their work, growing ever closer to the sandrats they shoo from their homes, chewing through whatever and whoever they have to just to put food in their bellies. Vexillium, like the Hag, with no magic to speak of. Men and women stooped over, life etched into the crags of their faces, dust permanently ground into their skin. When Omma and I come back from trips to the palace, I have to scratch in the dirt or I look too clean.

Somewhere inside one of the buildings I pass by, laughter tumbles out—a family, I think—and I smile.

Aryd at night, when we finally get a break from the sun and the effort to keep going, always reminds me that under that decay are people who laugh, love, and just try to survive. Patience gets them through the heat of the day, and a world of moonlight is their reward. Moments like these remind me why, no matter how unfulfilling this life may be, I will never leave it.

Even if I haven't experienced the same pangs of hunger or scorching burns from laboring under the desert sun, or wept because I couldn't afford a house or healer, I see the suffering of the Enoran people—*my* people.

I've lived among them and beside them, though. I've tasted the sweet, honeyed candies sold in our marketplace. I've heard music more beautiful than the night sky, and lain on rooftops, listening to elders pass on the stories of our world to the wide-eyed children of Enora. If I abandoned this place, who would be left to watch over them? Who would fight to protect them? Who would be willing to die for them?

There is only me. And maybe someday Tabra, if I can help her see beyond the palace walls. If the people even allow us in.

Which is why there is still danger here, especially for me. Or for who I am, at least. More and more, we've heard whispers of unrest and organized uprisings from the outer territories, some of the smaller cities and settlements, and even within Enora itself.

Which means I need to move.

A prickling feeling of being watched has me checking the way I came. I half expect the Hag to be hobbling after me, but no one is there.

I curse my uneasiness. Her warning has me extra jumpy tonight.

Dealers, thieves, life stealers, and traffickers. The underbelly of this city lurks in the same cracks and crevices I slink through, and if I'm discovered, things could get bad, fast. Through dark patches and doorways I near the south gate of the city walls. Though I know the route by heart, I can't shake the creeping sense that I am being watched. The Hag must have gotten to me more than I thought.

Checking over my shoulder one last time before leaving the city, I—

A young man, only a handful of summers older than me at most, stands in the middle of the street, staring at me.

I stop, adrenaline spiking in my veins. *Shadowraith?*

I shouldn't have strapped my knife to my ankle. Under my top would have been better.

But no, he looks human enough. Dressed in black, his clothes aren't those of a laborer or a waif, like me, but neither is he wearing anything that would indicate wealth or privilege. Is he a Vex? He doesn't look like a Vex. He's too still. Too...controlled.

Which means he's probably an Imperium. Great.

The question is, which kind of Imperium?

A Hylorae would be less of a threat. We control tangible, physical

elements like sand or water or plants, depending on the person. But an Enfernae... Their control over intangible things like emotions or souls or a person's mind can be terrifying.

King Eidolon is Enfernae. Or so we've been told.

My sister will be, too.

Omnia is Enfernae.

The last thing I want is to cross paths with an unfamiliar Enfernae. *Please be literally anything else.*

I eye him. He's not just staring—he's *watching* me. Intently.

The strangest sense of recognition tickles the back of my mind, but I can't pin it down, like trying to touch a mirage.

For just an instant, the clouds part and a shaft of moonlight moves over his features. A wave of impressions strikes in rapid succession. Midnight black hair swept up off a high brow. A sharply set jaw. Slashing, thick brows over eyes that even in the silvery light remind me of the times I've stood on the protected side of our dominion's glass-walled borders and watched the sun play on the shallow ocean waters beyond. Sometimes, for a crazy, pulse-pounding instant, I've thought about risking a gruesome death just to know the feel of the translucent waves washing over my feet.

I feel that same pull now.

A slight crookedness to his mouth is the only imperfection I can see, but somehow that adds rather than detracts. He may be the most harshly beautiful man I've ever seen, but that's not what captures my attention. It's the aura of leashed power that surrounds him...and the way he's studying me. Like he sees *me*.

And I do the worst thing I could do—just stand here. Like it's perfectly normal to come across beautiful, uncomfortably familiar men who all but appear from thin air in the middle of the night. An Imperium, no less. Omnia would have my head. Tabra might even help, because she hates it

when I put myself at risk. Although our definitions of “dangerous” are as different as our lives, neither of us can stand the thought of losing the other.

If I can get to the desert, I can hide myself in the sands. It’s the only place my power becomes helpful.

“Who are you?” he demands before I can make the smart decision to leave.

Warmth fizzes through me. Goddess, what a voice. Velvet and iron. But then his question sinks in. That is the *last* thing I want anyone asking me. Especially a potential *Enfernae*. What if his power is over truth?

Forget sneaking away. I bolt.

“Hey!” he calls after me.

I hesitate, glancing over my shoulder...a foolish move. *Why are his eyes so damn distracting? Sandrat bastard.* At least I remember to deliberately lower my voice, so I don’t sound like my sister when I speak. “I’m no one.”

His eyebrows slam down. *Oh, you don’t like that?* Not a surprise. I’m old enough to know that men who look like him are used to getting their way. But then his expression shifts as he glances between me and the exit. “You shouldn’t go out there alone.”

Is he trying to protect me? *Or corner me*, a more logical part of me thinks.

I lift my chin. “I do as I please.” I hear the queen’s imperious tone in my words, and I want to kick myself. A waif of Enora wouldn’t sound so... royal. So entitled.

There’s no flicker of recognition in his eyes, thank the goddesses. I’ve about convinced myself he’s just a Vex criminal whose nighttime activities I interrupted when he gives a slight incline of his head. A gesture I recognize from court.

I frown. A criminal with an authority’s manners? *Who is this man?* But before I can ask, the stranger turns and melts into the shadows, leaving

me alone. Dropping my hand to my side, I stare at the spot where he'd been standing, not sure what I saw and maybe even more unnerved by the unexpected sense of disappointment I feel. Disappointment and... emptiness.

I shake myself out of my stupor and hurry through the tunnel toward the sand on the other side. I pause at the end, glancing behind me one last time. No one is there. So why do I still feel eyes on me?

Taking in a breath, I step outside the city walls. As my feet bite into the sand and my eyes into the seemingly endless dunes of the Crystalline Desert, which now glows under the three full moons, my entire body hums with pleasure. It is always this way, as if the magic in my bloodstream finally feels at home.

I walk a while, heading for the towering glass wall that marks our dominion's farthest eastern border. I try to make it out in the distance, but it has no reflection. No one knows how high the glass goes. Some even suggest that it's actually a dome, but if that were true, how do we still have air to breathe?

All we know for sure is that the walls were made by the Goddess Aryd to keep out the Devourers. And yes, those monsters live up to their name—violent and ravenously thirsty for blood. No one knows why our seas were damned with them, but each of the six dominions named for their ruling goddess—Aryd, Tyndra, Wildernyss, Savanah, Mariana, and Tropikis—has its own defenses, some more successful than others.

This is ours.

Plus, in protecting us from the monsters, our goddess gave us an unexpected gift. The tendrils of endless winter are crawling beyond Tyndra's borders, and our glass walls keep out the relentless, brutal cold that Omma told me is ravaging the other dominions.

No one dares to question what would happen if the walls abandoned us.

I keep moving south, away from the city, where I'll have the best chance at finding Cain and his people.

But no fires dot the dunes in the distance. No bursts of warm laughter. No horses' hooves scuff on the parched sand. The longer I walk without any sign of him or his zariphate, the more disappointment builds in my gut. When I reach the well where we always know to meet, it is empty. I am once again reminded how lonely this life can be.

Sighing, I decide to grant myself the only pleasure I can. My blood has been keening for it since the moment I set foot outside of the city, begging me to reach down and take the sand into my control. After another glance around, because I'm not supposed to do this, I feel for the kernel of the power inside me, the one I can't ever seem to fully grasp, and warmth flows through my skin like effervescent bubbles as a soft yellow glow comes from my palm.

Under me, the ground shivers. The sand obeys me as it always has, and a small amount lifts from the ground. I direct its temperature to rise, and tiny golden sparks spray out, reminding me of fire sprites who lead people who are lost even deeper into the desert. The sand fuses, forming into a ball, then the individual grains melt and meld, becoming a glowing orange liquid.

With a flick of my fingers, I shape the small bubble into the start of a glass flower for Tabra. My sister loves my glass gifts so much, she made a secret garden of them in the palace.

I don't finish, though. It's still just a bud when I decide I shouldn't stay here waiting any longer. Cain isn't coming, and it's dangerous to be out here alone.

Wrestling with my disappointment, I get to my feet, slipping the flower into a pocket to finish later.

But before I can pick up my pack and turn back for the city, a leanly

muscled arm wraps around my chest and a knife blade digs into my throat.

3

Cain

I stiffen. Merciful goddess. Did the stranger in the street follow me after all? Did he see what I was doing with the sand? How could I be so careless?

“Move and you’ll be breathing blood through your windhole,” a low voice says close to my ear.

Wait. Not the stranger’s voice.

The blade digs deeper, and I flinch. The warm trickle oozing down my neck tells me that whoever this is...he’s deadly serious.

My mind splinters. If he isn’t the stranger, then who in the seven hells is he? An Imperium would have used their power. A troll would be taller. Maybe an Outcast? I catch a scent of sweat. Not my own, though—fouler, more pungent. Human, at least.

I was right earlier with the stranger. The strapped knife on my ankle is useless right now. Handling it is one of the skills Cain taught me, but I can’t reach it.

Which leaves me only one option.

Closing my eyes, I stay still and silent. As long as I’m not a threat, maybe he’ll let me go. Unless this guy is one of the “sacrifice her to the Pit of Bones” types. Being digested slowly over a hundred summers really isn’t in my plans.

“I wondered how long it would take before we bumped into Cain’s little pet.” The familiar female voice comes from behind me.

My eyes snap open. Despite the knife still at my neck, I don’t bother to hide my glare.

Cain’s half sister, Pella, moves the sleek black mare she rides around in front of me. Even though they don’t look it, with their smaller, fine-boned stature, the horses of the Wanderers have been bred to be hardy with incredible stamina. Survivors.

If I were a horse, I'd want to be like them.

Reins loose, hands casually draped over the high pommel of her saddle, Pella sneers down at me. Sharp nosed and sharp tongued, she is a feminine version of Cain with skin the color of sand in the sunset. I always was jealous of that, since I have to be careful to protect my own to more closely match my sister, who rarely leaves the shelter of the palace.

I've never liked Pella.

The sneer I can handle. No one comes close to Omma—or even more so, my grandmother—for sneers. The court is riddled with judgment like the pox, so I've managed to grow a thick skin. But the fact that Pella always calls me Cain's little pet, despite me being a few months older than her, chafes like sand in my undergarments.

What's more, she knows it.

"Pella," I greet. "I wish I could say this was a nice surprise, but you clearly still haven't outgrown that bitchy phase. Shame."

Her sound of outrage is worth the sting of the knife pressed deeper into the flesh of my neck, earning me another oozing trickle of blood. "You dare insult the zariph's daughter?" the scout demands.

"Let her go," another familiar voice, deeper than the last time I saw him, commands from behind the well.

Cain.

He steps closer, the moonlight illuminating his face, and I blink. Lately, whenever I see him, I'm surprised. I can't help it. I guess I keep expecting to find the same boy I saw every few months growing up—gangly and scrawny, with a head too big for his shoulders and coltish legs he hadn't known what to do with.

But that's not who he is anymore, and it hasn't been for a year or two.

Laughing eyes, nearly onyx-colored in the night, are wide-set under a strong forehead. An even stronger jaw. Skin burnished by the sun to a rich,

coppery-bronze, darker than his sister's. His form has filled out, broadened, and no doubt hardened under the looser clothing of the wandering desert peoples.

Made of cloth the exact hue of this region—sand the color of oats—the clothes blend Cain's silhouette into his surroundings. It's difficult to see where one layer ends and another begins, but I know the outermost layer hides razor-thin armor strapped to his legs, torso, and shoulders.

The knife is removed from my neck, and the scout steps away. He pretends not to recognize me as he disappears into the desert, even though I know he does. Everyone in this zariphate knows me.

After all, as the zariph's son, Cain is next in the line of succession. Kind of like me, but legitimate. Which means people tend to keep an eye on who he spends time with.

He winks, and I try not to laugh.

Pella's expression, meanwhile, curls into a scowl. She really would be strikingly beautiful if she'd stop doing that with her face. I told her that once. She didn't take it as a compliment—even a backhanded one.

I blow out a silent breath and turn my back to her. I used to understand her attitude. Wanderers are naturally wary of strangers. But after so many years of me hanging around, Pella should be over it.

"Why do you bother with her?" she asks Cain, then gives a little hiss of derision. "Caught like the ignorant city-dweller she is."

If only she knew. In order to play the role I do in the palace, I've been educated the same as my sister. All the best tutors. Debates with philosophers and generals and government leaders. I'm the most educated waif in all of Aryd.

I wonder what the zariph would do if I knocked his precious only daughter off her horse with a rock?

"There's only so much I can protect you from," Cain murmurs as he

steps nearer. Like he read my mind. “As much fun as your smart mouth is.”

Before I can answer, a tremor deep in the ground catches my attention. A good distance away, a tiny plume rises into the air. It could be a dust devil.

It’s not.

A zariphate of Wanderers, in number, is on the move and headed straight for the well. Still a league out at least.

Tracking my gaze, Pella suddenly sits straighter. “We’ll see what Father has to say about your sandrat,” she says to Cain.

“Sand *snake*, don’t you mean?” I glance pointedly at her.

Pella’s hand goes to the small, puckered scar on her lip that I can’t see but know is there. The last time she called me a sand snake, I’d cracked a whip at her. It was supposed to be a warning. It caught her in the face instead. I’m not all that great with whips. Can’t say I’m sorry about it.

Rather than pout, she grins at Cain. “Now that you’re to be—”

“*Pella.*” Cain practically growls the word.

His sister stares at him, all wide-eyed innocence, leaning forward to casually pat her horse’s silky neck. “If you’re going to be married, brother, I doubt your new heartmate will appreciate having *her* around.”

I’m instantly a confusing mess of emotions. But mostly, hurt rises to the top like curdled cream. He didn’t tell me.

“Go tell Father I’ve purified the well,” Cain says to his sister over my head.

“Yes,” I say. “Run on back to daddy, little girl.”

Hatred flashes through her eyes, but something else must pass between brother and sister because she huffs again, then turns away.

Leaving me alone with Cain.

I wait a beat before looking at him, searching his familiar face. The first time I ran away from the hovel, I was six years old, and Cain, not much

older, found me parched and barely alive under a lone tree in the desert. His father managed to have me returned to Omma in Enora.

You're lucky they didn't force you into servitude, Omma had scolded me.

I wasn't so sure "lucky" was the right word. Even at that age, being a servant who was wanted and useful sounded better than being what I was.

The second time I escaped—only a month later, thanks to the Hag turning a literal blind eye after I bribed her—Cain had been the one to find me again. That time, he'd taken responsibility for me, and his father hadn't bothered to send me back. Cain promised to teach me to live and survive in the desert as long as I promised to only venture out when I could find him near this well, the one closest to the city.

I've worshiped the ground he walks on ever since. But if he got married? I would lose my friend. My *only* friend.

Cain studies me. "If I call you beautiful, will you cut out my tongue?"

I blink. He's never said anything like that to me before. For the first time in my life, I'm tempted to put a hand up to check my hair, which only adds another layer of confusion to go with my dry-as-dust mouth and no doubt dirt- and sweat-covered face. I shift awkwardly. "Is it true?" I ask. "What Pella said, I mean."

He grimaces. "She shouldn't have told you that way."

So, she *wasn't* lying.

"You're right." I suddenly want to lash out at him. "*You* should have told me, Little Cainis."

I regret it the second the words are out. Cain hates his full name, but even more, he hates the patronizing tag of "little" some add to it. His father, for whom he was named, is called Mighty Cainis and is the leader of the largest zariphate in Aryd.

Cain shakes his head. "I'm sorry. I was going to—" He cuts himself off and starts over. "Father wants me to make a political match with an

authoritate.”

“Why?” My grandmother has been desperate to make an alliance with the Mighty Cainis for as long as I can remember, but the Wanderers have always spurned those who lived in cities.

“For access to resources,” Cain says grimly.

Resources? The zariphates are self-sufficient. “What could you possibly need?”

“The wells are starting to dry.”

Goddess, is that true? While the walls have kept out the Devourers, they’ve also kept in the intense heat of summer. The desert has been eating away at anything that had once been lush and green with a slow, unstoppable hunger, just as the decay has been taking over our cities.

Cain takes a deep breath. “Tomorrow we’ll travel to Oaesys to barter for my...bride.”

My mouth opens a few times without sound coming out. “You... You’re going to the palace?”

Where Tabra is. Tabra, who looks exactly like me. *Don’t panic.*

He steps closer, urgency in the tense motion of his body. “Yes. But it’s not what *I* want.”

I’m still stumbling over the whole palace thing. What if he gets a good look at my sister and puts it all together? Omma will kill me. *Truly.* Because if my secret is uncovered, my existence revealed, what’s the point of keeping me around?

Cain takes my hands in his. Touch in our dominion is important. Personal. All I can do is stare at our linked fingers. His are larger, stronger.

“Come with me,” he says.

I jerk my gaze up to eyes filled with a soft expression I’ve never seen before, not from him. Tenderness and a question I can’t possibly answer.

“Don’t go back to Enora,” he says. “Stay with the zariphate. And me.”

What is he asking? That I go to Oaesys with him? That won't work on so many levels. I shake my head. "Pella's right. If you marry, your heartmate won't—"

"*Meren.*" He sort of laughs and groans at the same time. Then digs in the loose pockets of his clothes before holding out a bracelet. A cuff made of pure, gleaming gold with the symbol of a sand fox—Cain's family sigil—etched into the center.

Oh.

Oh goddess.

"We could travel to the Sacred Tree, like we've always talked about... make our covenant there."

I swallow. I've never even seen the Sacred Tree in Aryd, though Tabra got to for our sixteenth birthday as part of her entering the age of reason. But not me. It's on the other side of the dominion and never stops burning. Cain and I have talked all our lives of visiting all six sacred trees of the dominions. Together.

But that's not what he's asking now.

My skin goes tight all over, like part of me wants to jump right out of it. This is Cain—my friend, my protector, my hero—who has taught me so much and always treated me with kindness. As an equal.

I know who and what I am, but he doesn't. Even in the desert when I'm trying to escape my life, that knowing is there, under every move I make, every word out of my mouth. It has never once occurred to me that Cain could be more.

A different life. One where I'm not a secret, unwanted until I'm required to do my duty. One where I get to always be part of the desert that has felt more like home than the palace or the hovel ever did.

The life he's offering is tempting, except for the odd, unsettled churning in my stomach. Even more unsettling is the sudden, sharp memory of

turquoise eyes in the night.

I have to give him an answer. I have no idea what I'm going to say, but the hope in his eyes is tearing me up. "Cain—"

Shouts from the direction of the zariphate cut me off.

Cain jerks his head around.

The buzz of voices rises toward us like a swarm of locusts, followed quickly by the pounding of hooves over the hard sand nearer the wall. Pella appears out of the dark and reins sharply to a halt. "Cain!" she yells. "We are leaving. *Now.*"

He glances at me, then back to her. "Now? Before we've rested? Why?"

"The queen is dead."

4

No Time to Mourn

I go as still as glass.

Everything is about to change. My grandmother is dead. The queen is dead. My own sweet sister will be crowned, and Tabra is going to need me. More than she ever has.

I don't wait for Cain, or Pella, or the Wanderers. I take off running, desperate to get back to Enora. Omma will want me to journey to Oaesys immediately.

"Meren!" Cain's shout is sharp, and I flinch, but I don't stop.

Footfalls, fast and hard, sound behind me. "Meren, please!"

I clench my fists against the plea in his voice. The confusion. "I have to go!" I yell over my shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Cain!"

"Cain!" Pella is still close by, the snap of her voice carrying over the dunes.

I hear him stop. Only the sound of my feet on the packed sand follows me now, and I know that he's given up.

He'll stay with his people while I return to Enora and my hovel, where no doubt Omma will be waiting for me by the time I get back, furious that I left at all.

There are preparations that must be done to transform me into Tabra. After that, we'll need to travel through the glass portal in the Temple of Enora to the sister portal in the temple in Oaesys where, for all intents and purposes, I will now be Omma, at the beck and call of my sister, the soon-to-be-crowned Queen of Aryd.

I glance over my shoulder one last time to see my friend standing tall and strong, a solid figure against the wall, watching as I run away from him.

I'll see him again, but that might be worse. If the zariphate is headed to the capitol, the next time I see him, I'll be Tabra, and he'll want answers.

Answers I can never give.

I don't bother to stop my tears as I sprint toward the city. I don't even know that I could. I let them fall as I cross the south gate, for my grandmother, for Tabra, for the hope in Cain's eyes, and for myself and all of the dreams I didn't even realize I'd had. That was all over now.

It doesn't occur to me until I'm standing before our hovel that this would be my final trip through the back alleys and darkened corners that have become as familiar to me as the palace is to Tabra. I could not risk such trips going forward. I wish I had appreciated it more.

Omma's stringent voice reaches me the second I walk in the door. "I wondered if you'd bother to show at all."

Knowing dawdling will only piss her off more, I hurry down the dark, narrow hallway that leads to the back of the hovel, turning the corner to find her pouring boiling water into a copperplated tub that stands in the center of the kitchen, already mostly full.

"We don't have time to argue." Her lips are pinched so tight, the puckered lines make her look like a seamstress sewed her mouth shut from the inside. "You're filthy. Get in."

Happy to avoid the yelling part of the night, I strip. Except, I remember the glass flower in my pocket at the last minute. Pretending to fold my clothes, I slip a hand into the pocket—

It's gone.

Hells. It must've fallen out.

With any luck, it's somewhere in the desert and the zariphate's horses crushed it. Not that anyone could connect it to me.

I make myself finish folding, then step into the tepid water, grateful she'd bothered to warm it even a tiny bit. She hands me a scrub brush, then goes to pull out the sweet-smelling soaps and lotions and oils that we stash in a hidden panel in the wall, just in case someone suspicious snoops

around looking for signs that not one but two hidden princesses live here.

I study her.

I know she was beautiful once. I've seen paintings and carvings of my grandmother at a younger age. But now... Omma's salt-and-pepper hair is scraped harshly back from her face, pulling at the skin and giving her a perpetually shocked expression. She's lost weight, mostly so that she would continue to look the same as Grandmother, who's been sickly. Her bones now appear draped with loose, paper-thin skin covered in age spots.

She's acting as if nothing unusual is happening—just another trip to the palace. Like her sister isn't dead and Tabra isn't about to be queen.

Omma is a cold woman, but does she feel *nothing*? What about how her entire world has just been upended? The time in her life to disappear and become nothing is here. I picture a fruit, withering away, unplucked on the vine until the bugs devour it whole.

Things for me to look forward to.

“Get moving, girl,” she snaps.

Omma puts the bottles on the small table by the tub, then sits down with a heavy sigh. I scrub and scrub the layers of grime and sand and sweat from my body. While I do that, Omma and I talk. This is also a deliberate part of our process. One that serves two purposes.

Partly it's about practicing the cadence of speech of authorities, who favor fancier words and a more affected accent than the lower classes here in Enora. Each syllable more pronounced, the vowels drawn out. It's almost unrecognizable from the dialect of the Wanderers, who eat their *S* sounds and blur the harder consonants.

The other purpose is to prepare me for court when I have to pretend to be Tabra. Omma tells me all the news from the palace. By the time I am done bathing, I know which authorities are in favor and which aren't, plans already laid for the funeral and coronation, the status of the other

dominions, and key bits of gossip that might be useful.

“Omma...will you miss your sister?” The question sort of tumbles out.

She doesn't even blink. Why did I bother to ask?

“I don't know who I am without her.”

I understand how she feels, perhaps more than I ever have. Then she ruins that small show of humanity by scowling. “Get up.”

She yanks me by my arm out of the tub, then hands me rough cloths, waiting impatiently as I dry off before we go up the narrow, steep stairs to my bedroom. There she stuffs me in my royal garments, also concealed in the walls. She turns to get something, and I quickly strap my two hidden knives in place. After drying and curling my hair, she does my makeup with swift, deft strokes, then yanks my hair into an elaborate knot piled high on my head.

And somewhere in the middle of all of that, it hits me that I'm the only one getting ready to leave...and why.

“There.” Omma gives a sharp tug to a curl. “You're presentable.”

She hustles me back downstairs. At the door, I pause, waiting for her to say...something. I don't know what.

When she doesn't, I open the door.

“Wait.”

I turn back.

She holds out the key that I recognize as the one belonging to our hovel. Looking me dead in the eyes, she searches my face. “Use what I've taught you. Do your duty. Be there for your sister. Never trust Eidolon.”

That's it? This woman has raised me since infancy, and that's all she has to say? Vultures have more feeling for their rotting food.

After a pause, I give a jerking nod, trying to hide a shiver at how cold she sounds.

“Go.” She gives me a push.

As soon as I'm out the door, the click of the lock behind me echoes off the alleyway walls, the sound cringingly loud...and final.

5

Long May We Reign

Less than an hour later, exhaustion dragging at my bones, I stand in the city of Oaesys, hiding outside one of the smaller gates in the outer palace walls, waiting. I've tucked myself into the protected storefront across the street, the hood of my black cloak drawn far down over my face.

I've been careful getting here—more so than usual, given the events of the night.

The tiny hairs across the back of my neck raise. I'm being watched. This time I *know* it.

Breath held tight, I slip my dagger out and whirl around.

Nothing. Shadows spill from the doorway behind me like ink. I frown, staring harder, trying to find the outline of whoever is watching me. A flash of eyes. Anything I could throw my knife at.

The shadows lengthen. Become darker. Solid. Like I could reach out and touch them.

Or like they could reach out and touch *me*.

My heart thuds heavily against my rib cage.

A whistle pierces the quiet, and I shrink back against the dew-damp stone of the building. The lamplighter doesn't see me as he passes by, going about his business, the flickering flame he carries throwing the shadows around me into disarray.

As soon as he disappears, so does the strange sense of being watched. Of not being alone. The whiplash of sensations frays my already frazzled nerves. I need to get inside the palace.

Where the hells is Tabra?

She's supposed to meet me here. Dawn is breaking. The purpling haze of it skates over the tops of the buildings to the south, warning me that we don't have long. If she's not careful, the servants will be awake. Someone

might see us.

“Moons and magic,” a hushed voice whispers from the gate.

Finally.

“Patience and sand,” I whisper back. Our passwords.

After one more check of the street, I hurry across and through the small door in the now-empty guards’ house. My sister will have ordered them away.

I pull up at the sight of her, staring at an exact replica of myself, and she stares back. Even though I’ve been scrubbed and primped and perfumed until I’m as polished as a scepter, she’s still more beautiful, at least to me.

On a gusty breath of joy, we hug. Mother goddess, it’s been too long. I hug Tabra tight. As much as my world is about to change, hers is even more. For once, I don’t envy my sister, who will spend the rest of her life under the constant scrutiny of a royal court.

“Grandmother is dead,” she whispers into my hair, and her body trembles against mine.

“I know.”

“I’m going to be queen.” Her voice breaks.

I pull back and tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear, taking her in.

Amber eyes made more dramatic with copper sand dust, like the shimmering-masked yoewl cats that roam the desert. Shining hair tumbling in artful curls around her shoulders. Her petite curves enhanced by a figure-hugging cinnamon-colored tunic, sleeveless and low-cut, fitted over a gossamer-light skirt rather than breeches. Beyond the dark circles under her eyes, she’s perfect.

“You’ll be amazing,” I say.

Lips like mine tip in amusement but mostly doubt. “I’ve never done anything without her.”

I know that, too. I’ve worried about that since I was old enough to

understand our fates.

Tabra may look like the pampered palace version of me, but her soul is purer, sweeter. Given the conniving, backstabbing, power-mongering life at court, I have no idea how she's remained so kind. If becoming queen steals that from her, either through exhaustion or malice, I don't know what I'll do.

Maybe I'll go on some sort of "off with their heads" rant when I'm standing in for her. They wouldn't dare mess with the queen after that.

"How hard could ruling a dominion be, anyway?"

Tabra's eyes go wide. "Meren," she hisses, glancing around like someone might have overheard.

"I'm pretty sure we can do it better." I'm pretty sure *anyone* could have done it better than our grandmother.

"Shhh..." She flaps a hand at me. "You can't say things like that."

I shrug. The goddesses have yet to smite me.

She glances behind me. "Where's Omma?"

Shock. She's definitely in shock, otherwise she wouldn't have asked.

Teasing isn't working, so I try to gentle my answer. "You know she can never show her face here again."

What would people do if a woman who looked like their dead queen was seen walking around? They'd crowd the temple in a frenzy, praying to the goddesses about the end of days, that's what.

"Oh." Tabra bites her lip. "Right. Silly of me to ask."

I squeeze her hand, her skin cold against mine. "Let's get inside. Then we can talk."

She nods, and we both draw our hoods up together, but two steps toward the palace, she pauses. "Wait." Then hurries back to the guards' hut and picks up a basket heavily laden with foods from the palace—breads, fresh root vegetables, even a leg of lamb.

Smiling softly, because she does this every time, I wait, watching her from the guard house as she hurries to the corner and places the food out of sight on the other side, where those who need it most might find it.

“I’m surprised the palace isn’t running out of baskets yet,” I tease when she returns to me.

Tabra smiles. “Grandmother can’t...” She pauses and self-corrects. “*Couldn’t* understand why the kitchens kept losing them. I started sending Achlys out with other containers—water jugs and things that might be equally useful—so she wouldn’t notice as much.”

We giggle. Then we both sober. We need to be in a safer space before we talk more.

No one sees or stops us as we make our way through lesser-used passageways to the long corridor where the royal suites are located. Her room is empty, of course. And as soon as the door closes, we hug again.

We always do, because we never know how long we’ll be together. This time is different, though. This time, she’s in charge, and we’re on our own.

Are we ready? I’m already shaking my head at the question. I’m not ready. And neither is Tabra. Her Imperium powers haven’t shown up yet. She can’t protect herself, and my powers aren’t strong enough to protect myself, let alone us both.

“Have you offered words to the goddesses yet?”

Tabra shifts on her feet. The six goddesses and their mother goddess hide in the Allusian heavens with their consorts. They stopped talking to their people long ago. My sister, like my grandmother who raised her, doesn’t pray—not unless it’s part of a public ceremony. Neither does Omma.

I do.

“I thought you could...”

I nod. I’ll do it for us both. “I know the viziers are already busy

planning the coronation and Grandmother's funeral."

She sighs and drops to the bed. "The palace is already starting to fill with authorities and politicians from all over Aryd and from the other dominions. Everyone wants to meet with the new queen. I'm supposed to give a speech tomorrow—" She glances at the watery light creeping across the floor. "This morning, actually, and tonight is the traditional pre-coronation reception."

That was fast. Then again, the dominion needs a ruler.

"Which do you want me to do?"

She wrinkles her nose. "Both?" she asks hopefully.

"Cute. But no."

She tosses a pillow at me, but at least I got her to smile. Meanwhile, I'm thinking about the two events. Speeches are given from a protected balcony that looks out into the city. No one can get near her there. "The reception is probably the more dangerous of the two."

Tabra hesitates.

I know that expression. "What?"

"I'm opening the palace to all the people for the coronation."

My throat pinches closed, though I probably should have expected it. I want to argue, to tell her she's risking lives. The uprisings may not have reached the capital yet, but many of Aryd's citizens—the downtrodden and struggling—are angry with the royals. I've seen their faces in Enora, witnessed their fight for survival. I'm angry *for* them.

"Then I'm standing in for the coronation."

She shakes her head. "The real queen should be the one crowned, and I want my people to see that. See *me*."

Tabra's naïveté when it comes to human nature, while sweet, is dangerous. Still, I can't say I'm all that sad to miss being the one front and center for that circus. "Fine. But I want Achlys to have me ready to take

your place.”

Tabra frowns, almost confused. “My people won’t hurt me.”

I sigh. Our grandmother’s rule hasn’t been easy on many in this dominion. Tabra can change that, and I can help her. Just not the way she’s imagining. I reach over and take her hand. “Not after they get to know you, they won’t. But right now, all they know is—”

A knock sounds at the door, and we both go still, staring at each other wide-eyed. No one can see us together. Ever.

“A letter for you, domina,” a male voice calls out. “Arrived just now.”

“Just a moment!” Tabra responds.

In as silent a hurry as I can move, I grab my belongings and run for the hidden panel in the wall by her bed. At a push of my palm, the latch unhinges, and the door swings open. Tabra pushes it closed behind me, and I’m suddenly standing in pitch blackness.

I drop my forehead to the door, eyes squeezed shut. Tabra hasn’t been queen-presumptive for more than a few hours, and I’ve already messed up.

6

Monsters and Hopes

The sound of murmuring voices reaches me from the other side of the wall, but I can't make them out. The courier doesn't sound like he's asking questions. Then again, a good servant wouldn't.

The secret room where I stay when I'm in the palace has no windows, not even a door to the corridor. This is a room that can be accessed only one way. A similar space can be found off the queen's chambers. That's where Omma stays.

Used to stay.

After the coronation, Omma's room will become mine, and this space will lie vacant until the next set of twins is born two generations from now. My new room after this will have one small window. *And that will be an upgrade*, I think as my stomach sinks.

I catch the *click* of her bedchamber door closing. I don't move, though. Tabra will get me when she's sure it's safe.

But when I hear no one moving toward me, not even a shuffle of feet, I inch back a small metal disk that covers the tiniest peephole to the other side as my heart pounds.

Tabra is there, of course, but so is Achlys.

Our handmaiden. Or, more specifically, Tabra's handmaiden. Achlys, a girl our age from the dominion of Tropikis, ducks her head and smiles. Her copper-colored hair is cropped close to her head the way all servants wear it, leaving nothing to hide her face or how her almost alabaster skin has flushed a pale shade of pink, her heavy freckles standing out in stark relief.

She knows about us, though we never told her. Somewhere along the line, she guessed. I still remember the day she was braiding my hair with her thin, pale fingers and said quietly, "You're not my Tabra."

I wouldn't hesitate to show myself now, except Tabra lifts her hand to

Achlys's face in a gesture so tender it sends a sharp, sweet ache through my heart, followed swiftly by a throb of sadness for both of them.

They've always shared a deep and longing affection for each other, but it can never work. My sister will be queen, and she will be expected to marry a royal or an authority, not her servant. She will also be expected to produce at least one heir. An heir who will produce the next set of twin princesses.

Achlys cants her head, leaning into my sister's touch, her eyes closed. Tabra whispers something to her, then Achlys turns her head and brushes her lips across my sister's palm.

I step back, giving them this moment for themselves. Something beautiful and private—a kind of wordless, perfect understanding.

Oh, Tabra.

A second later, at the soft patterned knock—our signal that it's safe to come out—I open the door, but Achlys is the only one standing there. She smiles at me, green eyes somber and yet happy. “It's been too long, domina.”

I reach out and squeeze her arm. “Way too long.” Then glance around, frowning. “Where's Tabra?”

“In your garden. She has something to show you.”

In the garden? I perk up. Has Tabra come into her powers? Is she a Sand Hylorae like me?

Achlys on my heels, I go to another hidden door on the opposite wall, which is already open. This one leads not to another room but to our private walled garden filled with all the glass flowers I've made for Tabra over the years. Just a patch, and high-walled so no one can see us or my handiwork.

The sunlight shines on the glass petals, casting shimmers over the space—mostly white, but a few in other colors made of sand from deserts across Aryd. In the center of this unusual garden is a warped and crusted orchid,

the first one I ever made her, my personal favorite.

This is *our* special place.

Tabra is standing with her back to us, staring at a piece of paper clutched in one hand and holding something I can't quite make out in the other.

I frown as I draw closer. "What's that?"

"I..." She shakes her head, then, before I get a good look at it, tucks her hand behind her back as she turns to face us. Instead she holds out the paper. "This just came."

My sister's eyes do that shifty thing she does when she has a secret she doesn't want to tell. I step toward her. "Tabra..."

She steps back with an expression that isn't Tabra. Almost...angry. Though it disappears too fast to be sure. "Now, don't get upset."

Which is a guaranteed way to get me there. Taking the letter, I reach for what's behind her back, too. "What are you hiding?"

Tabra jerks away, shielding it from me with her body. "No! It was a *gift*, Meren. For me."

I fist a hand on my hips. "Uh-huh. Who sent it?"

She flinches. Barely, but I still catch it. "Eidolon," she whispers.

Hearing his name opens a big hole that swallows all the words I want to say. Achlys, who Tabra has assured me doesn't know all our secrets, even grimaces. The guards don't know anything about Eidolon's attacks on previous queens, otherwise they'd know about me. I'm not surprised they let the package through. But my sister should have stopped it.

Never trust Eidolon. Omma's words.

Which Tabra *knows*. She knows this. Even if the package managed to get through without her realizing it, why is she not more bothered now? More worried?

I don't care if it's a jewel big enough to solve all of Aryd's money woes,

that thing is going into the envelope and right back where it came from. “Let me see.”

With a wince, Tabra holds it out so I can see an amulet swinging back and forth from a gold chain. Wrapped in a thin metal filigree, the rough stone inside is the size of a small scarab beetle.

Familiarity comes with a new *whoosh* of worry, and I reach out, only to pull my hand back like it’s dangerous to touch. “That looks just like...”

Om妈 wears something similar, one made of rare lightning glass, formed when a bolt strikes sand. Only hers is white and this one is blue.

“Like Om妈’s?” Tabra finishes.

I flick her a glance. I wasn’t sure she knew about that necklace. Is it just coincidence that Eidolon’s gift is so similar?

Om妈 says that nothing is a coincidence.

Not that she ever let me ask her *why*.

With a huff of frustration about...everything...I force myself to look down at the letter. In a scrawling, masculine hand, Eidolon’s note starts out all flattery and praise.

My Dearest Soon-to-Be Queen Tabra of Aryd.

Dearest? Really? He’s going to lead with that?

My deepest condolences at what I am told is the hour your grandmother, the previous Queen of Aryd, has died.

How did he even know? I only just got here, and, while getting back to the hovel slowed me down, I hurried.

The old world is passing to new, just as it should. And perhaps it is finally time for Aryd and Tyndra to also move on. The silent goddesses who I know in my heart still watch and listen would bless such a change.

Would they really? Given that Eidolon is as old as dirt, despite still appearing to be a young man, he’s never passed his throne on to a new

generation. *Hypocrite.*

Our dominions have been divided for too long, and I pray that the new queen on the throne of Aryd will be open to forging a new relationship. One not only for our people but between us. Let this gift—one of my most valuable possessions—be a testament to my sincere wish to unite our dominions. I hope that you will consider accepting my hand in marriage.

I choke. “He wants to *marry* you?”

“To unite our dominions.” She parrots the king’s words. Worse, though, her tone is belligerent. My sister is never belligerent. What is going on? This isn’t her. Then Tabra’s gaze slides to Achlys, who remains quiet.

I rub my forehead. What the hells is happening? It’s like my entire life just got upended for the second time tonight. I swallow, feeling hollowed out. Not only because of the disbelief but because of what this means. I glance down, rereading the letter and the proposal.

“He proposed to you only hours after Grandmother died,” I point out. The bastard moves fast. I’ll give him that. “Am I the only one who thinks that’s not the action of a good man?”

Tabra hesitates only a second. “Yes, but *he* didn’t kill her. She was old, and she’s been sick. Plus, you know how she was. I’m sure she blocked every attempt he’s made to heal the breach between our dominions.”

For a reason. An itching sense of wrongness tugs at me. I drop my gaze to the letter in my hands.

Let us enter a new era together. On faith that I will be welcomed, I send this letter ahead of me by mere hours. I look forward to meeting you face-to-face and pray to all the goddesses that your answer will be yes.

Yours,

Eidolon Calix I, King of Tyndra

My spine goes as straight as the bamboo reed Omma used to strap me to

for posture lessons. He's coming *here*? "You're not going to see him, are you?"

Tabra's lips go flat, reminding me of our grandmother all of a sudden. "I can't very well offend the leader of the strongest dominion in all of Nova. Not when no one but us knows his history with our line."

Damnation. I want to say, "The hells you can't. You're queen now. You can do whatever you want." But she's right. To the rest of the world, we have to keep up appearances. Which means I have no choice, either. He's only ever taken queens in secret. He wouldn't dare in the middle of the coronation with all eyes on Tabra. At least, I have to believe that will make a difference. There's no way I'm letting the king kidnap her and cut her into a million pieces.

Oblivious to where my mind has gone, my sister squares her shoulders. "I...I should meet this king and decide for myself if the stories we were told about him are true."

I barely hold back a groan. Tabra has a pure, trusting heart, but she can't possibly be this naive. Eidolon is a *monster*. Worse even than the Devourers, because he *chooses* to be a monster. We've been told so our entire lives.

"You don't believe the stories?" I ask slowly, carefully.

I can see the appeal. What if our grandmother and Omma drilled lies into our heads just to keep us scared and willing to do whatever they said to "protect the dominion"?

I can see it, but I don't believe it. If that were true, they would have lived different lives themselves. And, anyway, I'm not sure I can handle any more life-altering changes in one night.

Tabra sighs, her expression turning serious and somehow older. Like the weight of the crown is already aging her. "I don't know. Maybe? I think Grandmother and Omma believed the stories. So did their grandmother and

her sister, all the way back. And queens *did* disappear. You and I are what we are for a reason. But Aryd is suffering, and he's rich. Powerful. Better an ally than an enemy."

Great. An alliance with the vilest Enfernae ever born who will probably kill one of us. That will fix everything.

But she's not wrong, either.

I glance between the letter in my hand, the amulet she's still holding, and my sister's face. I can see there's no changing her mind, which scares me. Is she already turning into my grandmother? I need to approach this carefully.

I've always been too soft on Tabra, but it's more than that. Deep down, there is a part of me that wants to believe she's right, to believe that Aryd could be a prosperous land again. For Enora's sake. "Fine. But stick to the plan. *I'll* be the one at the pre-coronation. I'll meet him first. He won't know which twin I am. If he doesn't kill me or kidnap me—"

She surges forward, taking my hands. "He won't," she insists. "I'm sure of it. He wants peace, like we do."

There's that soft heart of hers again. Someday, it's going to get one of us killed. "I hope you're right."

Let's just hope that day isn't today.

Don't Scream

Achlys tweaks my gown into place, the other servants in the room oblivious that she's dressing me and not their true mistress.

"Do you miss Tropikis?" I ask. Her home dominion. I've never asked before, and suddenly that seems wrong.

Achlys's hands still, and she glances up, then resumes what she's doing. "I miss the rivers and how green everything is," she says. "It's so dry here —"

A *tsk* from one of the other servants cuts her off. Because, of course, most are from Aryd.

"It *is* dry," I agree, and they bury their noses in their work. No one would dare argue with the soon-to-be queen.

She shoots me a grateful look, but otherwise we fall into silence. Tabra is hiding in our garden with Eidolon's gift. She has barely looked away from it today.

I shift on my feet, uneasy with that. Something is off with her, but I can't put a pin in what exactly.

"Stay still, *domina*," Achlys scolds gently. "If I don't get this dress right, you'll fall out of it." She directs a pointed look at my breasts, but really the problem is with the dress itself. Not appropriate given the situation, and I make a mental note to have Achlys talk to the seamstress.

My dress tonight goes on in layers, each piece a tribute to one of the six dominions. A visible display that royalty is ordained by *all* the goddesses. The crowning piece is the beaded overdress with an intricate collar made of colored glass from each region of Aryd—blue, black, green, red, and white. The trinkets tinkle with delicate sounds every time I move.

Maybe not the best choice, given how I'm trembling.

My hair has been pinned up in intricate knotting—a guaranteed

headache by the end of the night. My makeup is applied last: glittering dust from the Salt Towers in all colors of the rainbow around my eyes, rouge for my cheeks, and red ocher for my lips. A dusting of copper flakes decorates the bare skin of my shoulders. Finally, two glittering, flat-edged onyx chips have been glued to the inner corners of my eyes.

No crown. Not before the coronation.

The funeral will come after Tabra's coronation, never leaving the throne without a queen, even a dead one.

"There we are, domina." Achlys carefully turns me to face the tall obsidian slab that stands in a corner of Tabra's chamber, acting as a mirror.

By law, no glass larger than the palm of a hand is allowed anywhere in the dominions except the temples. Too dangerous. Even though the glass portals in those temples haven't been able to be replicated, the law guarantees that an Imperium can't turn the glass into their own secret portal.

Invasions or worse could be started that way.

Our walls are different, and maybe the goddess designed them that way. With no reflection, they can't work as a portal. People have tried. Myself included.

I stare at my muted reflection.

The girl staring back is beautiful—lips that to my critical gaze are too full, ebony hair gleaming in the shine of the many oil lamps and braziers lighting Tabra's room, eyes that can be deeply mysterious but also as fiery as embers—this woman is beautiful, but she is not me. Will never be me.

Yes, Tabra and I have the same face. But except for the strong chin with the delicate indent in the center that smacks of stubbornness, the woman who stares back now is more my sister, true royalty through and through, than I will ever be. I'm just bait.

Please don't let him kill me.

At Achlys's raised brows, concern pursing her lips, I turn away from the

reflection.

“Lovely,” I say, acting the part of Tabra at her sweetest for everyone else in the room. “You’ve outdone yourselves.”

“I’ll tell the viziers you are on your way,” Achlys says with a satisfied nod, then ushers everyone out with her.

“Let me take a look at you.” I turn my head to find Tabra peeping out from our garden. Eidolon’s gift sparkles from around her fingertips. She tried to put it around her neck, which got a hell’s no from me, so she’s been holding it. I don’t like it, but I don’t say so. We’ve already argued about her wearing it once, and I won that one. Sort of.

Instead, I turn to face her for the final check. Something we always do. Tabra runs her gaze over me, pausing at my right hand as always. Her lips twitch. “Where’s your signet?”

We both wear a signet ring with the royal crest of Aryd—a striking cobra in dunes—but rather than pass one back and forth and risk misplacing it, Grandmother gave us each one. I always “forget” mine so I have an excuse to return to my chamber and hide a knife or two on me, which I can’t exactly do with all the servants around.

In my room, after arming myself, I find the dress I arrived in and fish out the ring, which I had left in the pocket. Then frown, feeling something else.

I pull my hand out and find Omma’s amulet resting in my palm beside my ring.

My heart drops to the soles of my feet. Holy hellfires, what are the odds, given what’s in my sister’s hands right this minute?

It glitters at me as I run my thumb over the jagged white glass that is unexpectedly smooth to the touch. Omma has worn this necklace for as long as I can remember, though usually under her clothes where no one can see. I stare at it, realizing she must have slipped it into my pocket at some

point. Also realizing why she did.

That *was* goodbye, that last time at the hovel. What she does next now is up to her, as long as she is never recognized. Death, disfigurement, or living in a remote part of another dominion are the usual choices, but she never told me what she planned if it came to it.

Regardless, she's gone. I'm her now.

Goddess save me.

If I'm her now, this amulet has something to do with the queens. What does that mean, then, that Eidolon has a similar one? Do all the sovereigns have one? If so, why did Omma have it instead of my grandmother?

"Are you coming?" Tabra asks from the doorway.

I shake myself out of my spiraling thoughts and slip the necklace around my neck, tucking the amulet between my breasts and the gold chain under the collar of the dress, then put on my ring and turn to face her. Somehow, its weight comforts me. I am not the first to be in this position, and goddesses willing, I will not be the last. Tonight, when it's just the two of us, we'll need to figure out what the amulets mean. But for now... "All set."

The hallway is empty when I come out of the room. Normally, I would be escorted, but arriving alone to the pre-coronation presentation is tradition, signifying the passing from princess to ruler. I must enter the throne room on my own.

Why'd I sign up to be the princess for this one again?

Behind me, Tabra quietly closes our door with a barely audible *snick*. The beads of my dress softly chime as I take the annoyingly mincing steps Omma taught me. "*Princesses walk daintily,*" she always insisted. "*They do not tromp around like great, hulking boys.*"

"*Who says so?*" I'd asked as a child. But to Tabra, this is second nature. I have to concentrate.

As I enter the long hallway that leads to the courtyard, I ignore every obsidian wall decorated with painted carvings of the history of our people. Minus a few odd, forgotten princesses.

“Meren?”

I turn my head without thinking about it. Then stumble a little as it sinks in. *My name. Not Tabra’s.*

Familiar eyes in an aching familiar face stare at me from the darkness. A man, not a boy any longer, dressed in the ornate, fitted ceremonial clothes of the Wanderers.

Cain steps out of the shadows in an alcove. “My queen?”

Was that what he’d said before? Not my name? I glance around, heart sputtering. What in the circles of the hells is he doing in *here*?

He stops suddenly with a heavy frown, his gaze searching my face. Does he recognize me through the glamour of becoming my sister?

Oh goddess.

A horrible realization hits me in the chest, squeezing the air from my lungs. Tabra. Is that why he’s here? His father wanted to arrange a marriage with a highborn, and no one is higher than my sister.

I scrape my brain for any idea of what I should do, what I should say. But I’ve got nothing. That useless lump inside my head needs to work harder.

“Can we talk?” he asks.

“I...” *Burning brimstone.* I force myself to tip my head at a regally commanding angle. “You should make an appointment for an audience.”

I go to brush past him, but he takes me by my wrist, tugging me close. He smells of sand and the spices the Wanderers bake into their bread. I raise my gaze to his and still as he suddenly smiles. The kind he’s always given me—amusement and acceptance and a sweet sort of protectiveness.

“By the goddesses... It *is* you,” Cain says, utterly sure of himself as

always. “I saw you walking toward me, and I wasn’t sure, but—”

Panic makes my motions jerky as I take a step back, then one more. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The words are tar in my mouth. Before he can react, I pick up my skirts and rush away. Again. Maybe I’m destined to always run away from him.

In seconds, I’m through the buttressed entrance leading into the central courtyard of the palace grounds, then past the massive well in the center of the garden, with its staircase that winds down to where the clearest, purest water in the kingdom flows.

But guilt slows my steps. Maybe I should just tell Cain the truth...and let him go. My friend deserves that much. Before I can turn back, though, a man steps out of the darkness into my path, and everything inside me goes quiet.

“*You.*” I’m not sure if I whisper the word or just think it, my lips are so stiff.

Recognition is instant—a full-body rush, as if all of me knows him. The stranger from last night. Goddess, my mind hadn’t exaggerated the harsh beauty of his face or the heavy aura of dangerous command that lingers around him.

He’s dressed in black again, only this time the cut and material of his clothing tells me he has to be one of the authorities. A lower courtier, maybe, though one I’ve never seen in the palace. And nothing about this man suggests lower anything.

Criminal or authority? Which is it?

Authority would be much worse. Because, despite my face having been covered that night, I met this man as *Meren*. As the real me, dressed as a waif, sneaking through the streets of Enora, out of the city and into the desert.

The queen has been dead all of one day, and I’ve fouled up twice. It’s

bad enough I'll have to deal with Cain—if this man recognizes me, no way in hells can I explain why Princess Tabra had been doing any of that.

I should demand who he is. We can't risk anyone else knowing about us.

Only his gaze stops me. That same intentness as before strikes me silent, along with the same odd sense that he sees beyond the trappings of royalty and truly sees me.

Sees me and wants me.

Just like before, I can't seem to untangle myself from his gaze. Iron bands tighten around my lungs with every passing second, every breath. I hesitate for...I don't know what.

“Hey!” Cain shouts from behind us.

The stranger's eyes go hard, predatory, as he jerks his gaze from my face to over my shoulder.

Then suddenly, impossibly, he's gone.

I jerk around only to shriek as a shadow rears up behind Cain like a wall of heavy smoke. It slams him hard against the nearest column, and Cain's head hits with a *crack* that reverberates through the courtyard.

He crumples, out cold.

I should be screaming, helping, running, *something*, but I'm frozen, like flash-heating sand only to instantly turn it to hard glass. My mind doesn't accept what it's seeing. As if I'm watching from a distance or from other eyes. Confusion swirls through me because my senses are telling me this man is scary—like *Enfernae* scary.

Cain's hand drops to the tiles, and something he was holding rolls across the pathway—the golden cuff he'd offered me before. For me? Or was he planning to give it to his new bride? It takes me another beat of pure disbelief to yank my gaze from the bracelet to the man who now stands over my friend.

Anger burns through the shock holding me immobile. Anger at myself.

What the hells am I thinking, standing here staring? Self-preservation finally kicks in. “Guards!” I call out, frustration sharpening my voice. On that single shout, I bolt, hampered by my dress.

“I’m sorry,” that delicious voice whispers into my ear, a lover’s caress.

So fast. He got to me so fast.

My heart is doing its best to break through my chest and leave the rest of me behind.

“I can’t let him have you,” he says.

Can’t let who have me?

The thought has barely formed when shadows snap out from the night. The darkness pins my arms to my sides and swallows us, wraps around us like a cocoon.

I scream.

“Don’t waste your breath, princess.” No more lover. His voice is bored now. And brutal. “No one can hear you.”

By some magical force, I am dragged along in his wake as he runs past Cain’s unconscious body and back through the empty palace. He’s right—no one can hear me. No one is coming for me. They’re all waiting in the throne room for me...for the new queen.

Through the swirling vortex of shadows holding me hostage, I catch only quick glimpses of our surroundings as he takes us through the grounds, past guards already dead at the outer gates, and into the cobbled city streets beyond.

My stomach heaves a protest. They’re dead because of me.

No, not me...because of *him*.

He says nothing as we go, so dark he almost becomes the shadows himself, moving with the prowling grace of every predator intent on a kill.

A single name repeats in my mind over and over.

Eidolon.

He has to be. It explains the moment of recognition—connection, even. I've never seen the king in person, but while he notoriously allows no paintings of his face, his profile can be found on Tyndran coins, and Omma had made sure to show me. He is said to be as handsome as the goddesses' consorts once were.

Before Cain showed up in the courtyard, I thought I'd seen wanting in this man's eyes. And I was stupidly, horribly right. He wants the girl he believes to be the next Queen of Aryd so he can get rid of her. Kill her.

Just like he got rid of so many of the queens who came before us.

Terror must have kicked my warped sense of humor into a near frantic level, because suddenly I'm laughing. Bitter, cringing laughter. But there's a much bigger problem than my embarrassment at being momentarily captivated by an evil king. Twice.

It looks like I'll get to fulfill my purpose as Tabra's decoy sooner than I'd planned. I have no doubt whatsoever that Eidolon intends to wipe out yet another queen of Aryd.

Only he's got the *wrong girl*.

PART TWO
KNIGHT TAKES ROOK

8

A Shadow's Puppet

Each step my kidnapper takes as he drags me through the city in his net of shadow is another step away from any hope of rescue. It takes leaving the palace for my mind to override the panic that had set me into a temporary stupor. That's when I start struggling.

Grunting with the effort, I test my bonds, jerking and flexing against them. Only with each movement, the hold tightens down with an equivalent amount of force, like I'd cinched the shadows closer myself. A few more tests, and I'm more trussed up than before. Dammit.

Anger rears up inside me like the striking cobra of my house crest.

"Hey!" I yell at the back of his head.

He doesn't acknowledge me, which only stokes the fury gathering sparks in my belly.

I grit my teeth. If I could get my hands loose, I'd chuck one of my knives at his stupidly handsome head. "Where do you think you're taking me?"

Still not even a twitch, like I'm insignificant baggage he's dragging along. I struggle again, only to stop as the bonds tighten.

If looks could turn into weapons, he'd have daggers embedded in his back. "Hey, asshole! I'm talking to you."

The way he comes to a halt is so sudden, the shadow actually jolts me. After a beat, he whips around. I dangle there like a fish on a hook as he strides toward me, then crowds me, so much in my space that I'd back up if I could. The heat of him brushes against my skin through my thin dress.

Up close, he's even more...

I swear to goddess, I almost thought the word "striking," but I stopped myself in time. "Evil" is a better fit.

He studies me with the strangest expression—hostility and satisfaction

and a searching kind of speculation all mashed together. The shadows around us seem to flicker, but it's gone so fast, I'm not sure. So is his expression, now wiped void of any emotion whatsoever.

"Calling me names isn't going to stop this from happening, princess." So saying, he dismisses me, swinging back around and continuing on.

After a stunned beat, I snort, glaring at the back of his head. "If you think I'm coming quietly, you've got the wrong girl." Literally.

No response.

I can't move. No one but my kidnapper can hear me, the shadows seeming to contain all my sounds. I'm going to die.

Think, Meren.

What about smaller movements? The tiny part of me still rational offers up the idea.

I crook a finger. Nothing happens. Then another and another, until I am sure I can at least move my hands in minimal ways without backlash.

The uncomfortable, ostentatious beaded dress Achlys had made me wear is about to come in handy. Carefully I twist and twist at one of the beads I can reach until the threads holding it snap, and I drop it to the ground.

I wince at the *tink* it makes hitting the cobbled streets below my floating feet and wait, eyeing my kidnapper. But Eidolon doesn't turn or stop, and my shadowy chains don't tighten.

Good.

Maybe someone can follow me, track me. Not Tabra, because she'll be busy pretending nothing happened.

Mother goddess. Tabra.

My sister will be on her own now. Dealing with the loss of Grandmother and now me, too. Facing people angry because of the state of the dominion. Dreading the oncoming winter that our walls can only keep

out for so long. All without me.

Only, I can't think about her right now. The only way to help her is to live, to escape and get home to her. Everything else will just have to wait.

Right. Escape. Who else might come for me—

Cain.

Please wake up fast, I will him. Come find me.

I'm going to leave him a trail to follow, and that smart mouth he used to tease me about is going to hide the sounds of my plan. I start plucking beads from the dress and dropping them every so often, timing them with my words. "Fine, if you won't tell me where we're going, I'll figure it out myself."

There goes a bead.

No response, as expected.

"Not out of the city to the Oasis Trail," I ponder. "Too easy to follow."

Another bead. Sure enough, he doesn't turn left when he should. I didn't think he'd be going that way anyway.

"You have to hide me quickly," I muse to myself. "Given who I am and all."

Another bead. Still no reaction.

"I mean, if *I* was a queen stealer"—does he flinch at that? No, just a trick of the lanterns—"I'd want to get somewhere others wouldn't think to look."

Another bead.

"Which could mean going across the lake." I deliberately make my tone helpfully sweet. "In which case, you should turn here—"

Another bead. He keeps going straight.

"You missed the turn."

"I don't need directions," he snarls.

Ah, so I *am* getting to him. Satisfaction overrides self-preservation for a

moment. I forget about the bonds and shrug, then hiss as they tighten down. Damn.

We turn a corner, and a massive and ornate structure with columns and statues and carvings rises up in the night ahead of us. Easily recognizable even through the veil of shadow, it's the Oaesys Temple of the Goddess Aryd.

Please don't be going there.

"Maybe you're headed to the Cinnamon Cliffs." Keeping up my words is more of a struggle as the temple draws nearer. I swallow hard and drop another bead. "But my way across the lake would have been faster—"

"Seven hells."

I've driven him to muttering. That's something at least.

I force what I hope is an easy grin. "What did you expect? A pampered princess too afraid to speak?" Instead, he got the one raised in a hovel.

My eyes go wide.

The hovel. Wait. He was in Enora last night. He saw me. I can't fathom a single reason King Eidolon would be in a run-down town like Enora... except one.

Has he figured out where we hide the spare princess? Or has he always known?

Fear is a living thing inside my chest, because of course he knows. He must. Were we *ever* safe there?

Hands shaking, I drop another bead.

"Fear and cowering would've been preferable to this," he snaps.

Fear, he got spot-on. But cowering? No matter how shaken I am, I won't give him the satisfaction.

"Is that what all the others did?" I demand, dropping seething hatred into my every word. And a bead, too. "Did they scream and cower when you stole them, too?"

That gets a reaction. He pauses, turning his head so I can see the side of him. It's difficult to read his expression. I would say confusion, but that makes no sense. Then his face contorts into something darker. Scarier. I'd flinch if every limb wasn't bound in silky, impossibly immovable shadow. Probably even run.

Then it's like he buries whatever he's dealing with, turning so cold I shiver. Without comment, he continues on, taking a direct path into the temple itself.

A new wave of panic wriggles through me like a worm through a corpse.

Hells and damnation.

The only reason to come here is to use the glass portal. Aryd has many, one in the temple of each major city. Meanwhile, the other dominions have one each. Eidolon can take me anywhere—and Cain will never find me.

It's eerily quiet as we enter. The late hour and the pre-coronation going on at the palace has left the gleaming black temple empty except for a single acolyte walking the halls. The light of the oil lamp she carries tells me exactly where she is.

"You hurt her, you answer to me." I hurl the words at him.

"I'll keep that in mind," he drawls.

His amusement only ups my fear. "You killed the guards before I could stop you, but I mean it. She's an innocent—"

"I'm not going to hurt her, damn it." Surprise cuts off my next words. "Not unless you give me a reason to."

It's a threat, and not one I'm willing to test.

Eidolon tucks us both out of sight into one of the many alcoves—this one dedicated to the Goddess Tyndra, the frozen dominion, the exact opposite of Aryd. *His* dominion. I shiver at the images of ice, so cold they'd been painted blue in the detailed stained glass window. The symbols of

knowledge, strategy, and stars are emblazoned into the stained glass sky like oddly shaped moons. Stars have always seemed cold to me.

The acolyte's steps come closer, and he moves into me, crowding me again. His head is angled to watch, and I take the opportunity to study him. He's so young. No more than a few years older than I am. Younger than I expected an ageless king to be.

As she retreats, he turns his head, his face disconcertingly close to mine now.

He doesn't look away.

Neither do I.

And our breaths mingle in the night air.

Eventually, the flicker of light from the acolyte's lamp travels to the opposite side of the temple, disappearing and reappearing as she passes behind thick columns of onyx. As if we hadn't just been locking gazes, he moves, taking me with him. Right into the chamber that holds the portal.

I'm as good as dead.

The urge to vomit fights the urge to try to bring the glass down on top of us both. If I'm going to die, I'd rather take him out with me, damn it.

He scans the massive block of glass. It's bloodred, made ages ago from grains of the Crimson Desert, legend says by a sand Imperium far more powerful than me.

Most people who use these portals have to pay a priestess for access because they can't do it themselves. Only Imperium—Enfernae and Hylorae alike—can make the portals work. It has nothing to do with the specific ability, and something, people think, to do with an Imperium's innate magic speaking to the magic in the glass. Which means I don't need a priestess to make it work...but Eidolon won't, either.

Almost like I blinked and woke up somewhere else, the shadows covering us disappear and we are suddenly standing there, side by side in

the portal's reflection. However, the bindings remain tight about my body.

But I still have my voice.

I suck in a breath—

Eidolon moves fast, though. Too fast to be real. He clamps a hand over my mouth. “Scream and I’ll be forced to kill whoever comes running.”

Which gives me only two options. Save myself...or someone else.

9

Take Her Far Into the Forest

I glower back into stormy eyes. Hard eyes. Uncompromising. He means it—he'll hurt anyone who tries to help me.

Which means he's already figured out what I won't risk: innocent lives.

I give a reluctant nod, but he doesn't release me. As his gaze searches mine, I get the impression he's trying to figure me out. Before that impression can solidify, he shoots me a satisfied smirk I want to slap from his face and slowly removes his hand, turning back to the glass.

"Bastard." I hiss the word.

"You have no idea," he tosses back, focused on the portal now.

Where is he taking us?

Tyndra, probably. It makes the most sense, since he is the ruler there. But does he do his killing there, too? No one will ever find my body, regardless. Not unless he sends me home in pieces like, according to Omma, he'd done to one of my ancestresses.

What can I possibly do?

The answer is large and red and staring me in the face. The portal.

Maybe he won't expect me to have come into my powers yet. Tabra hasn't, and we've been hiding mine.

I reach for my power. More like a frantic grab as I urge it forward. The burst of sensation skirts close to pain, the usual bubbles turning to searing flame. A new pinpoint of heat sparks in the center of my chest, which almost makes me stop until I realize it's from Omma's amulet.

That's definitely odd, but it's a mystery for another time. Right now, I need to focus on the glass in front of me before it's too late and Eidolon brings us through.

An eerie purple light—way brighter than mine ever gets—emits from

Eidolon's palm, and I almost don't notice what he's doing with the portal because purple is the wrong color. Shouldn't his light be yellow like a Hylorae? Like mine? Shadows are tangible in a way, aren't they? Purple is the *Enfernae* color.

Focus, Meren.

I snap my gaze to the glass as it changes, showing a sparse, gray-stoned room I'm not familiar with, which makes me pause. I thought Omma had shown me the other side of every portal in existence, even if only briefly. I frown, trying to use anything in the image to identify where we're going, but all I see are gray granite walls.

Close it. Now, a voice in my head insists.

I turn my hand away from my captor, hoping he doesn't spot the tiny glow igniting in my palm, and picture the glass solid again as I push my own power into it. With a snap, like dousing a lamp, the glass blanks out.

Whoa. I...can't believe that worked.

I turn the power off as Eidolon cuts his gaze to me so hard, for a second I swear his head damn near snaps off. Holy heavens, those eyes. They're like quicksand, ready to suck in unsuspecting prey wandering by. Except, he's already caught me. The darkness holding me prisoner tightens around my neck, squeezing hard. So much pressure that spots swim in my vision, growing larger with each passing second.

"Don't try that again." The smoothness of his voice has descended to a growl of sound. Wild. Feral.

A shiver lodges between my shoulder blades.

"Understand?" he demands. "Now turn it off."

I've never done well with demands. "No. If you're going to kill me, I'd rather you do it here, where they can find my body."

His gaze narrows. "Turn it off. Now."

As much as I hate giving in, I hate the idea of dying even more, and I

can tell his patience is waning. Damned if I'm going to let him see the fear gripping me. Glaring at him, I douse my power, the warmth disappearing so abruptly, my skin turns cold. He abruptly turns his concentration to the wall, which goes opaque again, showing us vague outlines of the scene beyond. Then it clears, and we step through.

Immediately, the veil of shadows raises around us and I am lifted up. A heartbeat later and I have left my home of Aryd for the first time. We move in that flowing yet jerking way out of the empty chamber into a dark hallway. It's clear he has no intention of allowing me time to familiarize myself with where we are. Knowledge is power, after all.

This is no temple I'm familiar with. It's not grand. Not an opulent object in sight. I'm getting really tired of the fear churning in my stomach. "Where are we?"

"Somewhere no one will think to follow." The way he sounds so grimly sure sends dread through me.

His shadows wrap around me and float me along behind him again. Then, faster than I expected, we go down a series of winding stairs, through a large open foyer, and out the door. I gaze over a moonlit vista. Only the moons feel...closer. Bigger.

That can't be right.

We are standing on the stone steps of a tower. The ground drops away, giving us a view over the tops of the trees.

My breath catches. Mountains.

Mountains everywhere that rise and fall in jagged, majestic spurs bathed in celestial light as far as I can see, blanketed in a forest of pine trees. It's beautiful.

Focus.

I pull my mind out of its awe and try to orient myself. We're definitely not in Tropikis or Savanah. These mountains are covered in snow, which

eliminates Aryd. And the single mountain range in Mariana is volcanic, so that's out. Thank the goddesses that Omma made me study all those maps.

That leaves two options. Wildernyss or Tyndra. Taking me back to his home would make the most sense...but this is not Tyndra. The snow isn't deep enough or icy enough. Air not frigid enough.

Come to think of it, given that my dress is designed for my hotter climate, I should be a princess block of ice. The shadows must be keeping me insulated.

Movement at the bottom of a long set of stone steps catches my attention, and even Eidolon pauses. From between two gigantic, rough-barked trees, a light mist appears, like clouds slipping along the forest floor. Then a creature I've only seen in tapestries emerges.

A kirin.

His body reminds me of Pella's horse, only with antlers. Around the hooves and down the front of his chest are bloodred scales. The tips of gleaming gold, razor-sharp teeth peek out from his mouth. He stands, regal and proud, the rack on his head expanding feet above and to either side of his head. Glorious.

Despite his fearsome appearance, legend holds that this is a gentle creature. My eyes widen as he bends a single knee and lowers his head in a bow. Beside me, my captor stiffens.

Holy goddess.

Then, maybe by a trick of the shadows, the kirin is gone.

Only one dominion boasts a creature like that. Wildernyss. Why are we here of all places?

Torture. The word scrapes through my mind. That's why we're in Wildernyss.

And here I thought I was afraid before.

10

Into the Wildernyss

My captor drags me along in his wake again, and together we disappear into the forest.

“What’s next? Are you taking me to your lair?” I cringe immediately, because that didn’t sound nearly as cutting as I’d intended.

“My *lair*?” His tone says everything. Basically an audible eye roll.

The snow isn’t as thick here as I expected. In fact, large patches of dry ground are all around us. The scent of the air is crisp, like the desert, but with a hint of something sharper and sweeter, almost spicy.

Why am I focusing on the stupid air? I should be dropping more beads. Not for Cain anymore—he won’t know where we’ve gone. These are for me now, so I can find my way back if I get away.

No. *When* I get away.

Luckily the forest floor hides the sounds as I drop the tiny glass clues. Every so often I pipe up with a remark, but only between bouts of trying to pay attention to where he’s going.

We don’t stop moving for what feels like hours, never seeing anything but trees and rocks and snow. Despite the protective cloak of shadow, the longer I float along, the colder I get. My shivers are growing violent enough to make my bindings tighten. The tips of my ears are numb.

Then, suddenly, he stops. I gasp, my body dangling in the air like an animal in a snare, and just as helpless. We’re not in a clearing or at a water crossing or anything. So what the hells?

Silence falls around us, even the breeze not daring to blow. My muscles tense. I would search my surroundings for a predator if I could move. Cain taught me that much.

But the predator is the man who took me. Anyone looking at him would know that in a glance.

And he's studying me, again with that air of hostile confusion, almost like he resents me being here.

The shadows pulse around him, and he rolls his shoulders, as if he has to control himself.

"I am going to release you." That low, stomach-clenching voice curls around me and through me, the sound both familiar and foreign. And perfectly controlled. "Scream all you want. No one will hear. There's no one close enough."

My stomach pitches. I am completely and utterly alone with a monster.

But then resentment flares from someplace inside, a feeling that's been building all my life. Forget Omma's lessons on self-sacrifice and honor—I'm alive. I have my mind, my voice, *and* two knives.

They're small, but he won't expect weapons from a princess. If he takes one move toward me after I'm unbound, I'll bury a blade in his throat.

After a long pause, like he's waiting for me to speak—which I don't—the bonds around me loosen. Slowly.

Then the shades of night that had surrounded us lift and the shadows melt away entirely, leaving the moonlight brighter for me to see by. I glance down and find no marks on my skin, not even the kind left by my pillow after too long sleeping in one position. So strange, given how hard I'd been gripped all the way here.

Nothing stands between us now.

The instant the last whisper of constraint leaves me, I sprint for the trees.

"Good luck, princess."

I lurch to a stop at his words. Not because of the sarcasm. What catches my attention is the almost uncaring disregard.

"You'd let me go?" I demand without turning to face him. I don't want to end up trapped by those eyes again.

“You wouldn’t last the night.”

He isn’t wrong. Already my muscles are shaking harder now that the shadows no longer cocoon me from the cold. I’m well aware of the dangers of Wildernyss. Massive catlike animals that could kill me with a swipe of a paw. Bears so large they could swallow me whole. Not to mention poisonous bugs and creatures and plants I’m unfamiliar with.

I only learned to survive in the desert because Cain showed me how.

My odds of surviving here are pathetic, to say the least.

Except, I won’t *have* to survive long. I have my secret trail to follow back to the portal, then home to Aryd—

“I doubt you’ll get far without these.” He tosses a leather pouch at my feet, and glass beads—*all* of them, by the number—scatter across the dirt in front of me, their beauty mocking me with colorful little winks.

I grit my teeth, mind working frantically for a solution even as it silently slings all sorts of names at him.

His words before he’d dragged me from the palace whisper through my head.

I can’t let him have you.

“Why did you take me?” I demand.

Determined silence is my only answer.

“You said you can’t let him have me. Who?”

Again, no answer. I glance over my shoulder. He’s watching me the way a hungry cobra watches a plump mouse, though there’s something in his eyes I can’t place. If I didn’t know better, I’d think it was regret.

My next words are like sand in my mouth. “Are you going to kill me?”

The silence grows fangs.

Screw it. I sprint for the dense trees anyway, until a low sigh reaches me. Then suddenly I am wrapped up in shadow, like a giant hand reached down and plucked me up. It deposits me right back in front of my

kidnapper, then releases me again.

“You said I could go.” I hurl the words at him like an accusation.

Thick eyebrows raise slowly. “I didn’t think you’d be silly enough to actually try it.”

Fury swells inside my chest like a rising storm, roiling and wrapping around my fear. I don’t hesitate or think—I snatch the knife strapped to my leg and hurl it at his head.

A wall of solid darkness rises as fast as the blade moves and knocks it to the side. The knife flings away and lodges in a tree trunk nearby with a pop.

In the same instant, he moves. I try to lunge away, but the shadow catches me, then Eidolon slams me against the harsh bark of a tree so fast that breath abandons my lungs in a *whoosh*. Then he’s there. In my space. Breathing my air. *Again*.

For half a moment, I get tangled up in his eyes. Up close, the blue is even more vividly brilliant. Noticing this only ups my resentment, so I shake it off and blank my expression. I’m not giving him an inch.

“Killing you is not on the agenda. Yet,” he snarls. “Because I need you. But you try anything like that again, and I’ll *never* release you from the shadow. Got it?”

Even through my own fury, I have to contain the urge to recoil at the harsh scowl shoved in my face. Gone is any veneer of civility.

Then, the strangest thing happens.

His face... *Transforms* is the only way I can describe it. Like the flesh moves and reshapes into a different face. It happens so fast, I’m not sure what I see, and that scares me more than the snarling, because even though he’s threatening me, the way he’s pinning me against the tree is careful. Almost...gentle. But the face I saw—those eyes weren’t gentle.

They were full of wrath.

11

I Won't Go Easy

I may be angry and terrified, confused and fighting for my life, but I don't have a death wish. I manage to nod. Immediately, I am released. My legs turn the consistency of custard, and I drop to my knees as he stalks away.

"Here." He pulls a leather-bound bundle from inside a hollowed-out log and tosses it at me. "Change your clothes. Then stay here."

He walks off into the underbrush with hardly a rustle.

Stay where, exactly? I am surrounded by trees and bushes and rocks and snow and dirt, none of it distinguishable from anything else in view. Not to my unfamiliar eyes, at least, and definitely not with only the moons to light my way.

A shiver rakes through my body. I open the bundle to find women's clothing from Wildernyss—I recognize them from courtiers at the palace, or more particularly, their servants.

The pieces are nothing fancy, no doubt to avoid attention in case we bump into anyone, but all in good shape. A linen under dress with a heavy wool blouse and skirt, thick stockings, a supple yet protective bodice of a material I think is called suede, and thick leather boots and gloves. All of this is wrapped up not in a bag but in a fur-trimmed cloak.

He's trying to keep me warm? I didn't expect any kind of consideration from evil incarnate. Then again, he said he needs me alive.

Alive is better than dead. I try to convince myself that's true.

I scramble out of my own clothing—which is harder to do without Achlys there to help with the tiny fastenings—and put on what I believe is the appropriate order of items.

It fits.

I shake my head at that, not willing to ask how he got the sizing correct.

Besides, the shudders of cold are easing, leaving my jaw aching from fending them off so long. I rub my wrists absently as I search the trees around me. Despite there being no marks, my skin still feels bruised from the grip his shadows had on me.

How was he doing that, anyway? Eidolon's power has kept him alive a very long time, which suggests he's an *Enfernae*, but shadow is a *Hylorae* power—I think. However, his glow is clearly purple, so we're back to *Enfernae*. It doesn't make any sense. No one in the history of our world has wielded two powers other than the goddesses.

Think, Meren. Think.

None of that is important right now. The shadows are important. Eidolon's greater strength is important. And being lost in these goddess-forsaken, unending forested mountains *at night* is important. He needs me for something. He said so. But what?

Seven hells. He doesn't need *me*, though.

He needs Tabra.

The realization is like a slap to the face, because how could I forget? What if he finds out I'm not my sister? Will he kill me immediately? Abandon me here? He'll go after Tabra then, and I can't let that happen.

I need a plan. A better one than chucking a knife at him.

I stomp over to the tree where my blade is stuck, muttering a string of swear words as my mind forms and rejects plan after plan to escape. But I see no other way. I need to continue to play the part of Tabra. At least until I find my bearings and we get to a place where escaping without dying is possible.

With a grunt, I manage to dislodge my knife from the bark, then slip it back in the strap on my leg now under my skirt. I hate skirts. They get in the way of things like running and climbing and probably fleeing.

More muttered curses slip through my lips.

“I didn’t know princesses could swear.”

Hopefully he doesn’t see how his sudden appearance startled me, either. Cain would be so disappointed with how I’ve handled this so far. I slowly turn to face him, determined not to give him the satisfaction of a reaction. “You shouldn’t sneak up on people that way. It’s rude.” *So is stealing people.*

His gaze slides from my face to the trunk of the tree where my knife had been embedded, then to my leg where the weapon is now safely hidden. He leans one shoulder against a tree, perfectly at ease. “So the pampered princess turns out to be a wasp with a stinger?”

I barely resist rolling my eyes. Too bad such a pretty face has to come with such a nasty soul.

“A wasp’s sting is only a prick,” I toss back. “Watch out for my claws, though. They draw blood.”

“Then I’ll declaw you.” He holds out his hand and signals with a wag of his fingers that he wants the knife.

I tip up my chin and stare him down, so haughty even I’m not entirely sure if I’m Tabra or Meren at the moment. Not that Tabra is haughty, but our grandmother sure was, and Tabra is now queen. A certain level of haughtiness is probably expected. “You want it, you’re going to have to take it from me.”

He moves toward me, and self-preservation has me taking a nervous step back, which I immediately resent. Okay. Maybe that was the wrong thing to say.

But before I can fix it, I find myself in the air, hanging upside down by my ankles from a rope of shadow. My skirt falls over my face, and with an annoyed hand, I lift it up and glare at him.

I really should have seen that coming.

He doesn’t move a muscle, still leaning against that tree as if he does

this all the time, and watches almost dispassionately as the shadow suspending me removes the knife, then makes a cursory check for any more weapons.

“I was led to believe you’re a sweet, innocent girl.” He shakes his head. “I don’t know what’s wrong with the rest of your dominion. You’re a holy terror.”

Before I can squeak a reply, he flips me over and lowers me to the ground with a *thump*. This time, at least, I manage to keep my feet. I bury a satisfied smirk. He’d missed the knife hidden in my bodice.

Given the sudden gleam in his eyes, I can tell he’s expecting a princess’s response to his search and seizure, or to his comments.

“Well...” I say when he doesn’t speak. “You got me here, King Eidolon. Now what?”

“Excuse me?” His lips curl like I said something disgusting. “I am *not* Eidolon.”

Not... Not Eidolon?

My mind can’t grasp the words. Maybe because I’ve had so many incomprehensible things thrown at me so fast and I’m done trying to take in anything new, but mostly because what he said makes no sense.

Why would he lie? The king steals queens of Aryd. And considering my current situation, I’m pretty sure I’m actively being stolen.

“You have to be Eidolon,” I insist. “He’s a murdering bastard. You’re a kidnapping bastard. It fits.”

“A square peg can fit in a round hole if the hole is big enough.”

Now he’s spouting wisdom like some kind of sage?

My thoughts must be clear on my face, because a lazy smile slowly tips his lips, the expression so unexpected, my breath hitches. *Danger!* my instincts scream, but it takes effort to pull my gaze away, because, just like when I first saw him, familiarity pricks at me. Familiarity and...awareness.

I deeply resent both and shove them aside.

“Who are you, then?” I search his face for any hint of deception, but he looks me straight in the eyes, not even a blink of hesitation, that smile still lingering.

“You can call me Reven.”

Reven.

If I spoke it out loud, I suspect the name would slide over my tongue like nectar. I try to focus instead on what the word means. “Well, isn’t that fitting.”

His eyes narrow, glittering at me. “Why?”

“Reven. Where I’m from, at least, it means to steal or take away.” I make a sarcastic gesture toward myself.

A flicker of emotion is there, then gone, taking the rest of that indolent smile with it. Otherwise, he says nothing. He still hasn’t moved from his tree.

“Okay, *Reven*.” I infuse every doubt I have into the word. “And who are you, exactly?”

“My name is all you need to know.”

The hells it is. What am I dealing with here?

Frustration burns through my blood. If this isn’t Eidolon, then my earlier questions about why and where and what he wants, the ones I actually thought I’d figured out at least the basic answers to, are a total mystery—and more important than ever.

I need answers.

“Why did you take me? You have to know all of Aryd will hunt you down. And killing me...” I give a low whistle and hope he has a good imagination for what his fate will be.

None of it is true, but he won’t know that.

“I’m not a murderer, princess.”

I scoff. “You killed my guards—”

“They’re not dead.”

I pause, trying to see the lie in the words. None of this man makes sense. “But—”

“I knocked them out. They’ll have a bad headache when they wake up, but otherwise, they’re fine.”

He didn’t kill our guards?

Before I can unwrap my mind from that riddle, from nowhere, Reven produces an odd-looking fruit, pear-shaped but with a shiny orange-and-pink skin, and tosses it to me.

“Eat that,” he says. “All of it. Or the animals will come sniffing.”

Then he dismisses me, turning to climb into the tree he was propping up. Feline grace in his movements, muscles bunching and flexing under his clothing, and not a foot wrong.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

More ignoring as he settles on a wide branch, his back up against the trunk, then produces a rope, literally from thin air, and uses it to tie himself down. Smart. I’ve never slept in a tree—we mostly have palm trees in Enora, around the rivers and oases, and those don’t have branches for sleeping—but I’m guessing that’s to keep him from falling out.

“I asked you a question.” Tabra might have stomped her foot then. I limit myself to my hands on my hips, made slightly lopsided by the fruit I am still holding.

“What does it look like I’m doing?”

My first impression of him becomes even more pronounced. The man is an arrogant, growling, genetically blessed bastard. Someone should knock him down a peg or two. The problem is, I’m not confident that I’m the someone who can. Definitely not while the scales are tipped so heavily in his favor.

He crosses his arms and closes his eyes, head back against the trunk, clearly not planning to discuss anything more, and I grit my teeth so hard my jaw pops. My hand moves toward the knife hidden in my bodice. So tempting to chuck it at him. Maybe this time he won't see it coming. Maybe I'll be fast enough.

Unfortunately, I need him alive for now. Until I get my bearings, I have no alternative. I have to go with him. As Tabra.

"There's little choice in what to eat when all the apples are rotten," I mutter to myself. Omma used to say that to me all the time. Only, according to her, I'm the rotten option in every scenario.

I'm not sure why I think of it now.

"Maybe you're smarter than you look." His voice drifts down to me.

I pull my hand back to hurl the piece of fruit at him, already anticipating the satisfying splat of it against his chest.

"Temper, temper, princess." His lip curls in a sneer even while his eyes remain closed. "Can't have you going hungry."

Agreeing with him, my belly rumbles its own protest. With a small hiss of frustration, I lower my arm and take a defiant bite of my dinner.

I'm so angry, it takes a second for the taste and texture to sink in. The outside is firm and the flavor sharp, like the cactus I'd eat at home after removing the needles. But the inside is strange. A green gelatinous substance filled with seeds and tasting of melon. The tangy, sweet combo is odd but pleasant. The jelly-like inside will take getting used to.

"What about water?" I demand, deliberately not making any of this easy on him.

He peels open a single eye, then sighs, and a swirling bubble, almost like a pocket of dense smoke, appears in front of him. He reaches inside and extracts a satchel, not unlike the kind I use when I trek through the desert to visit Cain. He lowers it down to me, and I drink greedily. I finish the rest of

the fruit quickly, too.

I hadn't had much to eat earlier today, fed intermittently between the maidservants making me beautiful. How did Tabra explain why she suddenly was missing all her finery after she learned I was missing?

Wait.

Oh goddess...

Realization strikes hard. If Reven is telling the truth and he's *not* Eidolon, then my sweet sister is with the king. Or about to be. Alone.

12

Beauty Sleep

Panic wraps an icy grip around my throat that has nothing to do with the weather. Tabra is facing Eidolon on her own, without me there to stand between them. Which is literally the only reason for my existence.

I have to get back to her.

That will only happen if you're smart about saving your own life.

I know this. Even if I don't like it.

Forcing myself to stay calm when I'm most definitely *not*, I study the tree where Reven is apparently already asleep.

"Want this back?" I hold the water satchel out, dangling it from the tip of a single finger.

Shadows reach out from the trees and swallow it whole, the weight disappearing in a whisper. He never even opened his eyes.

Whatever.

Climbing this thing will be different than shimmying up palm trees in search of their fruit, but I still think I can manage. With only a few scrapes—my leggings would have served me so much better than these stockings and the damn skirt getting in my way—I manage to get up to the branch that extends from the other side of the trunk from where my captor lies.

"The pampered princess can throw knives *and* climb trees." I hear his silky murmur from the other side.

Ass.

"What else can she do, I wonder?"

This time I catch the confusion in his tone. "Guess you should have done your research."

"I did."

"Better." I seethe. If he had, he would've taken the right princess, after all.

It takes me a while to settle, but at least my clothes—especially my cloak—protect my skin from the rough bark.

“I’m sure you’re getting comfy for your beauty sleep, but can you stop moving around?”

“If this is beauty sleep, I’m a Devourer,” I mutter to myself.

“Not all the Devourers are monsters on the outside.”

It takes me a beat to realize he’s commenting on my muttering.

“The Reverie takes any shape that is the most appealing to the looker,” he continues almost casually.

He’s *seen* the Reverie? The creature that lurks outside the whirlpool at the mouth of Mariana and, as far as I know, has killed everyone unfortunate enough to cross its path. I have so many questions, but the last thing I want is to give him the satisfaction of asking.

I don’t manage to swallow them all down. “What form did it take for you?”

Silence.

I picture having some kind of *Enfernae* power over silence and choking him with it. Not that I’ve ever heard of such a thing, but the image makes me smile.

Sand really is useless.

“I need a rope,” I say, making my voice as demanding as I can. I might not be able to escape—yet—but I don’t have to make this pleasant for him, either.

A second later, one floats around the side of the trunk, carried by shadow. I don’t thank him. I will *never* thank him for anything. Not ever.

As soon as I’ve tied myself in the same way he did, I lean my head back and close my eyes.

“How did you know my size?” I ask. “For the clothes.”

Then wince because I hadn’t meant to ask that. It gives away too much,

like how vulnerable that made me feel. Had he been watching Tabra? Had he been in her rooms? Or had he guessed?

“How do you know how to throw knives and climb trees?” is his reply.

Because not everyone is who they seem.

I mash my lips together. Apparently neither of us is going to be giving the other any answers tonight. I quietly relish the day he learns that he got the wrong girl, imagining his shocked and defeated expression.

So long as that moment comes when I am able to get away.

I force myself to close my eyes, only to open them again with a frown and the sudden sense of being watched. Which is ridiculous. He’s on the other side of the tree.

Familiarity teases my mind. I’d felt the same thing in Enora the night we met. Who—or *what*—is this man?

13

Upside Down

Reven isn't in the tree when I wake up. In fact, I don't see him anywhere. Moving quickly, I untie myself and drop to the ground. Then I hiss with a new frustration. My beaded dress is gone. I was going to use that to barter for supplies after I escaped. I hate this man.

"Let's go."

I jump back, startled at the sound of his voice. Where the hells did he come from?

Before I can snap at him, shadows rise up, almost like he's going to drag me along again, but then they sort of flicker before they disappear. Expression blank, Reven reaches a hand for me instead.

I slip out of the way just before he catches my arm. "I won't run."

He casts me a doubtful glance.

"Where would I go?" I point out.

I can see him chewing on that. Does he believe me?

After a second, he drops his hand, and as he does, I spot the scars running down his wrist. They're not like any I've seen before. Shiny, almost silvery, they remind me of mercury, solid and yet shining. A series of three jagged, parallel lines that look like claw marks.

I don't ask. He wouldn't answer me anyway, I'm sure. Besides, the last thing I need is to think of him as anything more than a monster. For all I know, those are the last remaining marks of a victim.

My distrust will keep me sharp, safe.

Reven takes the lead, allowing me to follow. Which I do, though *maybe* I dawdle. Again, I have no reason to make this easy on him. After getting a branch slapped back in my face for the second time, though, followed by a gruff, "Keep up," I grit my teeth and move faster.

After that, we fall into what amounts to a lot of silent walking, and a lot

of trees, and more walking, broken up only by eating a few more pieces of that fruit...as we're walking. It's the unending kind of marching that reminds me of journeying with Cain's zariphate the one or two times I was allowed to travel deeper into the desert with them. I'm trying not to think about how worried he must be right now, and at the same time trying to channel him.

A memory strikes, like flint to tinder, of when I'd run from a lion and dropped my knife in terror. *Be smarter, Meren. Stop letting fear and exhaustion cloud your actions.* Is that what he'd tell me now?

Without warning, we emerge from the tree line.

"Watch it." Reven reaches a hand across me despite the fact that we're still at least twenty feet from the edge of a sheer drop. His palm presses into my stomach.

Touch.

One I don't see coming. And yet, my gut reaction is to gasp and almost to...lean into him.

The *hells* with that. I must be even more agitated than I realized.

He withdraws his hand.

Deliberately, I turn my gaze away from him only to really take in the drop off we're standing near.

"Goddess above," I breathe and stare out over endless skies and the incredible sight laid out before me. One I'd never thought I'd witness in person.

For ages now, we have watched from our solid place in Aryd as the dominion of Wildernyss has broken its bonds of land and crept slowly higher into the sky. The exposed and jagged rocks beneath it always remind me of upside-down mountains, the tops—or bottoms, I guess—of their peaks dipping into the oceans below. The southern parts of Aryd are cast in shade for many hours a day now because of this dominion. A blessing for

those who live there.

Below, through wispy clouds, I can see the ocean, the blue expanse of it seemingly endless, though I know Tropikis is out that direction somewhere. Far enough from here that it isn't visible on the horizon.

That's when it sinks in just how high up we are.

He didn't need to bother with the protective gesture. Self-preservation and the whole falling-to-my-death scenario have me scrambling back into the trees. I'm tempted to wrap my arms around the trunk of one, but I manage to stop myself. That would be too telling.

Focus, Meren. The most important thing is I have my bearings now. I know where in Wildernyss I am.

Once again, Goddess bless Omma and those hours she forced me to spend memorizing the maps of the dominions. I've never thanked that woman for anything, but I'm starting to appreciate her more. She prepared me more than I realized.

Only one set of mountains ends this close to the border of Wildernyss: the Devotion Mountains. We are on the eastern side of the dominion, right at the edge. The question is, how far south are we?

Have we passed the River Tropikis? I could follow it to the Lake of Tymber, which sits at the center of the dominion. From there, I could make my way to the capitol city with its temple and the portal housed inside. Then home.

Well planned or not, as soon as I get a chance, I'm gone. Now at least I know what fruit to eat, what path to take, and to sleep in the trees for safety. I have warm clothes and a small weapon. Forget waiting for shadow boy to get me out of here. I've relied on my ability to think my way through challenging situations my whole life. Tabra got all the grace, kindness, and sophistication, so I guess it's only fair I got the brains.

The journey will take me days, probably, but trying to find that tower

Reven brought us through would be more foolish. The Queen's Tower, I realize now. It had to be. Everyone in the courts knows that Istrella and Trysolde, Queen and King of Wildernyss, have what Omma describes as a "tumultuous" marriage, and the queen made for herself a private retreat. One deep in the mountains that only she knows how to get to. Where had Istrella got her hands on enchanted glass for a portal?

Actually, I have a more important question. Who is Reven, that he knew where to find it?

Regardless, it makes sense that Reven would take me through there. If no one else is aware of the portal's existence, they would never think to travel that way. And with the queen and king both in Aryd for Tabra's coronation and Grandmother's funeral, the tower would be empty.

Reven is smart. I'll give him that much. I gulp as it dawns on me that I might not be smarter.

The clothes, the escape route, when he snatched me...this was a well-thought-out plan. But how did he know when to strike? It's not like Grandmother's death was preplanned or even widely rumored, and he'd been in Enora the night it happened, not Oaesys. Does he realize I'm the same girl he warned not to go into the desert alone?

My brain fills with questions. Regardless of the answers, I'm only a poor girl from Aryd and a part-time pretend princess who can make glass flowers. I have no chance against him.

"When was the last time you saw Devotion's Edge?" Reven asks with a wave at the drop.

I catch the subtle lilt of suspicion in his voice. Plus, he said words. He doesn't tend to do that for no reason. I've figured that much out about him.

But why suspicion?

I barely ask myself the question before I figure out the answer. Tabra has been to Wildernyss many times, including recently. Luckily, I know all

the details of those times. Thank the goddesses yet *again* for Omma, who'd also made me memorize useless junk like Tabra's itineraries.

Not so useless now.

Instead of answering, though, I flick him a glance. "What do you care?"

"You look like you've never seen them before, which can't possibly be right." He looks me up and down.

Dammit. I need to be more careful. This situation is worlds different than even Omma prepared me for, and I can't seem to hold up my Tabra impersonation.

I need a distraction, and fast.

"Aryd is drying up," I blurt out.

His lips flatten, sinking his cheeks even more beneath his sharp cheekbones, giving him a grim expression I probably should be wary of. But, somewhere along the way, between the perfectly sized clothes and goddess knows how much walking, I stopped being afraid of him. Or at least my fear lessened. Maybe he should have killed me faster, while my terror was still fresh.

"What does that mean?" he asks.

"The oases are drying up, so are the wells. And the lakes get lower every season."

He studies me. Will he consider letting me go, knowing that a brand-new queen will need to deal with such a dangerous situation for her people? And, to borrow an expression from Tyndra, that's only the tip of the iceberg of Tabra's problems.

"This must have been happening for some time, so I assume your viziers know," he finally says. Like that will solve the problem.

Meaning...I'm stuck.

"I'm going to hunt us a midday meal," he says, still grim, like he's angry with himself now. Then points. "Follow the edge of the trees that

way. Stop when you reach the river. I'll meet you there."

The river. The beautiful, glorious river that's about to be my salvation. Did he seriously think the Princess of Aryd is so uneducated and coddled that she wouldn't know the layout of the other dominions almost as well as her own?

Deliberately, I school my features, hoping I'm not giving away how eager I am to reach those waters without him in tow. I keep my mouth shut and march away, head held high.

"Don't go too close to the water when you get there," he calls after me.

Yeah, I bet you don't want me to. I raise my hand in a crude gesture and keep going.

It takes me a solid ten minutes of rushing along before I realize my mistake.

He'll expect me to go the direction he said, and yes, the river that lies in that direction is one path to safety. But I also know of a way from the north that will take me to the smaller, lesser-known Mariana River and the same salvation, just not in the direction Reven thinks.

I spin around and go back to where he left me. Careful to make no noise, or as little as possible on the crunchy bed of pine needles, I move carefully along the line of trees to my left, keeping the sheer stomach-churning drop to my right far enough away that I'm not hyperventilating. I hardly allow myself a breath as I keep moving, unstopped and unhindered, slower than I'd prefer in order to keep quiet.

The farther I get, the more my muscles tense, quivering with each step. I don't know how long I've been going—a while. Long enough to start to hope for success. But then a tingle of what is becoming a familiar sensation—awareness—hits the back of my neck a half second before shadows slam up in front of me like a wall. I skid to a halt.

"*I knew you'd be trouble.*" That distinctive slide of voice sounds from

behind me.

I don't turn. Hands on my hips, my head drops forward under the weight of my disappointment.

Hells swallow me whole.

At the same time, a tiny part of me relaxes. Escape is my only option, but a small part of me can still begrudgingly admit I feel safer with him than without. Which is the most ridiculous thing I've ever felt. Damn him to the depths of the seventh circle of the hells. "Then save yourself more trouble and let me go." I address the ground, not ready to face him.

"I can't." He almost sounds apologetic.

I'd be a fool to believe it. "Why? What do you want with me? Ransom? Power? Leverage?"

Silence.

"Tell me," I demand, desperation creeping into my voice now. Because if he's not going to kill me, then why did he take me? I whirl to face him.

He's standing close but not too close, his hands shoved into the pockets of his fur-lined coat.

"I need your help." The words are quiet and so full of resentment I imagine he's choking on it.

My...*help*? Is he joking?

I can't help it. Laughter bursts from me.

And Reven's immediate scowl only makes it worse.

14

Crawling Death

I have no idea what Tabra's response would have been in this situation. If Reven had kidnapped the right girl, dragged her across snowy mountains, terrified her, pissed her off, then told her he'd done all this because he needed her help, how would she have handled it?

Probably not with laughter.

The way his nose flares in visible aggravation only makes me laugh harder. I'm doubled over with it, riding an edge of what is quickly turning into something out of control.

My help? He needs...well, Tabra's help, actually. And he thinks that's who he took. I laugh so hard my cheeks start to ache.

"Goddesses give me strength," he mutters.

"I'm pretty sure they're all laughing, too," I manage around my unladylike chortles. How this man hasn't figured out I'm no queen is beyond me.

A strong grip around my arm cuts off my hilarity abruptly, and suddenly I am being frog marched back in the direction I'd come.

"Was it something I said?" I snigger.

No response. No big surprise there.

Eventually, we pass the place where I turned around the first time. After even more walking, the rushing sound of water reaches my ears before I catch a glimpse of the river. We turn a bend around an outcropping of rock, and there it is—the River Tropikis.

I try to tuck my awe away where he can't see. The rush of water cuts a wide path through the land, a violent torrent moving so fast it must sweep away anything that tries to cross. I glance at where the water drops over the edge of the dominion, mist rising up in the air like angels' wings, kissing my face, the bite of it in the cold air invigorating.

Maybe I can push him in.

I'm grinning at the mental image of a shocked face, a big splash, then a yelp cut off as he gets swept away when I spy a small dead animal that looks like a mix between a rooster and a miniature ostrich with black feathers and a bright red coxcomb on the ground away from the banks. The lunch Reven had gone out to catch, no doubt. With the way it's lying all haphazard, I'm guessing he dropped it when he realized I wasn't here.

I bite back another peal of laughter, picturing his face. Seriously, though, I must be tired. Or losing it. I'm never this punchy. Well, not usually.

Get yourself together, Meren.

I manage to sober up, but just barely. "Is that a basan?"

"A juvenile."

I wasn't expecting an answer, and also not a confirmation. The fire roosters are supposed to be shy—and deadly.

He must see my hesitation. "They're not poisonous to eat. Just don't let one breathe ghost fire on you."

Right.

In short order, he has the bird stripped. Then he pulls out a wicked-looking knife with a long blade curved on one side and quickly has the thing prepped, on a stick, and roasting over the fire. We say nothing as we wait and watch the skin brown. The hickory scent of smoked meat fills the air as fat drips to hiss and spit on the flames below.

"Won't this attract animals?" I ask.

"Most likely."

"I hope one of them eats you instead." I flutter my eyelashes at him.

He leans forward from where he sits on a rock across the fire from me, elbows propped on his knees. "Sweet, they said. Easily frightened, they said," he grumbles under his breath.

Which only makes me want to laugh again. With him, though, rather than at him. Which is so...not what I should be thinking.

“I guess being taken against one’s will can turn anyone into a—”

“Mouthy brat?”

Ouch. One point for him. But then why did I let that sting?

I manage an uncaring tip of my head and lift a deliberately bored gaze, propping my arms on my jackknifed knees. “If this is how you ask for help, I can’t say you’re winning me over.”

A single, unamused laugh escapes him. “At the rate we’re going, I’m quickly rethinking that plan.”

I’m definitely doing something right, then. “Kidnapping a queen *is* an extreme measure,” I muse. “You might want to rethink your life choices while you’re at it.”

I expect a growly comeback, but instead he glances away. “Who says I had a choice?”

I frown, studying him closer. Is that real regret in the set of his shoulders? “Everyone has choices.”

But the moment the words leave my lips, I know they’re not true. I don’t. I never have.

“If you say so, princess.” His lips hitch, but his eyes lack any trace of amusement.

I glance away because that’s definitely bitterness in his voice. The kind I recognize because I struggle with mine every single day.

How could he possibly have no choice about kidnapping the Queen of Aryd?

“I had a dog once that bit anyone who would come near it.” The words are out of my mouth before I even recognize the urge to share this.

Reven waits, eyebrows raised slightly.

I twitch a shoulder. “For days we tried everything—food, water, walks,

other dogs to play with, toys, petting. Grandmother wanted to put it down. She insisted it was possessed.”

Tabra had been beside herself. She’d loved that little scrappy thing, even though I was the one who’d found it in the streets and brought it to the palace.

“Then one day we discovered a thorn wedged in the folds of its skin, sticking into its neck. After we pulled it out and treated it, the dog stopped biting and became the sweetest pet anyone could ask for.”

A long pause greets this. “Am I the dog in this story?” he asks slowly.

I allow myself a small smile, watching the bird roast, the flames reaching up for it. “Sort of. Biting was the only way the dog could ask for help, to tell us something was wrong.”

Silence.

I try again. “What do you want? Maybe I can give it to you without all the, uh”—I gesture between us—“hassle.” Not to mention my life. That is already spoken for by too many others.

“You can’t,” he says, all traces of amusement vanishing.

“You never know until you ask.”

Surprise jolts through me as I find that I’m actually sincere. If he’s that desperate for help, maybe I can find a way.

Goddess, what am I thinking?

Not speaking, he lifts the bird off the flames, pulls it apart, and hands me some. I have to hold back a moan because I am ravenous—those fruit things only get a girl so far—and the meat is surprisingly good. Tastes like game hen from home.

“What could be so important that you’d risk stealing a queen?”

Before he can answer, a movement behind him catches my attention, like the green of the underbrush is shifting slowly. I glance over Reven’s shoulder.

Everything inside me tenses.

A creature lurking in the bushes rises up silently, poised to strike him. Snakelike in shape, it's furred instead of scaled, the same gray as the rocks of the mountains, as thick as a log and longer than me by...a lot. Balancing against a sapling, its head hovers directly behind Reven, and it opens its mouth in four parts, each part forming a triangle that come together into what looks like a blunt nose when closed. Essentially, its entire head is a creepy mouth, its face peeling back to expose rows upon rows of dagger-sharp teeth down an endless throat.

Gut reaction has me scrambling for the knife hidden in my breastband even as the world seems to slow to the sound of my heartbeats.

Reven starts to turn as the snake thing strikes. In the same instant, I manage to get my knife into my fumbling hand. I hurl my weapon over his shoulder, nailing it in the eye with a sickening thud. Dammit. I was aiming for its open mouth.

The shadows that rose up around him fall away in an instant, and we both watch as the creature writhes in agony. Then it locks in on me. All I've done is piss it off.

The thing strikes again.

In a blink, Reven is standing between me and death. At the same instant, out of nowhere a shadow turns solid, lifts a boulder, and brings it down on the creature's head, crushing it. The rest of its long, furred body flops and twists around several times before it drops in a knotted heap. Dead.

The forest goes silent around us, all except the river.

Reaction sets in, and I drop my head into shaking hands. I may have trained to use a knife, but I've never used it on more than a target. Clearly, I'm not as skilled as I thought, because all I did was anger the creature. What if I'd missed? What if I'd been alone? What if I'd killed Reven?

Strike that. Stupid thought.

But now I'm mentally cursing my actions. Because I've just given up my *last* weapon, and I've done it to save the life of the man I am trying to escape from.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

I hear the motion as Reven whips around to face me. Silence, heavy with implications, blankets the rock I'm still sitting on, weighing me into its uneven surface.

"You...tried to save my life." Reven's voice has a different note to it. Confusion, maybe.

I lift my head to find him staring at me with eyes suddenly brighter, glinting with questions and something else I'm unsure of. The way he pronounced each word slowly, it's like he's tasting them and finding them bitter pills to swallow.

Denial—of his words or the way that look in his eyes tugs at something inside me, I'm not sure—has me shaking my head hard. "I was trying to save *my* life. You just happened to be in the way." I drop my gaze to the creature. "I've never seen anything like that. What is it?"

He continues to watch me, his gaze like a physical touch.

"A death worm," he says. "Its bite paralyzes its prey so you're alive as it swallows you whole and digests you slowly."

Shudder. "Does it climb trees?"

His silence answers that, and I shudder again. I guess sleeping in trees isn't entirely safe, then. Good to know.

Dragging my gaze away from the death worm, I look up to find Reven still watching, gaze pinpoint bright, like he's trying to slot together puzzle pieces that don't fit, and my breathing decides to turn erratic on me. Because, no matter how I fight it, my initial, honest reaction to him—to the way he looks at me sometimes—still lingers.

I clear my throat. “Can I have my knife back?”

“No.”

He bends over and tugs the weapon out of the death worm with a slurping sound. The slitted eyeball comes with it, and he flicks it off the blade with a finger, then wipes the blade on his pants and slips it into an unseen pocket. Probably the same pocket where my other knife went.

“I just saved your ass,” I point out. Sure, he might have killed it, but it would have bitten him if I hadn’t acted first.

“Not according to you. Saving me was an unwanted result of saving yourself.” Then his narrow-eyed gaze lands on me. Skates over me, taking me in from head to toe, and an entirely different kind of shiver passes through me.

“Any more weapons?” he demands.

The truth is too sad to contemplate. “As if I’d tell you.”

He grunts.

He doesn’t bother to check me like he did before, and I wonder for a fluttery second if maybe he believes me. I wouldn’t believe him if our roles were reversed, but you never can tell.

In the meantime, priority number one just became getting my hands on another weapon before I try to escape again. I’d even settle for a whip at this point. I’ll never make it on my own without something to defend myself—not with creatures like death worms roaming the forest.

But I might have no choice.

15

Reasons

Reven is back to brooding, only maybe more threatening now, because speculation creeps into his gaze far too often. I pin my lips shut and try to make myself as boring and unremarkable as possible.

The rest of the day is spent walking. And then walking some more. The way he strides with purpose and definite direction tells me Reven knows where we're going. But any effort on my part to get him to give up the plan has been met with heavy silence.

I've been trying to sneak peeks around us, looking for anything remotely identifiable to tell me where we are or where we're going. Beyond the position of the sun telling me we're headed west, I've got nothing.

Maybe he's taking me to one of the cities that lie in the west. Or maybe he's just leading me deeper into the forest, where he can cut out my heart and be on his way.

We follow the bank rather than crossing the river, thank goddess. When we stop for dinner, it's another meal of some kind of bird and those fruit things. But instead of strapping ourselves to a high tree branch for the night, Reven finds us a massive hollow tree trunk, one fire had clearly carved out a long time ago. At his wave, I step inside, then turn immediately to walk right back out.

"No fucking way."

His scowl is immediate. "Do princesses say that word?"

This one does even if she shouldn't. "I would rather pull out all my teeth than go in there."

"That can be arranged, though it might be harder to understand you afterward." He pauses. "Actually, that might be better for me, so feel free."

"Let me consult with my advisors." I glare at him. "They unanimously say no."

He leans closer and points at the tree. “*This* is where we’re sleeping.”

Not if I can help it. There’s hardly enough space for the two of us to fit in there, which will mean sleeping wedged up against him. Given my awareness issues where he’s concerned, I just...can’t. “I’ll sleep on one of the limbs.”

He snags me by the arm as I try to walk away, his grip firm but surprisingly gentle. “I can protect us better in here.”

I look at his hand on my arm and then at the tree. “Won’t we be trapped if something comes?”

He shakes his head, and, with a flick of his other hand, shadows close over the entrance, looking like blackened, charred bark.

Oh.

“Death worms are more common in this area of the mountains.” He says this deadpan, and I narrow my eyes. Is he messing with me? Or is he serious? Not worth the risk of finding out the hard way.

Hells and damnation.

Reluctantly, I shake him off and step back inside the carved out trunk, where I sit down, back to the wall formed by the hollow inside. Moonlight finds its way through the hole in the top and through the entrance, though not much. Reven follows, though he has to contort himself a bit to fit, grunting with the effort as he twists to sit beside me, hard and warm and suddenly too real against me.

I knew this was going to be a problem.

I’m not used to being touched, which means I keep trying to subtly contort my body to gain some space.

“Close your eyes,” he murmurs. Contained as we are, his voice is all around me, sliding through me.

Gritting my teeth, I force my body to still and do as he says. It doesn’t help much. His warmth spreads through me, his scent—familiar, fresh like

the creosus willows that manage to thrive in the deserts—winds around me, and my muscles coil with an unwanted tension.

An odd noise filters in through the “door” of our makeshift shelter, and my eyes spring open, because that sounded like a woman.

“There’s someone out there,” I whisper.

“No.” He shifts like he’s uncomfortable. “*Something*, not someone.”

Something?

“A harpy eagle,” he clarifies.

There it goes again, louder this time and more distinctive. Then again, breathy, needy.

“Seriously?” slips out of my lips. “*That’s* what a harpy eagle sounds like?”

His unamused chuckle is in no way comforting. I’d heard harpy eagles sounded like a woman in pleasure when they eat, but not this. Apparently her repertoire includes *all* aspects of a woman’s voice.

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to block it out.

“I think she’s following you,” Reven murmurs.

Me? Oh...like the kirin. Because I’m supposed to be queen, I guess. Except, I’m not. “I doubt it. More like she’s following *you* for killing that basan.”

Another breathy moan, this one long and drawn out. I’ve lived all my life in a hovel sandwiched between two houses of ill repute. I am well versed in what a woman sounds like in the throes of passion, and this is, remarkably, exactly that.

But I’ve never had to listen to it pressed up against a man before. Especially this one. A new experience I could have happily skipped.

Heat floods my cheeks. I creep my hands up over them, trying to cool my face. Where’s a handy pile of snow when you need one?

Beside me, Reven drops his head back against the tree. “This has been

the damnedest journey I've ever taken," he mutters.

A single, sharp laugh sort of huffs from me.

The harpy eagle is going at it hard now. Ecstasy and agony in each long, loud moan. How long does it take to pick bones clean, anyway?

"Tyndra is sinking," Reven says.

I lower my hands and turn my head, not that I can see the details of his features in the gloom. Which means he can't really see me, either. He sounds tired, though. "What?"

"The same way Wildernyss is lifting into the sky, Tyndra has started to sink into the oceans. But faster, not over hundreds of years."

Into the oceans where the worst monsters wait. "What is Eidolon doing about it?"

He shakes his head.

I'm not sure if that means he doesn't know or he doesn't want to tell me.

"I have people," he says instead, voice turning gruffer now. Like he's embarrassed to reveal that. "People who rely on me."

He does? I can relate to that. But I don't want to relate to this man. "Why not go through the proper channels? I could have come on a diplomatic mission."

But even as the words leave my mouth, I want to pull them back. No queen of Aryd has been to Tyndra in centuries. At least not of her own will.

Reven's silence tells me he knows this, too.

The harpy eagle decides that's a perfect moment for a loud, keening moan. I can't believe I'm having this conversation while a large bird is about to find her completion over a carcass.

"What about the other kings and queens?" My voice sounds tighter.

Another shake of his head. "I want *you* to see it first."

Tabra. He means Tabra. Even if it feels like he really means me. In the

dark, he sounds younger. Unsure of himself, even. I wish I could see his face better.

“I want you to see the sinking lands and the people who will die if something doesn’t happen soon. Then, I’ll tell you the rest.”

There’s more? But apparently, he doesn’t trust me to believe him. Not only that, but it hits me that he won’t give up on this foolish gambit. Not with people to protect.

I have people to protect, too, though.

“There are whispers about the people of Aryd rising up against their rulers,” I say quietly.

He’s silent a beat, and I wonder if he even cares.

“How bad?”

His question is genuine. Something like relief trickles in. Which is why, instead of retorting with something snappy, I give an honest answer. “I don’t know how organized they are yet. I wouldn’t have heard if not for...”

Hells. I almost said if not for living in Enora.

“But it’s not good,” he says. Not a question. He gets it. I can hear in his voice that he does.

“Not good is one way to put it.”

“What are you going to do?” he asks.

“I don’t know that, either.” I pause. “I want to help them.”

I’ve spent most of our endless walking processing everything that’s happened since the night I snuck out of the hovel. My grandmother’s death. Cain’s proposal. The way Tabra gazed at Eidolon’s goddess-forsaken amulet. The king’s proposal. Reven.

Our silence is heavy, and at the same time...close.

I need to break this feeling, cut it with a knife or something. As if on cue, the harpy eagle reaches the climax of her show, her feverish calls rapturous.

“I think she’s faking it.”

Reven chokes. “And how would you know?”

I give my best uncaring shrug, though I’m squirming inside. “She’s definitely trying too hard.”

Silence greets that. I’m not sure if I shocked him into it or if he has no comeback. I mean, what could he say?

Unfortunately, it didn’t help break the tension at all. Like Reven did, I drop my head back against the fire-smoothed bark of the tree and close my eyes. Not against the sounds or the night but against *him*.

I don’t know why Reven was in Enora the night before he kidnapped me. If I thought he’d answer, I’d ask. It’s clear he believes I’m Tabra, soon-to-be Queen of Aryd. But he’d have no reason to search for her in a place like Enora.

The man is a mystery—one I find myself wanting to unravel. Maybe even wanting to believe that he did a horrible thing for a good reason. As a princess who lived under her grandmother’s rule, I saw the hard choices she made on behalf of our dominion. Even if I disagreed with most of them.

The harpy eagle’s serenade eases and slows until quiet settles over the forest.

“Go to sleep, princess,” Reven murmurs. “We’ll get where we’re going tomorrow.”

Trusting Reven is the last thing I should be doing. And yet, as I drift off with the warmth and solidness of his body against mine, a seed of trust takes hold.

16

The Faces of a Hideous Beast

When I open my eyes, it's still night.

And I'm alone. Again.

Reven is no longer pressed up against me. The loss of his body heat has to be what woke me, because I'm shivering, despite my cloak. Where in the dominions could he have gone?

I crawl out of the hollow tree trunk and get to my feet.

Run.

The word echoes through my head, but my feet don't move. *I* don't move. Maybe it's the death-worm experience. Or maybe it's the way his desire to protect his people echoes my desire to protect mine. Maybe I *should* see these sinking lands. Though goddess knows what help I—or even my sister—could give.

Am I actually considering going along with him?

Rejection stirs sharp and heavy in my breast. No. I even shake my head. My first instinct of running is the right one, and I force my feet to move, one step, then another. My best bet is to follow the river, skirting along the bases of the mountains as best I can. I'll only get lost in the forest with all the ups and downs and everything looking the same. The question is which way along the river? Opposite from the way we were headed, I decide.

Listening for the rush of water is what guides me in the right direction. With every step, adrenaline pumps through me, pounding in my ears. I'm picturing death worms or worse hunting me through the night. I don't even have a weapon.

This might be my worst idea yet, and that's saying a lot.

I step into an abrupt clearing, as if, instead of thinning, the trees suddenly just backed away. A strange sort of friction to the air is the only

warning I get.

Reven, unmistakable to me now for anyone else, stands shirtless, his eyes closed, in the center of the clearing, the cold starlight playing over the ridges of his muscled torso. The blood thrumming through my veins pulses with the energy emanating from the man in front of me. An energy that has nothing to do with my unwanted reactions to him. This is all coming from him.

He holds out his arms, and I stifle a gasp. The jagged scars on both his wrists glow around the edges with the same deep purple light as his palms. Almost like his magic is trying to get through the cracks.

And then the fabric of night itself *moves*.

Rivers of what almost look like ink flow between beams of moonlight and into his body. Coming from every crevice of the forest, the shadows pool and swirl around his feet, surging to a beat that my heart echoes. The darkness creeps up his form, shrouding him, turning his entire being to ravenous night.

Then the darkness swells out of him, up and over his head, and I choke. Hardly a sound, and yet the churn of shadows seems to turn on itself, and his eyes, two glowing spots of aquamarine, open and lock onto me.

“You shouldn’t be here.” His voice—deeper even than before and smooth, like a pool of star-kissed water—slides over me, through me, into me.

“What are you?” I whisper.

His face spasms. “Don’t test me, princess. Go back to the tree and wait.”

This isn’t Reven speaking but something else. Something elemental and savage.

I should be terrified. I should sprint back down the path that led me here, back to the safe haven he found us.

I'm not. And I don't.

Maybe it's the way I've always felt safe in the shadows, drawn to them, because the pull to stay is too strong. Like something deep inside me doesn't want me to go.

"Why do you need...me?" I almost said Tabra.

Those eyes flicker brighter.

"To keep Eidolon—" The darkness around him rears up, seemingly in protest at that name, and a pained grunt reaches my ears. "To keep you from being used against others, and maybe even save a few along the way."

Then the shadows ease and dance, reaching and flowing across the forest floor toward me. Arms beckoning. Alluring.

"You need to go." His voice is strained now, rough. "I can't hold them —"

Tendrils of night brush over my skin—seductive and intoxicating. They wind around me, drawing me into the circle. A sense of rightness settles in my center, and I take a halting step forward.

"Princess." His voice is right in front of me now, and I open my eyes to find myself surrounded by shadow and Reven himself, solid and real, standing before me, close enough to touch.

I blink slowly, because I'm having trouble separating out reality. It has to be a dream, and I'm asleep beside him in the tree still. Right? Sure I have it figured out, I smile almost tentatively.

Only his eyes narrow at the sight.

"See me," he says in a voice gone deadly harsh. Silk frayed by thorns.

The shadows punch out from us, abandoning us, leaving only Reven and me in the clearing. Only the man in front of me isn't entirely Reven. His face appears to crawl with...*goddess*...with other faces. No other way to describe it. Changing and morphing before my eyes, like a hundred different men exist within him and all are fighting to be seen.

Each a different manifestation. Some harsh and hard, some daring, some laughing. *All* compelling.

Finally, a face of utter despair settles in place the longest, tired lines etched into the skin around his mouth and eyes, and, without thinking, I reach up and put my hand against his cheek, try to smooth those lines with the pad of my thumb. Reven grabs my wrist, hard, and the sadness disappears, replaced by a face that glints at me with something purely evil.

“Run, little girl.”

Horror-fed adrenaline slams through the hollows of my bones. Swallowing a scream, I jerk away from him and do what I should have in the first place.

I run. Fast.

The kind of fast that happens in nightmares. The kind where I worry if my lungs might burst or if my legs can keep up. Will they fail me and leave me to be caught and goddess knows what done to me? Because I was right, even if he’s not Eidolon. The man behind me—or whatever’s inside him, at least—is a *monster*.

Only Reven doesn’t come after me, not even a call of my name. Even so, it feels like the horde I saw inside him is breathing down my neck. I consider running deeper into the forest, finding the river, and going from there. I’ll never make it, though. Not in the dark. Not at night and alone. Not without any weapon.

I sprint back to our hollowed-out tree and scramble inside, knees pulled up to my chest. Like a child hiding under a bed, I wait there. To die. To be caught. I don’t know which.

I wait until fingers of dawn crack the night. I wait until the gut-wrenching fright slowly recedes and I fall asleep through sheer exhaustion, wondering all the while why he hasn’t come for me.

Maybe I'm Not Disposable

The first thing I see the next morning is Reven, and I stiffen on a spike of alarm. He's not inside our hollow tree with me, but sitting in the doorway, back propped against the bark, one knee up and the other leg stretched out, head tipped back and eyes closed. His expression is a wearied crosshatch of lines that should never be found on a young man's face.

He may be a monster, but at least he didn't kill me while I slept.

I don't think I moved or made any sound, but his eyes pop open to find me watching him. "We need to talk."

"You think so?"

He looks at me, and I look at him. Everything about last night settles between us, and despite being terrified of what I saw, it feels like we're bound more closely together.

That should *not* be my reaction.

The sound of a female voice in the woods breaks the silence, and I groan. "Not again."

Reven jerks his finger to his mouth. What is it that he hears different? But then a severe kind of silence takes over the forest, and he goes rigid.

My skin starts to crawl.

Before either of us can do anything, a scream pierces the quiet. The sound launches a hundred snow-white birds into the air, visible through the scarred opening of the tree, followed by the indistinguishable shouts of several men near our hiding place.

Reven swears under his breath.

Immediately, we're both on our feet, him crowding me into our semi-protected hollow tree, the light of day going black as he pulls shadow up and over us. His back to the entrance, he wraps his arms around me, pinning

me between his hard body and the bark.

I don't get a chance to react. Footsteps sound directly outside, so close. Too close. They crunch on by in the pine needles, clunky and not trying to be quiet at all. Part of me thinks I should scream, too. What if these are soldiers from Aryd sent by Tabra to find me? Maybe I'm not disposable after all.

But a small voice inside me scoffs. Of course she won't send anyone, because Tabra does what is expected of her. Always. And in this situation, she's been trained to do nothing. To let me make my sacrifice.

Another scream echoes through the forest, closer this time, and I flinch, but my mind also clears. I curl my hands into Reven's shirt. "We have to do something," I whisper. "Help her."

Reven drops his gaze to mine, seeming to debate with himself, and I stare back steadily, willing him to do the right thing. He gives a small growling huff like he doesn't like the outcome of the argument he's having in his head. "Stay here."

I startle—I expected him to say no—and he feels it, since I'm plastered against him. His mouth pulls down at the corners as if he doesn't like my reaction.

I don't like the way my belly wants to soften at *his* reaction, so I cover. "You should give me my knives."

He snorts. "I've seen your aim, princess."

There is absolutely no reason why, but that makes me want to laugh. I don't, though.

He cups my jaw with one hand. "Don't leave the tree. I can't risk them finding you."

A warning. An order.

"Okay." He's helping. For once I'll do as I'm told.

He pauses at the entrance of our hiding spot and looks back at me with

an odd sort of reluctance.

“Hells,” he mutters and steps out. But his shadows remain, protecting me.

Not ten seconds go by before I hear another rustle, even closer this time. A man steps into view. He pauses, and I hold my breath.

A Tyndran soldier.

Recognizable by the armor—white rather than the black or gray of Wildernyss or the sandy color of my own dominion, the shoulders are formed to look like the cragged Ynferno Mountain that sits at the heart of the icy dominion, as cold and unforgiving as diamonds.

The crest of King Eidolon is stamped in the center of his chest—the Revoker, the Devourer that tends to stay closest to Tyndra. Human-looking on one end, the other end is a long tail that splits into three. It is rumored to pull people who get too close to the water in and eat only their eyes, tongues, and feet, leaving them alive but floundering in the ocean. Very few have ever made it back to shore, from what I hear.

Eidolon is the only ruler to have a monster as the sigil of his house. I always wondered why that wasn't a huge clue to every other ruler that this man was not to be trusted.

What the hells are Tyndran soldiers doing in the Devotion Mountains of Wildernyss? Could they be here for me? I don't see how, but I don't really believe in coincidence, either.

Another scream sounds, followed by raucous laughter, and the soldier grins and moves away. His compatriots must've caught whatever poor woman is running from them. The rustle of his feet in the undergrowth goes quiet, and all I can do is stand here, listen, and wonder.

I can hear the soldiers talking, more laughing. Nothing that sounds like a fight, though. What is Reven doing?

A flapping noise that sounds like someone whispering, “*basa basa*,”

sounds overhead, and a different shadow penetrates the hollow tree from above.

Something is watching me.

Slowly, warily, I lift my head to stare straight into eerie bloodred eyes that match the elaborate coxcomb on top of its head. A basan, alive this time, and much, much larger. Clearly an adult, this one has blue hackles and claws, and green hackles and sickle feathers that stand out against its black body.

Merciful goddess. Did we eat its baby yesterday?

I swear whatever forces guide this world have it in for me. The fire rooster is eyeing me like I'm its worst enemy. *Fire*. I glance around the charred insides of the hollowed tree, and it occurs to me that I must be standing in its nest.

No one could have this much bad luck.

The thing lifts its wings out wide and rears its head back, making a hissing sound as it inhales, and I have no doubt what's coming next. With no choice left to me, I stumble backward out of the tree, the veil of shadows disappearing as I fall on my ass on the forest floor. A brilliant crimson glow fills the tree's insides, and smoke rises from the top. Except, instead of flames, the crackling almost sounds like ice.

For the second time today, I know I should run. But I can't. The girl... Reven...

Before I can even get up, a rough hand grabs me by the scruff of my neck and yanks me to my feet. The Tyndran soldier from a moment ago shoves his face into mine, grinning with yellowed teeth and horrendous breath. "What have we here?"

"Rev—!"

He clamps a filthy hand around my mouth, cutting off my scream. "Can't have that. Come on now."

I find myself dragged through the woods, and with every step, I search for any sign of my previous kidnapper. Where is Reven?

But I don't see any sign of him as the soldier forces me into a clearing full of other men dressed similarly. With a grunt, he throws me through the line of men to fall to my hands and knees next to a girl who I'd guess is around fifteen, sixteen at most, but small with it. She looks a lot like me, actually, with similar coloring and hair the same length caught up in a braid. She's holding a sack that looks too heavy for her to heft.

This is who these bastards were hunting?

They've cornered her like bored hyenas toying with a desert mouse. Based on her clothing, I'm guessing she lives in these woods. She's covered in dirt, blood pouring from her nose, but she's not backing down, glaring at them. Ready.

"Try it again," one of them snarls. He's swinging a rope as if getting ready to lasso a prized heifer. He also has a nasty gash across his face. From her, I figure. I like her already.

Getting to my feet, I ready myself to protect her in whatever way I can. My knives would be helpful about now. I glance around me, hoping to see something, anything, that might give me a chance. I even briefly think about sand, but I can't feel much in this soil. There's nothing.

Which is when I lock eyes with Reven. He's standing at the edge of the clearing, hidden by bushes. It's impossible to deny the chilling anger etched into his face.

No shadows move around him, but at the same time I can *feel* them. Feel the darkness rising in him.

He shakes his head at me. Once. A silent command to not reveal his presence.

"Found another one," the soldier who dragged me here says, pulling my focus away from Reven.

“Give us the food,” another soldier is saying to the girl, gesturing at the sack she carries.

Studying them more closely, I can see that under their armor they’re thin, not lean like soldiers usually are but underweight. They remind me of the people in Enora. Is Tyndra suffering, too? Or is Eidolon starving his army?

The soldier glances at me. “We’ll take whatever you have, too, missy. Then you’ll both be free to go.”

The bloody one shakes his head. “They’ll tell the authorities, and then we’ll really starve. I say we just take the food and kill the witnesses.”

A different one wipes his arm across his mouth, then points at me. “Agreed. I’ll deal with her. You kill the other one.”

I snort a laugh. Or more accurately, the sound escapes before I can stop it. But really? “That’s the best you can come up with?”

They actually pause and glance at one another.

I can almost hear Reven thinking at me to shut the hells up. But fear makes me say things, and I’m not dead yet, so... “Why don’t you scamper off, and we’ll all pretend this never happened? No harm, no foul.”

The leader’s expression hardens, and I know I took it a step too far. He takes a single menacing step toward me, reaching around his back to pull out a curved sword. The world seems to slow as I turn my head and meet Reven’s eyes. In them is a dread that matches my own.

Then a possessive sort of fury.

His face contorts a fraction of a second before shadow explodes from every crevice around us. Like a solid wall of sand in a massive dust storm, darkness slams through the clearing. The roar of it is so hideous, a scream rises out of my throat.

Instinct has me grabbing the girl and jerking her down to the ground, trying to cover her with my body.

But nothing touches us.

I yank my head up, daring to look. A violent swirl of shadows circles us, trees and boulders and debris all visible in the maelstrom. Everything is so loud, an overwhelming thunder of sound that I can feel in my bones, and yet the air hardly stirs around my body. I spot a flash of white armor in the debris. Then another. Attached to limp, broken bodies that are being pulverized by the onslaught.

Faster than it erupted, the tumult comes to a dead stop. The wreckage hangs, suspended in the air for a heartbeat before the shadows disappear and everything drops to the ground with a crash, dirt flying up from the impact. I squeeze the girl tighter, bracing against being struck.

But again, nothing touches us.

Then...silence.

Holy bloody hells. Reven had that in him all this time, and I was chucking tiny knives at his head. And missing. If he wanted to kill me, he could easily have done it before now. In an instant. In a heart-stopping blink. Instead...

He saved me.

“What was *that?*” the girl whispers.

“I—” I jerk my gaze to where I think Reven had been standing, but he’s gone, only heaps of rubble in his place. I spin, searching, waiting for him to come to us, but nothing stirs.

“Stay here,” I tell her and clamber over a rock that wasn’t there before.

18

A Life for a Life

With more apprehension than I want to admit to, I circle the outside of the debris field in widening rings, searching. As I pass an ash-colored, long-dead body of a felled tree, a groan reaches me from the other side.

Male. Velvet and iron.

Carefully, I skirt the log. As I round the far end, a swath of black moves underneath a low, orange-leafed bush.

Reven.

My first instinct is to run to him. Help him. I even take a few hurried steps, only to stumble to a halt. This is it. My best chance to get away. I don't know why he's lying here, but I should take the girl and run. If she's from here, maybe she knows the fastest way for me to get home.

I half turn away, but another groan stops me again. I know that sound. Pain.

Movement brings my head around to find him struggling to push to his hands and knees, muscles visibly shaking, his head hanging between his arms like he can't find the strength to lift it.

I remain rooted to where I stand. Undecided.

His entire body quivers as he tries to force himself up, then he collapses to the ground. From where I stand, I can see the marks on his wrists, which glow like his palms, and the light in both places snuffs out. His eyes roll back at the same time. Out cold.

I close my own eyes, squeeze them shut as I fight with myself. He *kidnapped* me, dammit. And what I saw last night scared me half to death. I should leave him here to rot and save my own life. Get back to Tabra before Eidolon has a chance to hurt her.

Only, Reven has been protecting me this whole trip. And he just saved me and a girl neither of us knows. He wants my help saving Tyndra, not

torture or some twisted plan like I'd assumed. He has people depending on him, same as I do. Lying there, face down in the damp foliage, unmoving and limp, he looks so vulnerable.

An image of the death worm swallowing him whole fills my head. Or the basan spewing its cold fire over his body. Awful things might happen if I abandon him.

"Um..." The girl stops beside me. "Who is that?"

Sandrats. "Someone who needs my help."

Her gaze darts between me and Reven. "Did he do that to the soldiers?"

"Yes."

She scoots back a few feet, abhorrence written all over her face. "He's the Shadowraith."

The word slaps at me.

The *Shadowraith*.

The demon-forsaken Shadowraith who steals people from their homes. *That's* who took me? The heavens really *do* have it in for me.

I drop my head back, staring at the sky but not seeing it.

It would explain a lot. I watched the man absorb shadows, for goddess's sake, and that was before that terrifying display of power in the clearing. The Hag would thwack me in the head with her wooden walking stick if she knew I'd been so clueless. So would Cain, and Omma, and even Tabra. If I hadn't been so focused on Eidolon, I would have figured it out sooner.

The question is, does that change my mind about leaving him here defenseless?

I sigh. No, it does not. "I need to get him somewhere safe."

The girl stares at me like I've just decapitated an innocent kitten. Then backs up a step. "I'd...better get home."

"Is it close?"

She pauses, then shakes her head.

Damn. A shelter without a territorial, ice-breathing bird in it would have been nice.

She takes another step.

“Wait. What’s your name?”

She eyes me. “Niri.”

“My name is...Tabra.” Hells, I almost said Meren. I gesture at her bag. “What were you doing when the soldiers found you?”

“I was gathering food for my family.” She makes a face. “But then the soldiers came, and one of them grabbed my other sack. It had all my kills.”

I wrinkle my nose. “I don’t suppose you know how to kill a full-grown basan?”

She perks up at that. “I was hunting a basan. It keeps stealing our goats.”

What are the odds? Despite everything, I huff a laugh, rubbing at my eyes. “I know where you can find it.” I can’t believe I’m about to suggest what I am. “I’ll help you kill it if you help me drag him”—I hitch a thumb at Reven—“to its nest afterward.”

I need that tree for shelter.

She shoots Reven another look, clearly questioning why I want to help the Shadowraith, but then shrugs.

“Basans are easy to kill once you find them.” She pulls what looks like a muddy apple out of the satchel slung across her bony shoulders and holds it up. “They can’t resist goat meat. But if they eat a rock big enough, it lodges in their throat. When they try to use their fire, they explode.”

Gross. “So that’s a rock covered in goat meat?”

She grins.

Right. “In that case, follow me.”

An hour later, thanks to her goat-covered rock trick, the fire rooster is dead. I don’t think I’ll ever unsee the way its head exploded off its neck.

Like a teapot gathering steam, but instead of whistling, its eyes bulged, and then *bam*, brains, blood, and feathers everywhere.

Mental note to not have to kill one of those ever again.

Niri and I backtrack to the clearing, strap Reven to a pallet she helps me make, and drag him to the tree. After we get him situated, she stuffs the dead basan body in her sack, chattering about how thrilled her family will be. Dinner *and* no more lost goats.

“You could come with me,” she offers. “It would be...safer.” She glances at Reven behind me.

I bet it would be. Though Reven would find me again. I know it. “Thank you, but I’ll be okay.” I hope.

She nods. “You’re older than me and seem capable enough, but a word of advice...?”

At this point, I’d probably even listen to Omma. “Sure.”

“My family has a saying—a monster’s power lies in our fear of him.” She glances at Reven and swallows. “But a Shadowraith seems like a monster worth fearing. Are you *sure* you don’t want to come with me?”

I am probably making the biggest mistake of my life right now.

But I’m not changing my mind.

“I’m sure,” I say.

She nods, then glances at the sky. “I’d better go, or I’ll be late.”

With an abruptness that is almost jarring, Niri disappears into the woods, leaving me alone with Reven. I glance over my shoulder at where his boots stick out of the tree. For a woman who wanted to beat him over the head with something heavy, things have definitely changed.

I blow out a long breath. “No, no. You stay here and rest,” I tell his unconscious form sarcastically. “*I’ll* go get us some water—”

I cut off with a frown. I don’t have access to Reven’s water satchel. No way to get the water and carry it back. I drag myself into the tree stump and

flop on the ground beside him with a groan. I'm wiped, and I don't have water.

"Water sounds like a start," Reven rumbles at my side in a slurred voice.

With a jerk, I pop up on my elbows to find him awake, if still visibly groggy, hardly able to prop both eyes open.

"That was...something," I say. The sharpness of my own relief makes my words harsher than I intend.

He takes a deep, shuddering breath. "You wanted me to abandon you both? Or just her?"

"Neither." I roll my eyes. "But if this is what happens..."

He grunts. "Yeah. Usually it's not this bad."

I want to ask what usually happens, only Reven is definitely waking up, because he flexes against his constraints before swinging a bleary-eyed glare my way.

"Release me."

A command. Seriously?

"I'm not sure if I should," I muse. "You kidnapped me. This is my chance to get away, now that I won't have the image of a death worm making a meal of you on my conscience."

I wait for a brooding comeback, but Reven blinks. "We aren't in that clearing?"

"No. We're back in the tree." I wave, because surely, he can see this for himself.

His gaze doesn't stray from me, and his eyebrows slowly raise.

I know what he's asking. "Don't get excited. I'm headed for the nearest temple. You can do what you want after I'm gone."

"You could have left me," he says. The way his voice goes quiet does funny things to my insides. Just like before.

I shove the reaction down deep. "I should have."

“Why didn’t you?”

“No one deserves to die that way.” I look away, done with talking about this.

“What way?”

I don’t look at him and almost don’t answer, but his unmoving form is compelling as always. I sigh. “Without being able to defend yourself.”

A silence descends between us, and I don’t allow myself to so much as glance in his direction, because I don’t want to care what he thinks about that. I shouldn’t care. He’s awake now. I’m sure he’ll be able to get himself out of the bindings holding him to the pallet even if there’s no hint of shadow around him at the moment. I need to get home.

“I never expected to be surprised by you.” The words feather over me.

His expression is almost...impressed is the only word that comes to mind. Impressed and something else. Something more intent. An answering sensation, a glow of pride like I did something worthy of praise, sparks in the center of my chest. A reaction that goes beyond baffling because I shouldn’t give two dried figs about his opinion of me.

I shove to my feet.

“Don’t go.” A plea. An entreaty whispered in that velvet voice of his. That lover’s voice.

But it’s the urgency edging the words that keeps me there. “Why shouldn’t I?”

He takes a deep breath. The first time I’ve ever seen him hesitant. “Come with me to where I was taking you. See what I need you to see, and then decide if you’ll help us or not. I won’t make you stay. I’ll even get you home safely afterward. All you have to do is ask.”

I turn, frowning, to stare into storm-tossed eyes that are fixed on my face, like he’s willing me with a desperation that goes deeper than himself.

Why am I even considering trusting this creature who took me against

my will and dragged me through this hell? One who has faces buried inside him—we still haven't talked about that. One, however, who also risked his life to save me and an unknown girl from the woods and who is trying to do something about his sinking lands.

At the same time, Tabra weighs on me. What if she's already dead? Would I feel it if she was?

I think through my options. If we were supposed to get to Reven's destination today, it's close. "Can you get me home faster that way than taking me to the nearest portal?"

"Yes."

"Okay." The agreement slips from my lips. "I'll stay just long enough to see it."

I can't believe I agreed.

I think I must've shocked Reven, too, because he opens his mouth, then closes it, an undefinable emotion in his expression. "Good," is all he says.

The man was desperate enough to kidnap a queen and all he can come up with is good? "Yeah."

He lifts a single eyebrow. "Now are you going to untie me?"

PART THREE
A PASSED PAWN

19

Fear Isn't Always Rational

I follow Reven down thousands of steep, narrow steps that switch back on themselves so many times I've lost count. The way Wildernyss floats in the sky, it's like the underneath is an upside-down range that dips its peaks into the ocean. Mountains above and mirrored mountains below.

And that's where we are. Below.

On a path carved out of the underside of the rock, this staircase is an ingenious way to climb down undetected.

Not that Reven has said what happens when we get there.

My palms are raw from dragging a hand over the surface of the rock wall to my right with every step, as far from the edge as I can get. Almost every second, the steps look like they go right over the edge, only to curve around into more rock.

Goddess, I hate heights.

I am literally having to force myself to take each next step, because I know if I stop, I'll never get started again. My bones will freeze in place. They'll have to build the tomb around my body when I finally die.

I am still having trouble wrapping my head around the whole Shadowraith thing. Honestly, I've thought of little else, other than getting back to Tabra, all through the night and the trek here. His being the Shadowraith makes such complete sense, given his ability to manipulate the dark, that I'm still pissed at myself for not realizing sooner. Not that he's confirmed or denied any of it.

I asked. He ignored. I guess saving his life doesn't give me the right to answers.

A step ahead of me, he pauses, and I almost smack into him. Mostly because I was keeping my gaze glued to my feet and slightly canted toward

the wall to avoid looking down at what would be a long plummet to my death.

“Stop here.” He’s back to growling commands at me.

What crawled up his backside this morning? I’m the one facing down a crippling phobia here. “The word ‘please’ would go a long way,” I mutter as I do what he says.

The way his shoulders brace, I swear he flinches at the words. But can he blame me?

Rather than respond, he points. “Watch out for this loose rock.”

He continues down the path, and I plod along behind him, now feeling like a total wretch because I snapped at him for looking out for me. Hard to tell with Reven. Emotions are clearly not his strong suit. Not mine, either, for that matter.

As Reven gets farther away, I force myself to move again, gaze right back on my feet and where I’m placing them. My muscles will be sore after this, not just from the strenuous journey but from the tension turning every fiber of my body into a mass of frayed knots under my skin.

Turns out, I’m not as brave as I want to believe.

“We’ve reached the bottom,” he calls back.

I won’t be happy about that until I am leagues away from any ledges and drop-offs. I risk a glance outward with a frown only to swing my gaze abruptly back to my feet. But he can’t mean the bottom. The ocean is still a good hundred feet below us.

Ahead of me, Reven disappears around a bend, then reappears, offering me a hand, and I hesitate only briefly before taking it. Touching him feels... different now. Sleeping against him in the hollow tree was definitely different. Almost like... I don’t know.

And I don’t want to know.

He leads me to a wide, flat platform-looking space that is overshadowed

by what is essentially the base of the mountain that juts out above our heads.

Fear recedes a tiny bit with more ledge between me and falling, and I take in the platform in more detail. Like the stairs, it's *connected* to the mountain, carved from it, the floor of what looks like a cavern jutting out, only sort of curved above and below, with sharply pointed boulders along the edges of both the bottom and the top.

Almost like we're in the mouth of a—

"Not possible," I breathe.

Reven turns and catches my slack-jawed stare and maybe even almost smiles at my awe. "A dragon, we think," he says. "The rising dominion revealed it about ten years ago. Calcified into the rockface."

I am standing in the mouth of a *dragon*. A creature who hasn't been seen since before even Eidolon's birth. I feel like I should sense some sort of magical field around it, but it's just petrified bones.

"This way," Reven says. Like dragon bones are no big deal.

Ten seconds later, horror doesn't even begin to cover the pit roiling at the center of my stomach as I stare at a narrow contraption he walks over to, so small I hadn't noticed it at first.

"What is *that*?" I ask, moving no closer.

"A bridge."

"Sell me something else. I'm not buying."

From what I can tell from my relatively safe distance away, the pathetic excuse for a crossing sort of stretches diagonally between the underbelly of Wildernyss to the ice shores of Tyndra diagonally below and across the way, the ocean directly below us. It is hardly more than a simple, cobbled-together ladder that drops away from the dragon's maw, tied to some of its teeth. It spans the channel that separates the two dominions. *The iceberg-laden channel*, I mentally correct. At least I assume that's what the massive

white icy-looking things in the water are.

Omnia's amulet, still strapped around my neck under my clothes, pulses with what I swear is dread. Sharp and blazing. Mine or its, I can't tell, but its energy twangs at an answering apprehension inside me, sending my barely leashed fear to a whole new level.

When I say I'm frozen with fear, I mean it. Otherwise that call from the amulet would have caught more of my attention. But I can only deal with one thing at a time.

"Nope." I shake my head. Hard. And slowly back up. "Uh-uh. Not happening. No way are you getting me on that...that *thing*."

I slip out of my authoritative pattern of speech completely, not that I've been all that stellar at keeping it up. He doesn't call me on it.

"It's perfectly safe."

"And my grandmother was the personification of kindness and love."

Reven actually makes a sound that could be a laugh, but then quickly swallows it as he takes in my expression. Part of me expects his usual brand of "do it or else" to hit me any second. When he remains quiet, I glance up to find him watching me with a speculative gleam in his eyes that I don't like.

"What?" I demand.

"Are you...frightened?" The disbelief in his voice deserves a good stomp on his toes.

"Only the incredibly naive wouldn't be afraid of *that*." I point with a fling of my hand.

It's a pathetic excuse for a bridge. What brilliant soul thought to name this a bridge, anyway?

Was that a twitch of his lips?

"I'm not joking," I snarl.

Hells, I'm starting to *sound* like him.

He wipes the hint of his amusement away. "I can see that."

"I'm *not* going." I march back to the not-much-better-but-at-least-solid-rock staircase. From down here, I can't see the jagged peaks of the right-side-up mountains. All I see are the shards of the upside-down mountains overhead. I can make myself go up those stairs.

So long as I don't look down at the iceberg-infested ocean below, I'll be fine.

A total lie to myself, but I take a step anyway.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." Reven's hand grasps my arm and tugs me back around to face him.

Up close and with the shaded sunlight kicking the color of his eyes up a notch to brilliant turquoise, I actually listen. Hells, he didn't need to steal Tabra. All he needed to do was look at her like that and ask nicely.

I beat back the thought with a scowl.

His eyes widen slightly. "You really are scared."

I am nimble and strong and healthy. The likelihood of my falling off is slim. But tell that to my imagination, which has already pitched me to my death at least fifty times while we've been standing here.

Reven tightens his grip and steps between me and the bridge and the damnable drop, gaze steady. "Is it the heights or the monsters in the water?"

When I don't answer, he gives me a squeeze. Like he actually cares. "Which one?"

"Heights, okay?"

Weakness is weakness, but honestly, I wished the threat of Devourers was making me like this. I'd rather be scared of real monsters than something my logical brain tells me is mostly in my head. I barely managed to make myself climb out of my own second-story window hiding from the Hag. This is a thousand times worse.

"You handled the stairs without a problem," Reven points out.

“You think so?”

I am starting to squeak, so I pin my lips shut with determination. He straightens, probably realizing that the shaking threatening to rattle the teeth loose from my skull isn't only from the idea of climbing down that death trap, but a reaction to the hours—yes, *hours*—of exposure to this entire situation. My nerves in that time have gone from rolling to stretched so taut I might split apart, frayed edges and all.

“Look at me.” His words are slow and even.

I swallow again, barely hearing. If I am going to die, it sure isn't going to be this way.

“Look at me,” Reven says again. He slides his hands up under the heavy fall of my hair, and the heat of him, the warmth of that unexpected touch, manages to snag my attention. I drag my gaze to his, hitting a wall of understanding.

Which is completely unexpected.

I blink as I absorb his expression, some of my panic slipping away in the face of it.

His mouth crooks slightly. “Knew you'd be trouble.”

“Not helpful.”

Except Reven is close, like he's trying to take up all of my focus, which seems to be working. “I know you don't trust me,” he says.

A single bark of laughter pops from my mouth before I can swallow it back down.

He ignores that. “But you know that *I* need you alive.”

A tiny part of me latches onto those words. After a second... “Uh-huh.”

“So, if I promise that I'll get you across safely, you can believe me.”

I take a sharp breath, then another deeper one. “Please don't make me do this.” The words come out as a whisper full of humiliation.

For a wishful second, I think his blue eyes soften, warm. But from the

way his thick brows immediately drop into a slashing scowl across his face, I guess I was wrong.

“What if I make it so that you can’t see the drop?”

If I can’t see the fall, would it be as bad? Logically I’ll still know it’s there, but if I don’t have to see it... “Maybe.”

He must’ve taken that as a yes. “I can do that.”

Shadows, thick and impenetrable, rise up and spread out underneath the bamboo structure like a dense black fog, settling a foot or two below like a net, obscuring the view of the drop and the waters and icebergs.

That band of tightness eases a fraction more.

A grunt escapes Reven’s throat, and I look at him more closely. Is he a little paler? “Manipulating the shadows is what knocked you out, isn’t it?”

Reven’s lips flatten. “You just worry about getting over the bridge.”

He goes first but only moves a few rungs down before he waves to me. Like a child, I sit and scoot to the edge, analyzing the best way to attempt this. The ladder doesn’t hang straight down or stretch straight out like a bridge. It’s angled, so I’m going to have to clamber across and down at an angle as well.

The ladder rung holds under my feet, although how the thick ties made of vines binding the thing together hold—

Don’t think about it.

Even so, I test it with a few bounces. Sturdy. I guess that’s something.

“I’ll be right here,” Reven assures me.

I look into his eyes—eyes that match the centers of the icebergs below me, I realize incomprehensibly at that moment—and, again, my breathing eases. The shaking, too. Like he is willing them away.

Just go.

Words that should be my motto. I manage to turn around carefully and take a step down. The midnight clouds below me actually look soft. Not

welcoming, exactly, but safer than—

“Oh, goddess,” I mumble.

Strong arms come around either side of me as he climbs back up, settling his chest against my back. “Don’t think about it,” he murmurs, his lips at my ear and his voice wrapping around me. “I’m right here. I won’t leave you.”

The man has no fear. None that I can detect, anyway. Except that moment in the clearing when the soldiers had me. The image pops into my head, but I shake it off, needing to focus. Having him on my side is... Goddess forgive me, I was about to think the word *nice*.

“When I step, you step,” he says. “Focus on your feet.”

“Don’t let me fall,” I whisper. A plea that comes from some place down deep and frailer than I like to admit.

“Never.”

I believe him.

He steps, and I do, too. Caged in between Reven and the ladder, which thankfully doesn’t wobble even a tiny bit, I relax a teensy bit more. Not by much, but progress. Maybe enough to get me to the bottom.

“Again,” his breath whispers across my neck, sending a different tension coiling through me. I grit my teeth against it. Together we move, almost in unison, his presence steady behind me. “Keep going.”

Slowly, carefully, we set up a rhythm as we make our way down the precarious ladder balanced between two dominions. A dance. And Reven’s shadow moves with us.

“Is it you?”

I pause. Not with fear but confusion. That wasn’t Reven’s voice. But I heard the words, clear as day, almost like they echoed in the cavern of my own mind.

“Did you hear that?” I whisper.

“Keep going,” Reven says.

So that’s a no. Now I’m hearing things.

“*Ssssspeak to me,*” the voice gurgles in my head, and my stomach turns sour. The amulet held against my skin by my clothing pulses again. Once. Hot and sharp.

That can’t all be in my head.

“One more,” Reven urges behind me, his arms tightening on either side of me like a protective barrier.

He takes a step, and I go to do the same only to stop dead at the sight of a tentacle sliding off the rung two more below where he stands. Bluish-purple in color, almost iridescent in the daylight, darker on one side than the other. The suckers on the bottom are white and appear to move independently, almost like they’re tasting the ladder as the tentacle slides back into the cloud of shadow.

“Come on, princess,” Reven encourages. “You can do it.”

Fear thunders in my ears. “Don’t. Move.”

20

The Hollow

Reven gathers in closer to me. “It’s okay. I have—”

“Purple...tentacle.” I barely get the words out, lips and jaw locked and voice raw with agonizing terror.

Without turning around, I can’t see him, but I can tell that Reven holds at my words, the muscles in his arms at either side of me rippling, his grip turning into fists. Even his breathing stops. He doesn’t ask if I’m sure or if what I might have seen is a manifestation of my own fear. Instead, he leans closer to whisper, “Where?”

I force my mouth to move. “Two rungs below your feet.”

He swears.

But that one word confirms I’m right about what this is. The Hollow.

The Devourer that legends say is a massive octopus-like creature that crushes its prey with its many arms, then sucks the juices from their bodies with a hideous beak until they are hollow shells of bones and skin.

That is what lurks below us. Within reach.

What is it doing this far from home? The Hollow is supposed to wander the seas to the west between Aryd and Savanah, on the other side of Wildernyss.

“Faster,” Reven says.

A new terror overrides the whole plunging-to-my-death idea. I was wrong about that being the worse thing. Being pulverized by those tentacles, then sucked dry of all my bodily fluids is off-the-scales petrifying.

As fast as we can, we quietly make our way carefully down the ladder. But we’re still only halfway there, and suddenly it feels like miles. Reven’s shadow moves with us, hiding us from view of the creature lurking below.

“*Where are you?*” That slurping, sucking voice pulls at my

consciousness. “*I can feel you.*” The amulet gives another sharp throb. Only it doesn’t seem to be answering—more like screaming.

That can’t be good.

“Duck.” Reven’s muttered order is abrupt, but I act instantly, jerking my head down with a gasp as a shadow, different from that below us, passes overhead. Behind me, Reven wrenches back, the motion violent enough to jiggle the ladder, and I hold on so hard I worry I might break the strong bamboo just with my grip.

Then a pause, and I hold my breath, not daring to look.

“Move!” he orders.

I scramble downward, trying not to look around. Faster. Faster. Have to go faster.

Reven’s curse reaches me right before I’m yanked off the ladder and into the air by a hand of shadow.

“*I feel you.*”

A tentacle tip wraps around where I’d been. With a terrifying series of cracks, it tests the strength of the ladder. A miracle it doesn’t break in half right then.

From my vantage point dangling in the air, I watch helplessly as Reven suddenly disappears and reappears, like becoming shadow himself, but in a stuttering motion like he’s running out of power. The tentacle passes through where his body was but, as he solidifies, returns for him again. As if the monster below knows it’s being tricked.

Reven swings around the underside of the ladder and hangs there by his hands, muscles straining, for a breathtaking minute. Then he looks straight up at me, and his expression hits me like a punch to the gut.

He’s afraid. For *me*.

The air *whooshes* from my body. That hand of shadow moves again and deposits me well below him on the rungs with surprising gentleness. I am

almost to the end. I can see it now through shadow that is fast dissipating.

“Go,” Reven mouths.

I shake my head. I can’t leave him.

A tentacle reaches out between us, snarling up and toward him, cutting off his way down.

“Please.” The word punches from him.

I don’t need him to ask again. I go.

As fast as my shaking limbs will let me move, I’m scrambling my way to the ground. Even so, I don’t look down but keep my gaze trained on Reven. Instead of coming with me, he goes back up from the underneath, like a monkey the King of Tropikis once gave Grandmother as a birthday gift, swinging from limb to limb of the trees in the courtyard.

Twice Reven has to twist or float away from not one but three tentacles now feeling their way along the shabby crossing, as if the Hollow can sense the vibration of Reven’s movement, like a spider in a web.

My feet hit snow and ice before I realize I’ve made it that far. Then I take off running, slipping and sliding over the barren ice-covered field, headed inland. While they live in the water, Devourers are known to come onto land after their prey. The Hollow more than most.

The dominion of Savanah is protected on three sides by massive rocks their goddess—a kind goddess, the patroness of fertility and animals who blessed her people with honesty—had placed there before she disappeared, just like my dominion’s walls. But for the long, unprotected fourth side that faces the channel between them and the other dominions they border, including Aryd, the people have had to build wooden walls which they maintain and patrol vigorously. Because of this creature.

Finally, my feet hit more solid ground far enough away that I stop running. I pitch forward, hands on my knees, sucking in air, even as I turn to search for Reven following.

But there is no sign of him.

I have to go back. No idea why, but the need is a compulsion. I won't just leave him—

I take a single, hopping step back toward the water before a crack—cannonball loud this time—splits the air, and the ladder breaks. The half on the Tyndra side tumbles into the ocean with a resounding splash, sending spray high, parts of it splintering as it hits icebergs.

The waters boil up around where the ladder falls, and suddenly all eight tentacles of the monster in the ocean consume the remnants, pulling it underneath the surface and disappearing from view.

I stare in horror, only able to hear the labored sounds of my own breathing, which hitches.

Mother goddess...Reven.

21

An Exercise in Trust

I dive toward the snow-covered beach with the half-formed idea of using the sand at the bottom of the channel to drag Reven's pulverized body from the very mouth of the Hollow, but a strong hand snags me by the waist and spins me around.

Reven.

Relief threatens to take my legs out from under me.

"Where do you think you're going?" he demands. He's as pale as the salt flats in Aryd, his shirt soaked in sweat or ocean water or maybe both, chest heaving as he sucks air in sharp bursts.

"To go rescue your bloody ass from a Devourer." I fling a hand in that direction.

He chokes. "I'm fairly certain princesses don't say 'ass.'"

"How would you know? And how did you get away—?" I search his body for any sign of injury.

His lips crook. "Were you worried about me, princess?"

My mouth slams shut. I should have left him in the water to be sucked dry. "You must think I'm a total bitch to want anyone to die that way."

His humor dies slowly. "You have no clue what I think about you."

And I have no clue how to respond to *that*. I glare back at him, both of us breathing hard. The man is visibly ready to drop.

"I was worried that the only person who could get me home just drowned and I had no other way to get back, okay?" A lie, but I fling an arm at where the ladder used to be anyway.

Not that I'm ever, *ever* planning to touch that thing again. I bet if I look hard enough, I can see the other half dangling from the underside of Wildernyss across the channel. The only way home now is through the one glass portal in Tyndra.

I'll figure that out later. Tomorrow, hopefully.

"We're almost there," he says.

"About time," I mutter. "I need a shower, and new clothes, and food, and a proper bed, and—"

Stop talking. I'm starting to sound like my domineering grandmother.

I cut myself off with a snap of my teeth, knowing full well that the residual emotion of what we just went through is what's spewing these words from my mouth. And that realization makes me frown. Did Grandmother lash out because she was afraid? I mentally laugh off the idea. No way was that woman afraid of anything except Eidolon. Even then, there's probably a reason the king never came for her.

Luckily, Reven seems to shake himself out of whatever his thoughts were, and his hands leave my waist, cold seeping into my skin in their place. "From here until I say, you'll need to be blindfolded."

"What? That's not—"

Immediately, the shadows steal my sight, plunging me into a darkness so intense, I'm staring into nothing. A void of forever. Not a whisper of brightness anywhere.

Needing to balance, I reach for him, my hands connecting with his solid chest. The immediate steadying of my world only irritates me more, and I shoot a hard look in what I think is the general direction of his face. "If you need my help, you're going to have to start trusting me eventually," I point out.

Firm hands wrap around my wrists, pulling my touch away. "Everyone who comes where I'm taking you is blindfolded until we get there. There is only one path, and it's hidden. That way no one can find their way back and be tortured into revealing the location to others."

I might hear his deep, perfect voice in the shadows for the rest of my life after this is over.

Honestly, though, so long as a shower, fresh clothes, food, and bed—ooh! And a fire because it's bloody freezing—are involved, at this point, I don't care anymore.

He turns me around, and then a gentle hand lands on the back of my neck—not warm but icy. “This way.”

“Are you going to make it there yourself?” I ask. Quietly now, though, not accusing. I'm pretty sure he's barely staying upright after everything he did back there.

“I'll be fine.”

Stubborn man.

The going takes ages, but we are at least moving. His touch, which gradually warms against my skin, moves me back and forth and urges me forward as needed. The third time I stumble over a root or a rock or something, though, I dig in my heels. “Tell me if I need to step over stuff.”

“Yes, your highness.”

Jackass. “You want me to arrive in one piece, right?”

A deep sigh sounds near my ear, ruffling my hair, and I have to clench my hands to control my shiver so he won't feel it. Then he pushes me forward but with less force.

I focus only on not falling.

I'm not even sure what direction we're headed at this point. We had been on ice fields, but now the ground has changed under my feet. Not snow, though—more solid than that, spongier and also crunchier, and I suspect we're in trees. I listen hard, trying to catch any other hints. Are there others with us, or are those rustles animals in the underbrush?

At some point, the air against my skin changes from the bite of winter to almost balmy. Like I'm standing in a ray of pure sunshine. Are we inside? No, the ground is still uneven beneath my feet, and the sounds around me are those of nature.

Still the journey continues on and on.

“Step up,” he says. That’s new.

I do, and then he says it again, and now we are going up some kind of spiral stairway, because he has to turn me slightly with each step as we go along. Finally, the footing evens out, even though the ground under the leather soles of my boots is hard and slightly uneven. Wood planks, maybe? There’s a creak behind me that sounds just like the front door of my crappy little hovel in Enora.

Then the darkness disintegrates, and I can finally see again. I have to blink in the light until my eyes adjust, then get a decent look at my surroundings and blink again.

This is *not* what I was expecting. At all.

I’m in a house. A freaking *house*.

Not a tent or ragtag camp in the woods. Not an icy castle. Not even a cave in the mountains. A house with a fire crackling happily away in a cozy stone fireplace, turning the air toasty around me. I open my mouth but stop as I take it all in. Reven stands by the door, feet apart, arms crossed. Maybe he’s waiting for me to spout off some complaint or other?

Ignoring him, I take my time looking around.

This is like no house I’ve seen before. Sure, there’s a feather mattress on the floor and clothing laid across it. There’s also a chair in the corner, even a basic rack with more hanging clothes in various muted colors—browns and greens and blues—set against one wall. What makes it unusual is the view. I can’t quite figure it out. There is a large, glassless window to my right covered with a white-furred animal skin, which is currently pulled back to show the outside. Are we floating high up in massive trees?

No, not floating. I can see that by the way my own room is constructed. The wall to my right isn’t wood planks but the huge trunk of a tree, curved and covered in rust-red bark. This structure is built into the tree itself. Those

winding stairs must've circled the trunk to get us up here.

I look out the window again at the forest beyond. The trees look similar to the pines in Wildernyss but so much more. Massively bigger. And the smell is different, still piney but sweeter, milder. Refreshing. This is not the land of death and decay I was semi-expecting Reven to take me to. Different from Wildernyss, these trees have leaves. Flat and green. *Green*. In Tyndra—the dominion of ice and snow in the middle of an endless winter, green-leafed trees are thriving.

How is any of this even possible?

But I have my answer in the slightly dimmer lighting here, more than just from the trees. A veil of shadow blankets everything, or maybe it's more like a bubble over everything. The shadows have to be why this place thrives this way. Insulating the forest. *His* shadows. He rules this place.

And I came here willingly. A lamb to the slaughter? Or something else?

22

The Shadowood

Wait.

I turn to Reven. “Are we near the hot springs?”

After a pause that tells me he didn’t expect that, he dips his head.

It makes more sense now. After all, we should be on Little Tyndra, which borders Wildernyss. Tyndra has a portion of land to the north that is separated from the larger land mass by a much thinner channel of seawater. The parts are connected by the twin towers that make up their temple, one on each side and joined together by a sky bridge no Devourer can reach. Though after our run-in with the Hollow, I have my doubts about that.

Little Tyndra is supposed to be uninhabited. Somehow, Reven’s been able to hide their presence. And the ladder, too?

“Can I see the springs? Or the Sacred Tree?” The questions pop out before I can stop myself.

The springs are said to represent the dual nature of the goddess Tyndra—a warm heart surrounded by ice—and that’s where her twin sister, the goddess Savanah, planted her tree. Its leaves are the deep red of autumn, and it is said to weep the sweetest nectar. In the Savanahan grasslands, the goddess Tyndra’s Sacred Tree is made of ice.

I’ve always wanted to see both the springs and the tree. *With Cain*, a small voice reminds me. I let my eagerness get ahead of me, which is why the question popped out before I could rethink it. We have bigger issues to deal with than a tree.

I take it back before he can respond. “Never mind.”

Shadows and hot springs—of course this forest is temperate. Not that it makes it any safer for me, but at least I can cross freezing to death off my list of worries. For now.

“This is where you’ll sleep,” he says after a small hesitation. “You

asked for a shower?”

Demand was closer to how I'd put that, but whatever. I nod, and he leads me out the door. The second I step onto an open balcony situated up in the trees, I jerk to a stop. We're high, but not horribly so—about thirty or forty feet up.

Is he kidding me with this?

Logically, I already knew we're high up from the view outside my window, but my *illogical* fear doesn't have a problem with windows. Balconies and cliffs, on the other hand...ugh. Plus, I'm still recovering from the staircase and ladder traumas. But Reven has already seen that weakness once—he doesn't need to see it again.

“Hells,” he mutters.

Then, before I know what's happening, I find my view taken up with only his broad shoulders as he steps into me. Not touching, though. Has he figured out that's a big deal for me? The scent of him winds around me, and my stomach goes squishy.

“I wasn't thinking.” He's holding himself apart from me, despite being so close.

I guess I didn't hide my reaction as well as I thought. My hands curl into fists, and all I can do is stare back and try to recover my breathing. “Usually it wouldn't be this big of a deal,” I allow. “But I just... We just...”

He nods, an understanding in his expression that I'm not expecting. Who is this man who changes from kidnapper to concerned protector in a blink?

“There are no places to sleep on the ground,” he tells me. “It's for safety. Just in case.”

In case what?

For half a second, I almost wish he would touch me. Like he did when he convinced me to go down the ladder. His hands in my hair were

soothing. The way he's looking at me, I wonder if he senses it, too. That things have...changed between us. Even if I don't want them to. I'm not ready for it.

My life is plotted out to the end and doesn't include relationships. There are too many secrets between us. But even if he knew everything, I'd still have to walk away. They're the same reasons I couldn't accept Cain. My sister needs me. My people need me, even though they don't know it.

"Are you going to be okay?" he asks. "Or do I need to make other arrangements?"

"What is this place?" I ask to distract myself.

He shakes his head. "Later."

What does that mean?

Putting himself between me and the handrail, he leads my reluctant body around the curved balcony, down two more doors. He opens the second one. Not so far after all.

Taking up most of a tiny room is a massive container that reminds me of the oak wine barrels sent to the palace from Wildernyss and Savannah. It's filled to the brim with steaming water. From it, a series of pipes protrude from the bottom. Beside it sits a bucket and, thank the heavens, soap and a sponge.

He points at the various items. "For scrubbing, for rinsing off. Pull the plug in the bottom when you're finished, and the water will drain from under the barrel."

A bath. In the trees, granted, but what does that matter? I am looking at bliss in a wine cask.

"Dry off with that." He points to a towel made of some rough material. It could be a boar's coat for all I care. I get to scrub off multiple days of sweat, dirt, and fear.

"Once you're dressed, knock on the door between this one and yours.

That's my room. I'll take you down to introduce you."

My brain isn't sure which piece of information to glom onto first. The fact that Reven's room is directly next to mine or the fact that I am about to face introductions. "Who am I meeting?"

Reven pauses in the doorway. "You'll see." He pauses again, gaze sliding between me and the tub, and his turquoise eyes are suddenly filled with an unexpectedly wicked light. Men have flirted with me before—both as Meren and as Tabra. Is that what's happening here?

Without a word, he leaves.

I guess not.

After I stare at the closed door for a long second, wrestling with why I'd even think that, let alone want it, I turn to the room and dive in. I take my time, scrubbing every inch of my body, dirtier than I ever was coming out of the desert, which had always felt clean to me. Dried off and back inside my room, I snatch up the fresh clothes already laid out. They are in the style of the Marianans, made for warmer, more balmy weather rather than the thicker wools and furs Tyndrans wear. Not the opulent, restrictive garments of an authority, but simply stitched, sturdy materials, easy to move in.

Hoping I am getting the layers right, I put on supple leather leggings and a simple linen tunic. Belted at the waist, it is cut above the knee, the length more typical of serfs and workers for practicality. Fine by me. I need practical.

Over that, I've been provided a peplos in a shade of forest-green clasped at the shoulder by broaches shaped like delicate leaves but only painted to look bronze rather than the real thing. Finally, I drape a long, rectangular-shaped mantle in an even deeper green over one shoulder. Most ladies of court in Tyndra wear this more as a shawl or a veil, but instead I tuck it into the broach at that shoulder and into the belt at my breasts so that it won't get in the way. I don't care about my hair, so I decide to braid the still-wet,

heavy tresses around the crown of my head.

I put my signet ring back on my pinkie and slip Omma's amulet around my neck, tucking it safely under the layers of clothes to lay against my skin. The glass gives a thrum like it's greeting an old friend. For the first time since the ladder, I have enough time to think about it. Is my amulet speaking to me? If it's not in my head, it's real. Is Tabra's amulet from the king doing the same thing? They're too much alike not to wonder.

I'm not going to find answers just sitting here.

My hands are trying to shake. Closing them tight, I gather courage and leave my room to knock at Reven's door. Almost immediately, he swings it open, and I blink to find him also bathed, his hair slicked back, the slight curl to the raven-colored locks already springing loose. As seems to be his preferred color, he wears all black, which only serves to make his turquoise eyes brighter by contrast.

"Ready?" he asks.

"I have no idea." I mean the words to come out haughty, not confused. Maybe the bath softened me up.

His lips, usually a harsh slash in his face, quirk, and I realize what is most different about him now. He suddenly gives the impression of being more relaxed. Our entire journey here, I could've bounced off the tautness of his shoulders like a gum tree. I'd even worried for his poor teeth several times, his jaw had been clenched so tightly.

But here he already seems...looser. Easier. Stronger.

I glance at the shadows that seem to almost cocoon this land, so constant I've already started forgetting they are there. Does he feed off them?

"Follow me," he says, oblivious of my thoughts.

He leads me down the curving staircase, careful to keep his body between me and the handrail and the drop beyond. Once we reach the forest

floor, I can see more buildings—an entire village of wooden-sided and thatch-roofed homes built high up in other trees throughout. Several buildings are connected by swinging bridges of rope. In trees standing closer together, the structures meld around them.

More rudimentary buildings, walled in on three sides but open to the front, are lined up around the bases of the trees, facing one another, forming what looks to be a sort of market. I recognize a forger's anvil, the distinct odors of a tanner, and a seamstress's goods.

What is this place?

I glance up to find Reven waiting, his seaside eyes giving away nothing.

“This way.” His hand to my elbow is almost gentlemanly as he leads me through the oddly silent, seemingly deserted village to a path that wanders away from the buildings and deeper into the mighty forest.

The trees are red barked like the one in my room, their trunks as thick as my hovel, reaching into the skies like mighty watchmen. They have to be hundreds if not thousands of years old. The shadows hold more sway out here, and I almost expect a chill, but the air on my skin is nice.

On this journey, we've walked in angry silence and suspicious silence and even exhausted silence. But this silence is new, and I can't put my finger on how. *Companionable* is the best way I can think of to describe it.

Then we turn a bend, a clearing opens up before us, and my feet stutter to a halt. Because a throng of people is gathered there. Waiting for us.

No... Waiting for *me*.

I catch sight of a petite girl with skin I think might be blue, but maybe my eyes are deceiving me, standing on the edge of the group, not quite with the others. She smiles, and I smile back, but then she walks away, disappearing through the trees. It happens so fast, I'm not sure it was real.

Hand at my back now, Reven urges me forward toward those still waiting, watching, until I stand before them. “Princess Tabra Eutheria I of

Aryd, may I present the people of the Shadowwood.”

I swallow. Hard.

All my training as a pretend princess fails me completely. What am I supposed to do in this moment? What am I supposed to say? Not even the part of me that might call on my grandmother’s conceit and regal presence knows. I cast my gaze over the faces before me—faces of all races, all dominions, all creeds and kinds—and my empty mind kicks back into motion, rusted gears cranking over with a groan.

Facts start to stick out at random.

These people are clean, clothed, and appear well-fed. Their expressions don’t reflect concern or fear, although they aren’t necessarily happy. Reven moves us forward with a persistent hand at my back, and, despite a well-cared-for aura, they also back away from us slightly, and I don’t know if it’s him or me who is making them anxious.

So tempting to tell them that I am the furthest thing from a threat. I am nothing.

“I don’t understand.” I turn wide eyes to Reven. “Are these your… prisoners?”

A quiet twittering rises up from the people closest to us who overhear, but Reven’s reaction holds me captive. He flinched when I said prisoners, his jaw tightening, and an odd, inexplicable guilt pinches around my heart.

“The Shadowwood isn’t a prison, princess,” he says. “It’s a sanctuary.”

He steps back, out of the way, and immediately I’m surrounded by people. Crowding in on me. Touching. Nothing too invasive, my shoulder or my hand, but coming from Aryd, I feel it all.

My shock doesn’t exactly wear off, but through it, impressions start to sink in. Like hearing words through water. These people are welcoming me. They’re warm and smiling and open. Yes, there are some who remain at the back, still wary or maybe even suspicious. But mostly, the residents of the

Shadowwood seem happy to add me to their ranks.

I catch Reven's gaze across the sea of people surrounding me.

A small child tugs on my mantle, pulling my gaze to her, and I squat down with a smile. "Hello," I say to her.

Rather than speak, she holds out a tiny ring made of woven blades of grass. My heart melts as I accept it and slip it onto my pinkie next to my signet ring. "It's beautiful," I say. "Thank you."

On a shy smile, she runs off to join a large group of children nearby. They grin and giggle, talking rapidly to her and glancing at me. There are children here. Cared for and safe and happy.

How is this place real?

A sanctuary, Reven said.

The man who stole me—the Shadowraith—is giving refuge to people who have no other place to go.

23

Vanished are Found

I stare at the ceiling above my bed despite exhaustion weighing my entire body down. I'm overwhelmed, honestly, and both tired and buzzing with it. Flickering amber light from the torches scattered throughout the village sends softly shimmering waves through my window, dancing across the wood beams. I should let the animal skin down, but after so many days in the open mountains, I find it too stuffy to sleep that way.

Not that I'm sleeping.

Only one moon tonight, in combination with Reven's shadows, makes for a deeper darkness than I've ever experienced. And yet I find it peaceful.

Reven explained, in more words than I'd heard strung together from the man since we met, about the people here. People who had nothing, no hope, no way out. They'd come to this place he'd made and found refuge, purpose, and homes.

Instead of explaining how this place, this Shadowwood, is possible, he said, "I have business that has waited too long. Stay here and talk with the people. Tomorrow, you will meet their leaders."

Then he left me there in that clearing, my world turned upside down *again*, and walked off into the forest between the trees.

I should probably be concerned that my immediate gut reaction was to run after the man who only days ago I wanted to get away from and drag him back.

But he left me there to fend for myself. Alone.

I spent several hours, meeting many of the people. Gathering snippets of their stories. All leading me to the same conclusion—Reven gave them a second chance at life.

The Vanished aren't lost or stolen at all. They are found. By him. The Shadowraith.

He still hasn't admitted that part.

Another piece of the puzzle that is Reven and why he took me clicks into place. This close to Eidolon's home, endless winter pressing in, not to mention the sinking dominion, and all with more mouths to feed practically every day, if the numbers I witnessed are any guide... No wonder he'd grown desperate.

It doesn't excuse kidnapping me, but I get it.

I didn't have a chance to talk to everyone, of course. At some point, a kind-souled woman recommended I go rest in my rooms, and I gratefully jumped on that offer. Except I haven't been able to make myself sleep. I lay here, my mind bending and contorting everything I've learned since being taken. Food was sent up on trays, and I ate, but otherwise I've been a wide-awake lump on my bed, frustrated that my mind won't shut off.

Reven, meanwhile, didn't reappear the rest of the night. Instead of resting, I could have easily walked myself right out of the forest and taken myself home, and I'm pretty sure he would have let me go. But he still hasn't explained why he needs me.

Tabra. He needs Tabra, not me. I keep forgetting that.

With a huff, I fling off the thin sheet twisted around my legs thanks to several hours of thrashing wakefulness.

This can't wait.

I throw open my door and march to Reven's, where I knock, though lightly, aware of those sleeping all around us in various tree homes.

But no answer comes. Not to my second or third knocks, either.

Is he ignoring me? I know for sure he isn't a deep sleeper—except maybe he's still recovering from the way he had to use his power to escape the Hollow? With a growl of frustration, I hurry back to my own room only to stare at the bed, which doesn't appeal, despite the way my exhausted body is dragging, heavy with the need to rest.

“Sands swallow me whole,” I mutter.

I throw the green wrap around my shoulders. After strapping my leather shoes to my feet, I leave my room and pad carefully down the winding staircase. If I’m awake, I might as well take the opportunity while I’m not being watched to inspect the place.

I walk first through the village itself, then, grabbing a lantern from one of the many hanging from posts, I drag what feels like rock-laden feet down a path that leads away from the village into the forest. A different path than Reven took me on earlier.

I try to be vigilant, a plan in my head in case I’m stopped or I come across something dangerous. Reven told me the houses are built high up in the trees for a reason, which could mean it’s not safe to be on the forest floor at night.

Still, I keep going with a sense that this is where I’m supposed to be.

Despite the dark night of a single moon and the foreignness of the surroundings, I feel at home in these woods. As if the trees are kindred spirits, set to guard me from any harm.

As I near the clearing, a shifting movement up ahead has me stilling.

“You shouldn’t be here,” a voice that’s becoming all I want to hear says.
Reven.

I debate what I should do. Leave is the smart choice, but I need answers.

I hear a sigh. “You’ve come this far. Might as well come all the way. It’s safe enough at the moment, I guess.”

Warm and welcoming are definitely not Reven’s strengths.

“I don’t know if I should. I have strict rules about reckless situations.”

“What? That you run headlong into them?”

I shouldn’t laugh, but he’s not wrong.

I step around the bend and stop at the edge of a clearing with a babbling brook that cuts through the center. Reven is seated in what appears to be a

swirling, contorting throne made of shadow, his hands resting on broad arms, back regally straight, eyes closed.

Is he meditating?

“If I squint, I bet I’ll see a crown of thorns.”

He ignores me, though there might be a ghost of a smile that slips away as quickly as my poor attempt at a joke. Not my best effort, but I’m tired.

His eyes are still closed, so I take my time looking around as I turn almost a full circle to where I entered the clearing. I jolt to a halt, staring, mouth hanging open at the sight of the Sacred Tree of Tyndra. I didn’t expect it to be so close. While not as tall as the massive trees that make up the forest, it’s still glorious, with elegant limbs that reach out from its center and broad, flat leaves of a color I can’t make out. They’re supposed to be red, but in the moonlight, they appear almost black.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

I nod. I can’t peel my eyes from it.

Then frown as it hits me that the tree is *inside* the veil of shadows that hang over the woods. “Don’t people come to this tree?”

“Yes. Rarely, though enough people come here to offer prayers and sacrifices, I couldn’t keep them from it forever. Only when *I* need it do I push my shadows out so that the tree is inside the Shadowood.”

Maybe that’s why the shadows here feel...different. More like how I used to think of them in Enora. Safe. Maybe it’s the goddess’s influence here.

My eyes are adjusting as I turn back to him. Reven’s throne is positioned in the center of what I can see now is a circle of blue stones the color of his eyes. I didn’t notice those earlier. Even with my lamp the best source of light, green-blue fire flickers at me within each coin-sized rock, and I get yet another jolt of surprise.

I should just stop being surprised at anything these days. Reven is full

of them.

“Are those...?” I don’t even dare whisper the word.

“Yes.”

Jedite is a rare mineral only found in Tyndra’s Ynferno Mountain. The stories say that, if eaten, jedite will either grant that person power and turn them into Imperium, or drive them to madness. Of course, those are the same stories that say cannibals and other terrors roam the mines, which have been long abandoned.

Even in the palace, I’ve never seen the stone, and I hear pieces as small as flakes go for a fortune on the black markets in every dominion. Yet here he’s surrounded by them.

A sense of knowing skates over my skin, and I lift my head to find his gaze is on me now, eyes open, a different edge to the intent light in the blazing turquoise than before. But maybe that’s a trick of the lighting, or a reflected purple glow from the brilliance emanating from his palms and wrists. Those scars peep at me from under the cuffs of his long sleeves.

Trying to ignore everything about the man and what he makes me feel, I cross the clearing to stand before him. Out of the night behind me, a smaller version of his seat forms, a chair for me facing him.

“Errr...thanks.” I sit carefully, testing the clouds of black. “This is comfy.” It is, too. Like sitting in the softest sands, except the shadows hold their form.

He doesn’t speak. He’s watching me. Waiting.

I clear my throat, having no idea how to be with him now. The anger that sustained me through Wildernyss is gone, leaving me hollow. And oddly hopeful. “Why are you out here?”

He tips his head, like he’s well aware that wasn’t what I really wanted to ask. “Recharging.”

Looking closer, I can see the physical changes—the lines gone from his

face, shoulders no longer bowed with exhaustion, even his hands, gripping the curving ends of smoke, appear stronger. I glance at the stones, but he gives a single shake of his head. “The shadows.”

Oh. “Makes sense, I guess.” That must be what he was doing the night I saw all those faces. But what are the stones for?

I don’t really know Reven, I realize. And this insistent sense that I do—that we’re somehow connected by the events of the last days—is something I should ignore.

His gaze narrows. “You’re not afraid?”

How could I fear a man who has saved so many? Myself included. Even with the faces I’d witnessed. Even with kidnapping a princess. Even if he acted like a jackass most of the time. I think of the Vanished, and so many more in Enora alone, who could benefit from a place like this. He provided a sanctuary for those who needed it most. I refuse to fear him for that reason.

A breeze sifts through the leaves of the Sacred Tree behind me, as if it’s telling me to trust that instinct.

I shake my head no, and the shadows around him suddenly loom above him, forming into a gaping mouth with razor-sharp teeth, though he doesn’t move. Neither does the shadow monster.

I glance at it, then at him. “Is that supposed to scare me?”

He mutters a word under his breath that I think might be, “Trouble.” Then spears me with eyes gone glitteringly angry. “You’ve seen what’s inside me.”

Maybe I’m so exhausted that I’m not thinking straight—which is entirely possible after the last few days I’ve had—but I get the sense that he wants to frighten me.

“You need me,” I point out. “You’re not going to hurt me.”

The shadows ease back. “At least until I get what I want.”

Another attempt to frighten me? Why?

We both sit in silence.

“Are you going to ask?” he prods.

Do I want to know what the faces were about? Absolutely. But it occurs to me that he protected me from them that night.

“Are you going to answer if I do?”

“Probably not.”

I settle deeper in the shadow chair and raise an eyebrow. “Ignoring my questions seems to be one of your favorite games.”

That surprises a chuckle from him, and I startle. I wasn’t sure the man had the ability to laugh. To give him credit, there haven’t exactly been opportunities. It’s not like I’ve been a barrel of hilarity. But the way the low rumble of humor skims over my nerves, even through my growing haze of fatigue, I’m suddenly curious what his full laugh sounds like.

I pull my legs into my chest. “So what *did* I see that night?”

“Evil.” He tips his head, the move so predatory I should be frozen in my seat, only I’m too tired. And pretty comfortable in my shadow chair, actually. It’s like being out here with him has finally forced the tension inside me to uncoil, allowing the fatigue to flood through me in its wake.

I yawn. I can’t stop myself.

Reven chuckles again.

I watch the play of humor over his face. I...like it.

“You aren’t what I expected, Tabra,” he says.

Other than introducing me to his people, is that the first time he’s used that name? Something twists inside me at the sound of it. I don’t want him calling me that.

I want to hear *my* name, and that scares me to death.

I rest my cheek on my knees. “Princesses rarely are.”

It’s not a lie, after all. By blood right, I am one. By pretend, I’m a

different one. The whole situation is exhausting. I'm so tired of carrying other people's lives and having to bury mine. Tired of the lies and the deceptions and the questions and the fact that there even needs to be a Shadowwood where people can be safe. Tired of everything.

"I stole something," Reven says. "And now I keep it inside me."

That jerks me back to the present. Something evil? The shadows pulse around him.

I shift onto my side and rest my head against what I guess would be the arm of a normal chair. The shadows expand to accommodate me. "You seem to be making thieving a habit. What did you steal?"

"I shouldn't tell you that."

"Why not?"

"Because you won't like what you hear."

Meaning, I won't like *him*?

We lapse into silence. Eventually, he closes his eyes, and after watching him for a bit, my exhaustion weighs heavier.

"You know what I think?" I'm not even sure if I'm speaking the words out loud or in my head now. Especially when he doesn't answer. I close my eyes and keep going anyway. "I think, no matter what you stole, you might be a decent man."

"Damn," he says. At least I think so. His voice is coming from a long way away, like he's on the other side of Aryd's glass walls.

"Maybe I should..." I was going to say that maybe I should stay. Help him. But I'm frowning over that. When did staying become a good idea? Tabra still needs me. More than ever.

"Sleep, princess." His voice is closer now, as though my ear is pressed to his chest, which makes no sense, and warmth is wrapped around me. I sigh and snuggle into it as he says, "We'll talk tomorrow."

The Wrong Family Tree

Morning light pulls me out of a dreamless, deep rest, and I find myself opening my eyes to the ceiling I'd stared at so much last night. I feel like all I've done for weeks now is open my eyes to something new. I frown, taking in the way I'm sprawled across the bed. Usually I sleep in a ball on my side and facing the door. If I can put my back against a wall, even better. But I'm not doing that. I'm laying on my back, arms flung wide, vulnerable...and rested.

And I'm in my room in the Shadowwood.

That can't be right. The last thing I remember was talking with Reven in that clearing. I frown harder. I was sitting on a chair made of...shadows? How did I get back here?

Oh hells, I'm pretty sure I fell asleep. Maybe even in his arms. I squeeze my eyes shut and groan, because it dawns on me that each night of our journey here, I didn't sleep until I knew he was there.

That's a *big* problem.

I yank a pillow on top of my face and groan louder.

"How do you feel?" The familiar voice has me staring with horror into the underside of my pillow.

Setting it carefully aside, I slowly push myself to sitting, pulling my braid over one shoulder before lacing my hands in my lap primly. "You scared me."

Reven lounges in the chair in the corner of my room. Completely rested. Shaved, even. He's dressed already, in what I would describe as the more casual, working clothes of a huntsman, with a long-sleeve shirt, breeches, and leather boots, though still all in black. I guess someone who uses shadow the way he does would blend in better in black. The top of his shirt is unbuttoned and his sleeves rolled back, and he appears completely male

in a way that I find disturbing.

He stares back, utterly serious and unapologetic.

“Sorry,” he offers.

Scratch the unapologetic part. My eyebrows reach for my hairline. “Was that an actual expression of regret?”

“I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Embarrassed is more the case. I stay perfectly still and quiet, the sense of being prey dropping over me. Which should have happened last night, come to think of it. At some point, were there shadow teeth? I blame how tired I was.

“By being in your room,” he explains, frowning a little at my nonresponse, sharp gaze sweeping over me. Missing nothing. “How do you feel?” He repeats his first question when I stay quiet.

I clear my throat. “Confused.” Actually, confused doesn’t begin to cover it. “How did I get here?”

“I carried you back.”

Well, hells. I’ve never liked any whiff of helplessness, one of the few things Omma taught me that stuck. That isn’t something I am ever allowed to be. Not if I want to make it longer than my eighteen years in this life.

I search Reven’s face for any sign that I’d said something I shouldn’t have last night in the clearing. But, as usual, that stony countenance gives nothing away. Actually...wait. There’s a hint of amusement in his expression. Just a twinkle. Is he enjoying this? Jackass.

But that’s gone as quickly as I spotted it when he says, “You shouldn’t seek me out like that. Especially at night.”

If the words weren’t a warning, his tone would be. Pure rancor.

I should probably shiver or something. I don’t, though. “Why?”

“Just promise me you won’t do it again.”

I stare at him. Some promises I just can’t make.

His hands, still on the armrests, curl into fists. “We need to talk.”

Which is not an answer, but maybe he’s going to finally give me one. Not here, though, where I’m still sleep tousled and shaken with the sudden worry that I might have talked in my sleep and blown everything.

He must read my expression, because his lips press together ever so slightly. “Get dressed and meet me outside.”

Like this is going to be any normal day.

I give a sharp, single nod, and he gets to his feet, even such a simple move rippling with his power. At the door, he hesitates, looking back at me, and I think maybe disappointment swirls in his eyes. Only he leaves before I can be sure.

Quickly, I dress and re-braid my hair, which had turned into a straggly mess overnight. Outside, Reven is leaning with his forearms against the balcony, looking out over the Shadowwood, almost content. As much as I’ve ever seen, certainly.

Stop thinking you know this man. These conversations with myself are becoming an unfortunate habit.

Instead of talking, he leads me down the tree’s staircase, once again positioning himself between me and the drop. It catches me off guard. Will I ever get used to these moments of chivalrous behavior from him, given the way we started?

Breakfast, I learn, is served community style at a series of long tables carved from the fallen body of one of the massive trees. The residents of the village all take turns preparing, serving, and cleaning up after meals, Reven informs me. I can also tell, by the plethora of startled glances tossed at Reven—not me, I’m pretty sure—that he doesn’t usually join them.

The meal is simple—thick pancakes of wheat spiced with cinnamon, then lathered in honey and served with dates and fresh milk. It’s so like the food from Aryd that I feel a smidgeon of home, the emotion toasting me

from my core outward.

I turn my head to find Reven watching. But instead of being wary, I can't contain a wide grin. "Was this all for me?"

Turquoise eyes sharpen, turn brighter, more disturbingly focused, as he glances first at my lips, then slowly lifts his gaze to mine. "Maybe."

All thoughts of breakfast flee as I lose myself a little in his eyes. It strikes me that, beyond sarcastic smiles—which were probably more like grimaces—I haven't truly offered him a sincere one since we've met.

And I think maybe...maybe he liked what he just saw.

I gulp. I should be holding onto the fact that the only reason I agreed to come here is so he can get me back to Tabra faster. But without the buffer of my anger... I can't explain it. I don't want to go.

It's like our personalities rub against each other. Before, we were rubbing the wrong way. Now...

My mind is about to tumble down a slippery slope, so I redirect the conversation back to the meal and absolutely mean to give him a demure, Tabra-worthy, "Thank you. This is very kind." Instead, what comes out is, "This doesn't make us even, though."

He leans closer, voice dropping low. "What *would* make us even?"

"If you'd have come to me and discussed your needs like a rational leader. That would have been a start." I pop a piece of pancake in my mouth and chew. I need the distraction.

The villagers around us go still, and some stare. What? Does no one question this man?

He ignores them. "I didn't have time."

"Why not?"

"The king never leaves Tyndra."

Eidolon? Tension steals into my shoulders. What does he have to do with Reven taking me?

“Word reached me that he would be traveling to your dominion for the coronation.” An emotion ripples over his features that I might have thought was rage, but he controls it swiftly.

“Why did that mean you needed to kidnap me?”

He glances at all the curious faces around us, and his shoulders rise and fall in a silent breath. I can practically feel him shouldering the weight of their expectations. Or maybe it’s not just their expectations. The way they act around him reminds me of how lower servants or even authorities new to the palace acted around Grandmother. Fascinated and uncomfortable and eager to please at the same time.

It strikes me that he doesn’t fit in here. With the Vanished. Despite saving them and dressing like many of them and us eating with them. He’s still...apart.

By his own doing? I wouldn’t be surprised.

“Are you done?” he asks with a nod at my food.

I glance down at my plate and blink. When had I eaten the entire thing?
“Err, I guess so.”

“Come with me.”

We make our way through the village to one of the tallest, thickest trees, where a building circles its entire girth—at least a hundred feet in the air. It’s the largest structure in any of the trees, as far as I can tell.

When it’s clear that’s where we’re headed, I stifle a groan. But once again, Reven walks beside me, putting himself between me and my fear. Instead of being embarrassed, I almost smile. I still also definitely breathe a sigh of relief when we make it to the landing at the top.

Reven knocks at a door, and a woman steps out.

Perhaps in her sixties, maybe older, her creamy skin is lined but in such a way it’s difficult to tell her age. Chin-length silver hair is more responsible for the impression of age. That and a sort of old-soul kind of

wisdom around her dark gray eyes.

“This is Bina,” Reven says.

I murmur a greeting. Rather than bow or scrape or curtsy, she simply nods an acknowledgment, then, with a curious glance at Reven, goes the other way around the outside of the building, leaving us alone.

Before I can ask more about her, Reven ushers me inside the room she came out of. The first thing that hits me is the musty odor of books. The second thing is excitement. My fingers itch to reach out and touch, pick them up, inhale the scent of the pages. Books are rare and precious.

The process to make books is considered long and tedious and expensive. They don’t hold up over time, not like carvings in stone, and they’re highly flammable. In Aryd, all books are kept in the Great Library, along with scrolls and parchment and a few other forms of written record.

Great is an honorary title, by the way. There isn’t much there.

At least Omma had been required to teach me to read. As a peasant, I didn’t need the skill. As a princess and soon a queen, even as a mere stand-in, I’d look foolish if I couldn’t.

Reven lights a single candle, and I find myself staring at stacks and stacks of books. Even more than I thought at first. Too many to count.

Oh. My. Goddess.

I think I must be in the Allusian heavens because this is amazing. What would he do if I grabbed the nearest book, plunked myself down, and just got lost in the words? Maybe I can find some answers to all the questions my family has had for so long.

“Where did you get these?” I ask, hardly daring to breathe on them. They look like they’d disintegrate at a puff of strong wind.

“I’m collecting the history of...my ancestor.”

“Who?”

When Reven’s chiseled face shifts to a severe somberness that reminds

me of petrified wood, I know I'm not going to like what's coming next.

"Eidolon," he says, letting the name fall between us.

I choke. He may as well have aimed a cannon at me and fired.

His ancestor is *Eidolon*?

Damnation.

25

Immortality

Reven takes a step toward me but stops when I shake my head.

“I’m not going to faint or anything,” I insist through stiff lips.

He crosses his arms, his clothing doing nothing to hide the ripple of muscles underneath as he seems to hold himself in place. “Are you sure? You lost every scrap of color.”

“Just...give me a second.”

He doesn’t agree, but he doesn’t move, either.

I suck in a breath. Well, this explains his resemblance to the profile on the Tyndran coins.

I must be in shock, because what I should actually be thinking—not for the first time with this man—is *run away*. From anything and everything Eidolon related, which apparently now includes Reven. If he’s related to the king, he’s even more of a danger to me than I thought.

But Reven grimaced when he said the king’s name. That has to mean something, right?

I try to latch onto logic. “As far as I know, the king has never married, so no heartmate, or even a mistress, or any children.”

“That is true. He can’t have children.”

I look closer at him. He’s strung so tight I could shoot an arrow from him. “Okay. Then *how* are you related, exactly?”

His hands curl into fists. “Bear with me. It hurts to speak of him.”

Hurts? There was pain in his voice when he said Eidolon’s name. I consider that for a long beat. “Does this have anything to do with what you stole from him?”

Slashing eyebrows shoot up. “You remember that? I wasn’t sure. You were—”

“A mess,” I interject. I’m still not happy with myself about falling

asleep with him that way. I was unguarded and probably babbling. He had to carry me to bed, for goddess's sake. "Does it?"

"Yes." He pauses, visible hatred seeping into his expression. "Keeping you away from him is important." He looks away. "Even more than I realized."

What does that mean? And is that who he couldn't let have me...err... Tabra the night he took me? If keeping the queen away from Eidolon is his goal—

Could he be an ally? He *kidnapped* me. An ally doesn't go around stealing people. At least, not a good one. "Why do you hate him?"

The shadows in the corners of the room flicker, and I find myself backing up a step.

He sees, but his face is a mask now, showing me nothing. "Because I know who he is and what he's done."

He knows.

My breath leaves my body in a hiss. Hope is a funny thing that way. You beat it back over and over, and still it rises up. A word whispers through me.

Ally.

We queens of Aryd have long believed that we're the only ones to truly know the full extent of Eidolon's evil. After all, when he's killed a queen, we immediately put her twin on the throne in her place. We don't know why he doesn't come for the twin, but our system is working. Maybe Omma and Grandmother were right when they would answer my questions about this with, "Does it matter why? It just is." After all, our line is still on the throne, and no one else has any clue that he's attacked us so often, which would make us look weak. Plus, his dominion continues to prosper, only growing his power, so why would anyone believe us or want to listen if we spoke up?

Zealots see what they want to see. People just trying to live their lives don't want to acknowledge a problem exists unless it affects them personally. And leaders, once they gain power, don't want to risk losing it again.

Or maybe it's not our system that's working, but Eidolon's? What if he's keeping our line on the throne for a reason?

But if Reven—a powerful Imperium with the means to steal from the king and kidnap a queen—knows about the king...

What exactly *does* he know?

I cross my arms. "I think you need to tell me everything."

"I'm trying."

"Try harder."

His grimace is both pained and frustrated. Grabbing a wooden chair, it scrapes across the floor as he drags it closer, then sits, elbows on his knees, focused entirely on me. "Eidolon," he says again, firmer, "is the Shadowraith."

Wait. This makes no sense. "But the winter taking over—"

"Isn't his doing."

Then where is it coming from? "I thought *you* were the Shadowraith." I'm pretty sure I've seen indisputable proof. Lots of it.

"I am. *Because* of him. It came from him."

He pauses, casting me an uneasy look, and I realize I've stepped back again. Away from him. I force myself to stay in one place, my mind a jumble. "How?"

Another grating pause. "The king can shed his shadows."

I'm staring. I know I am. But what's coming out of his mouth makes no sense. "Shed his what?"

"Shadows. Everyone has them. They're always there, but only visible when light casts one into existence, so most people pay them no attention."

I glance at the floor where, as expected, my shadow pools around my feet even in the dimly lit room.

He follows my gaze. “What you see is different than the darkness you’ve seen me manipulate—that shadow is part of you. Part of your soul. You have many shadows within you, as do I. As did the king.”

I have no clue where he’s going with this.

“The king’s power not only allows him to command the darkness—it allows him to disconnect his own shadows from his body, to shed them as one entity. One ‘Shadow.’”

Reven watches me as if waiting for me to ask questions. When I don’t, he continues. “The mortal husk of the king that’s left behind continues to age. Meanwhile, the Shadow he shed...that thing—” His face flickers with pain. “It forms into a solid man, as flesh and blood as you. A younger version of himself.”

I blink. This is...grotesque.

I glance down at my hands, almost like I’m seeing them from across the room. When did they start shaking? Maybe shock is starting to set in again.

Reven keeps going, slowly, carefully. “As the Shadow solidifies, the old Eidolon educates him, filling in any gaps of memory and teaching him to use his control over darkness faster than he would learn on his own. Once the younger version takes the throne, the older man is no longer needed and...” His eyes dart away.

I swallow hard. I get the idea. I think.

Eidolon is essentially putting his replica on the throne over and over and over. Not a child who might decide to do things differently, but a copy of himself, formed from...his own shadows?...with no one the wiser. This explains how Eidolon claims immortality. How he has continued to come after my family all these centuries.

Wait. “What does that make you?”

“I am—” He grimaces and drops his head forward, visibly struggling for control. “I am *him*.” Reven expels a ragged breath, then runs a hand through his hair. “No,” he mutters. “That’s not entirely right. I started as *one* of his Shadows. He has one for every facet of his being.”

“Like layers of an onion,” I say, like this is a perfectly normal topic of conversation. Like onions and evil kings are the same thing.

He huffs out a humorless laugh. “Exactly like that. We all exist inside him together until we’re shed. When that happens, one rises up to take control, and the rest of us are part of that new man. We exist within him.” He lifts his head, meets my eyes. “This time, it was me. *I* took control.”

Mother Goddess. The shaking is getting worse, but I do my best to quell it, because I still have so many questions. Like how is the old version of the king still on the throne when Reven is obviously fully formed? Shouldn’t he have taken old Eidolon’s place by now? I’m about to open my mouth, to say goddess knows what, except he beats me to it.

“I have flashes of memories from before. I was only there for parts of the old versions of the king’s lives, flickering below the surface whenever I managed to claw my way through the others, though what I remember is like trying to see through fog, because I wasn’t...real.” He clears his throat. “Eido—” Another grimace, and he starts over. “In those rare moments, I witnessed the horror he’s become. He has discarded so much of his soul, so many layers, that the parts remaining are evil.”

He flinches, then rolls his shoulders, and I’m pretty sure the things inside him didn’t like that description at all.

“You’re not making me feel any better about being here.” Understatement. “Do I need to be afraid of you?”

If Reven had scowled, I think I could have taken it on the chin, because I need the answer. But the disappointment that drops over him like a tattered cloak when he lifts his gaze to me...that’s harder to handle.

“Yes.”

The word drops between us.

Definitely not feeling better.

I scrabble together an unaffected facade and lift my chin, ever the royal princess. “What makes you different? Shouldn’t you be evil if all that’s left of him is bad?”

A test. If he *is* evil, he’s not going to answer that. But he does.

He shrugs, the move too jerky. “I believe that I’m the last of whatever good was in him. So, when he shed us this last time, I timed it right. As he disconnected, I forced my way up and wrested control from the others. Then I ran.”

He ran. Which means— “The other layers, the Shadows. You took them with you?”

His mouth flattens. “*All* of them.”

Fear has a taste, I’m learning. Acrid, like metal in the mouth. This man is a copy of Eidolon, with countless layers of the king inside him. Which means he’s more Eidolon than the husk of a man he claims is on the throne.

Reven is quite possibly the most dangerous person in all of the dominions, especially to a queen of Aryd.

And I’m standing in a little library high up in the trees with him. Alone.

What He Knows

Fear is something I try not to give into. It's paralyzing—both for the body and the mind—and a good way to get yourself killed. But I can't help the fact that screams are trying to claw out of my throat like the damned trying to escape the seventh hell.

I'm trying to keep them inside, to take deep, calming breaths, and to work my way toward an answer that makes any damn sense.

Reven saved the people here. That's the only thought keeping a lid on my terror.

"The power he wields—I wield—is very complex, and I left before he could teach me." Seeing my quick frown, he expands. "Every Imperium has to learn their power over time, me included. I'm still figuring mine out, but without him around to show me, it's going slower than I'd like. Believe me, I'd love to get rid of these things inside me."

He stops, fisting his hands, seeming to fight with himself. He even pushes his chair back, putting more distance between us.

That's not scary at *all*.

I wrap my arms around myself. "How do I believe any of this?"

Another flicker of disappointment over his features tugs at my own guilt.

"He has a book," he says. "Leather-bound, tattered, and very, very old. I tried to take it when I ran." His mouth twists. "But the Shadows stopped me."

"What's in it?"

"It's a diary. A history of Eidolon's different reigns," he says. "Written in his own hand."

Mother— "Why would he do that?"

"So that when the old version is dead, the new version doesn't forget

what we've done before and what we're trying to do in the future. This book is seen only by Eid—" He cuts off with a grunt. "I only got a glimpse of it here and there." His brow furrows. "I don't remember anything specific. Just the handwriting and word choices. As you get deeper into the book, as time is passing and he sheds more of himself, the writing gets more corrupt, fouler, sinister."

I have no idea if I'm relieved or disappointed not to be able to learn more about this book and what, exactly, the king knows about the queens of Aryd. The Hag's words the night I met Reven suddenly echo in my head.

"There have been Shadowraiths before you, right?"

Reven frowns. "Why would you say that?"

"I was told this isn't the first time people have disappeared. That a Shadowraith has roamed Aryd before."

I think maybe he doesn't like that news much, judging from the way the darkness twitches around him.

"Not that I know of." Reven clears his throat. "Not that I know much. Yet another reason that book would be helpful to have. I think we'd find a lot of answers in it. Maybe a way to stop him."

"But it's too dangerous to go after."

His nod is grim agreement. "The king is aging now, with no way to maintain his immortality. That makes him even more unpredictable. After I got away, I tried to kill myself—kill what is left of...us." He says this the same way he'd state any cold, uninteresting fact, but my heart clenches so hard at the thought I rub a hand against my breastbone, trying to ease the tightness.

"*They* wouldn't let me." His voice is bitter now. "Every day is a battle to hold them back." His flat-lipped smile is as grim as a reaper. "I'll do it, though. Until I age and die and take them with me to the grave."

I cannot imagine living an entire lifetime trying to contain that kind of

evil. “I’m glad they didn’t let you do it.”

He stares at me.

It’s unexplainable but there all the same, the desire for him to live pushing through every deeply embedded fear I have. “If you’d died, the people of the Shadowwood would have been truly lost.”

Shoving his hands in his pockets, he searches my gaze, his eyes trailing over my face. “For a princess raised in the courts, you are...sweetly naive.”

“For a man shed from evil, I guess I see why you’d be jaded.”

Only his expression isn’t irritated—it’s exhausted.

I blow out a long breath and glance around us, trying to center myself on something, anything. “Given who you are, why the need for all these other books?”

“To try to figure out those secrets, for one. But mostly...proof.”

Forget breathing. My entire body jolts at the word. *Proof*.

“For everyone else,” he grits through clenched teeth. Then rolls his shoulders again. I guess those shadows really don’t want him talking about any of this.

“I still don’t see what this has to do with me.” Or Tabra, for that matter. Because he doesn’t know our part in the scheme of things. No one does. As usual.

“He’s vulnerable now. Even before, when he had us, he didn’t go outside the borders of Tyndra. He wouldn’t ever leave this dominion unless it was for something vitally important.”

And Eidolon left to visit Aryd to ask for my sister’s hand in marriage. To send her that amulet—one that might be doing unexplainable things, the same way mine is.

My blood turns to ice. The fear for her that I’ve been burying since he took me—because there was nothing I could do about it—turns to cold fury.

I’ve got to get back to Aryd. Now. Get her away from the king. Put

myself between them.

I jerk my gaze to the man standing before me. Should I tell Reven? Tell him about the amulet? Show him mine? Maybe he knows what they are. But that would mean revealing who I truly am. *My* life isn't in danger now. Not based on this place, at least. In fact, I'd probably be offered a permanent home, if I wanted it.

The most important secret in the history of Aryd—the existence of twins and the sacrifices we make—offered up to save my sister, which is kind of the point.

Logic slows me down. That and years of experience in courts with men and women who lie the same way they breathe, without thought or concern. What if he's trying to gain my trust to learn my secrets? Or deliberately keep me from interfering with Eidolon and Tabra? Maybe he really is Eidolon and is spinning me some crazy story. Even if he's not, this man, who I was starting to hope might be an ally, is Eidolon incarnate...but not? And he's carrying the king's sinister shadows around inside him? Are they listening now?

My head is starting to hurt. "You said I should be afraid of you. Why?"

"Most of my energy goes into keeping the other Shadows leashed inside me. The rest into protecting the Shadowwood. It leaves me with little control."

I think of what I saw in the woods that night. The faces trying to get out. I definitely can't tell him who I am. Not yet. Maybe not ever. There's got to be another way.

"Why not approach me sooner?"

His jaw works. "No time," he says. "I got word of his plans and had to hurry to beat him to your palace and get you out."

Which means Eidolon is definitely there with Tabra now. *Think, Meren.* "Why do you think he wants me?"

Reven hands curl into fists. “Your power.”

My...oh no.

My legs go shaky, and I sink down onto the rickety chair at a lonely desk behind me, completely unable to hide my reaction. Because *no one* knows about *my* power. Grandmother made certain of that.

The queen was not pleased when my power manifested so young. Not that I asked for this blood right from my family line of Imperium—sand and souls, Hylorae *and* Enfernae—supposedly gifted from the goddess Aryd herself to the first twin queens, my ancestors. Maybe the power was strong back then, but it definitely diluted by the time it got to me.

Tabra’s hasn’t even come yet.

Other than Achlys and my sister, no one knows what I can do. Not even Cain.

“I don’t have one yet.” I try not to wince at how unconvincing I sound, mostly because I know I already gave myself away. I shut off the portal that night he took me. Only Imperium can do that.

Reven sinks to his haunches in front of me, gaze a smolder of frustration. He reaches his hands out as if to put them on my knees but stops, balling them into fists and pulling back. “Now is not the time to start lying to me, princess.”

Shit.

“You’re a sand Hylorae.” He tosses the truth between us quietly. It’s not a question but a statement. He knows.

Double shit.

“Aren’t you?” he presses when I don’t speak.

“How do you know?” I whisper, voice cracking.

“I saw your glass flowers.”

The Right One After All

He knows about my flowers? The ones we hid. Not well enough, I guess.

I close my eyes against a wave, like a wall of broken glass, of stunned regret, but I shake my head. “No one knows about the flowers. That space is private and hidden.”

A long pause greets my words. He must’ve reconsidered touching me, because gentle hands land on my knees, almost apologetic. I open my eyes to find him watching me. Waiting. “I travel in shadow, remember? I got in from the balcony above, almost by accident.”

He pauses. Opens his mouth as if he’s going to say more, then shakes his head and closes it again.

“I see.” I glance down at his hands. Strong hands with long, sinewy fingers. Nice hands. Capable hands. They don’t feel strange against me.

A fresh surge of apprehension wells up. If Reven is right, Eidolon wants me. *Me*. Not Tabra.

That’s a first.

I have to be sure. “Why does he need my power?”

“This is all speculation, but based on the little I know...” He pauses. “A sand Hylorae can do many things. Like keep Tyndra from sinking.”

What now? “Um... How would I do that, exactly?”

“By bringing sand up from the ocean floor and packing it underneath.”

Oh. Harsh laughter sounds in my head, but I manage to keep it in. I can barely make my flowers. “That doesn’t sound like some evil plan. Saving his dominion.”

“That part isn’t.”

There’s more? Of course there’s more.

“What else could there—” Another shudder of apprehension settles into a cold pit inside me. “I see. If I can raise his dominion, I can sink one, too. Is that what you’re thinking?”

“Yes.”

If Eidolon had really done his research on me, he’d know exactly how pathetically far from that capability I am. “Maybe shedding shadows sheds brain cells, too,” I mutter under my breath.

“What?” Reven frowns.

My panic is speaking, and I’m going to give myself away. “Never mind. But why me?” I can’t wrap my head around this. I’m not used to being the one someone wants. “Previous queens had powers over sand.”

Not exactly like mine, though. My grandmother, for instance, could turn any object she touched into sand, though nothing bigger than a horse. Eidolon never came for her. I frown to myself. Actually, every queen he managed to steal—and kill—were almost all *Enfernae* with soul-related abilities. Very few sand. Are soul *Enfernae* what he’s after?

Eidolon had to know at least Grandmother’s power, because it’s common knowledge. I know, at least generally, what power every sovereign over every dominion has. Everyone does. The question is, wouldn’t the king know that our line has two types of power, not one? And if he knows, how does Reven not know?

I’ll take that for the tiny blessing it is and keep that information to myself for now.

“Could the other queens make glass?” he asks.

I think back over the previous generations, the ones I know, and slowly shake my head. Then I frown, not in confusion this time but because what he’s implying is impossible. “No one has made a portal since the goddesses went silent—”

Reven shakes his head. “That’s something I *did* find in my books. A

sand Hylorae who can make glass should also be able to make a portal.” He gives me a meaningful look.

“Well, cut off my head and call me a basan.”

Reven shakes his head. “The things you say sometimes.”

I wave him off. Aryd may have multiple portals—one for every temple, allowing travel throughout our lands as well as to whichever dominion we choose—but the other dominions only have one each. With more glass portals at his disposal, Eidolon could go anywhere. Take armies anywhere.

This may be speculation, but it makes an awful kind of sense. More than me trying to sink an entire dominion.

I swallow back the wild urge to laugh. Because guess what? It turns out Reven kidnapped the right princess after all. He just doesn’t know it.

It’s all too much. Too many things pulling me in a thousand directions. I feel like I’m trapped in quicksand, sinking, and with no clear path through, mired by doubts and suspicions and questions.

A weird hiccupping sound escapes my lips as everything crashes down on me in an instant. I feel like the city of Ruinous—once the lauded, decadent capitol of Aryd, destroyed by an earthquake that shook until the foundations of the city crumbled like dust.

That dust is me.

“Breathe.” Reven’s voice comes at me like he’s far away again. “Breathe, princess.”

Only I realize I can’t. Air rasps in and out of me on panicked draws that rake down my throat, but my chest is so tight. Too tight.

Warm hands cup my face, and Reven is close, lips moving and eyes focused on mine. I stare back, trying to center on him, trying to hear him, but I can’t hear anything over the ragged edges of my struggle to get air into my body. Tears are leaking out of the corners of my eyes, and my body is locking up as tight as an animal-skin drum.

“Goddess forgive me,” Reven mutters. I have no trouble reading that on his lips, though I still can’t hear him.

Then his mouth is pressed to mine.

Everything fades to that one touch. The kiss is as soft as thistledown and surprisingly gentle, like I’m one of my glass flowers and he doesn’t want to shatter me. More sensations break through my panic, like rays of sunshine. The strength of his hands. The way the fresh scent of him—so like home—surrounds me. His body is close but not against mine. Not close enough.

I close my eyes because, goddess, it’s like I’ve been waiting for this without knowing it.

With each brush of his lips, my struggles slow, and the tension drains from my body until I realize that I’m breathing again. Safe.

And kissing him back.

A flicker of darkness has me opening my eyes, and I tear away from his kiss on a gasp. Shadows have filled the entire room.

He’s across the room so fast, I hardly see him move. Facing me, muscles coiling and chest moving with each strained breath, he stands there. Rigid. Unapproachable. Slowly, the shadows recede, leaving us staring at each other across the dimly lit room full of books. Of proof.

His eyes fill with an apology I don’t want. “I’m so—”

“Don’t apologize to me.” That would make this all worse.

I don’t ask him why he kissed me. It’s pretty obvious—a shock tactic to force me to focus on something else. It didn’t mean anything. Not really. Harder to ignore the warmth still cascading through me, or the way my lips still taste of him, despite the shadows that interrupted us. Were they the ones inside him, trying to break free?

“Are you better?” he asks.

“I’m fine.” The words come out on a snap.

His expression resumes its cool mask, but not before I catch a flicker of something that looks a lot like hurt. “We can finish talking about this later.”

“No.” I need to know everything. “If there’s more, then I would rather know now.”

An odd sort of reluctance settles over the angle of his shoulders, and his mouth turns down, but after a moment, he nods. “I told you I need your help, and I do. To keep Tyndra from sinking. But I also have to keep—” He grunts, expression pinching. “Keep him from gaining control over you.”

Breathing in steadily, I hold on to the calm he gave me with that kiss and try to work through the information I have.

If I’m the one Eidolon is truly after, he’ll catch me—of that, I have no doubt. But why does he want a sand Hylorae? If our histories are right, most of the queens he’s taken were soul Enfernae. Generations with Hylorae firstborn like our grandmother were often skipped. What changed? Tyndra sinking? That still doesn’t explain our history. Was he killing Enfernae queens to keep them off the throne? If that were the case, on the rare occasions he—what, accidentally?—killed a sand Hylorae, why didn’t he come back for the Enfernae twin? Why was there always a queen on the throne?

I rub my temples. This is way more than I can process right now. All I know is that both Tabra and I need to stay far away from the king. Meaning I can’t go home, and my sister needs to be protected.

I have only one option that I can see.

Seek sanctuary here—even though Reven is who and what he is—and send someone else home to do whatever they can to keep my sister safe. But staying behind goes against everything I am, literally. I was raised to sacrifice myself for her. That’s my entire purpose in life. Can I even trust another person to complete the duty I was born and bred to do?

My sister’s face flashes before me, so sweet and naively believing in

others. What if he kills Tabra when she turns out to be a soul *Enfernae*?

If Reven's guesses are right, is hiding worth keeping Eidolon from destroying a dominion or waging war or whatever nefarious things he has planned once he has a sand *Hylorae* who can make glass? Not to mention I'd be trying to save Tyndra, the goddess-forsaken *home* of Eidolon.

The king isn't my only problem. If anyone had asked me a few days ago if I'd want to stay with Reven, I would've taken great delight at laughing in their face. But somewhere along the way, my world changed.

He changed. Or maybe I did.

I took one look at the people he is protecting and the community they've built here, and, despite all the rest of it—the kidnapping, and jackassery, and creepy faces that I now know are Eidolon's Shadows—I decided to trust him. The man who saves the Vanished. Who protected me from the soldiers and the Hollow.

All without consciously choosing to.

And for whatever reason, I still do.

If someone can do what he's done, maybe he can help me with everything else. Help me figure out the right thing to do. For Tabra. For Aryd. For everyone.

"I'll stay."

I think we both startle at my words, but the second they're out, I know—deep down in my bones, in the heart of me—that it's the right decision.

Except Reven doesn't look thrilled like I expect. His expression descends to something wary and maybe even pissed. "I didn't kiss you to sway you."

My back goes poker straight. "It wasn't *that* good of a kiss."

A flash of amusement, then he's serious—concerned, even. "I mean it."

I swallow because I can see he does. Believing him is getting to be a habit. Reven being concerned and sincere—for me—might be my undoing.

“I know,” I reply quietly.

We stare at each other. “What about Aryd?” he asks. “And your people? The uprising?”

Hells. I have no idea what to say to that beyond spilling Tabra’s secret.

“Don’t decide yet,” he insists, reading the indecision in my eyes. “Give me a chance to show you what little proof I’ve found. Then we’ll figure out the best way.”

I search his face. Why would he offer this to me? His need for me here is almost as great as the need for the queen in Aryd. “Agreed.” There has to be a way to do both. Protect both peoples. “But I want to help.”

Relief in the form of a genuine smile is like dawn breaking. As if the shadows backed away, the candlelight illuminates him. He suddenly appears younger, freer. And more handsome than my heart can handle.

“What first?” I ask, more abruptly than I intend.

After a pause to consider me, he glances around the books stacked throughout the room. Then picks one up and places it in my hands. “First, a gesture of good faith.”

He steps back farther, putting that distance between us again, and I feel the absence deeper inside me than I should. “Take a moment to look at that. Come outside when you’re ready, and I’ll show you the proof of the sinking.”

Right. That. I need to see if I can even attempt what he’s thinking of—raising the dominion back up. It might take me eons.

He leaves the room, and I glance down at the book in my hand. Leather-bound, with paper the consistency of parchment. I open the cover and blow out a breath. *The History of the Rulers of Aryd.*

I’ve never seen this book. Not even in the Great Library. With a gasp, I flip until I see a name. The first set of twins. Relief puffs out of me. Her twin isn’t mentioned. I keep flipping. *None* of the twins are. He doesn’t

know. Not even the writer of our history knows.

There's that, at least.

Wait...does that mean even Eidolon *doesn't* know about our twins? How could he not? What does he think happens when he kills one and she's back on the throne the next day? Reven said something about hazy memories and not remembering everything. Maybe he missed that part?

I'd love to sit and take my time leafing through this, but that's for later. I close the book with a snap and walk to the door, only to pause in the doorway. Reven is standing out on the balcony, leaning his fists against the rail, head bowed. A stark picture of regret.

Regret for what? Kissing me? The shadows? Bringing me here?

Regardless, I can feel his burden. I close the door behind me with a *snick*, and he raises his head, entire posture changing, mask in place, hiding the reality from me behind the front of a strong, indestructible man.

I pretend not to have seen and hold up the book. "Thank you."

He nods. Together, we descend the winding stairs to the forest floor. As soon as we're in sight of the village, a man I haven't met yet strides toward us. And he looks furious.

With stark purpose in his gait, he reminds me of Cain's father, the zariph. Pure power. Power that is etched in every inch of him, from rich sable skin, to almost-glowing lavender eyes, to the breadth in his shoulders and the lankiness of a fighter, topped off with a face that's all sleek lines and edges. Actually, except for the coloring, he also reminds me of Reven. It's the way he moves.

Reven curses but stops and waits. I stop a few steps behind him, curious.

"Vos?" he asks as the man gets closer. "Do you have word from Aryd?"

I stiffen. Even my ears feel starched. From my dominion? What word from Aryd would this man have?

The world around me slows to a crawl as the man called Vos doesn't stop in front of Reven or answer him. Instead, he comes straight for me. Before I can open my mouth, he wraps his hands around my throat, lifting me to my tiptoes and squeezing the life from me before anyone can stop him.

“Who are you?” he demands.

I am released even faster than he snatched me, and Reven is standing between us, shadows rearing up around him, turning everything around us menacing.

“Explain.” Reven snarls.

Peeking around his back, I take the full brunt of this Vos character's suspicious glare. “The Princess Tabra Eutheria I of Aryd is still *in* Aryd, happily going through her coronation events as I speak and waltzing around with fucking King Eidolon himself. So I ask again...” His scowl hits me, ice so frosty I shiver. “Who are *you*?”

Lies...and Damn Lies

I have two options to choose between as I stare at these men, one of whom could kill me with a thought. Maybe they both could.

I can tell Reven my secrets, who I truly am...or keep up the lies.

I'm tempted to tell him. After all, I just said I would stay. But my sister is on the other end of it, and I would never risk her. Not with another man who both is and isn't Eidolon, no matter how much I want to trust him.

I choose lies.

Drawing myself up to my full, if unintimidating, height, I step around Reven, channel pure Omma with a disdainful smile, and add a dash of Grandmother with a regal tilt to my head. "Of *course* a woman who looks like me sits on the throne."

Both men pull up short at that, Vos frowning and Reven scowling, suddenly looking as threatening as the day he snatched me.

"Why?" Reven demands, voice a roll of thunder.

"I have a body double." I wave a languid hand in the air as if this is the done thing for royalty these days and am proud of myself that it doesn't shake.

Reven's gaze narrows, but he says nothing.

"You've got to be joking," Vos mutters.

"I'm not." I pretend to misunderstand the sarcasm. "She stands in for me on those occasions when I can't attend a function. She is also trained, with the help of my closest advisers, to step in for me in the event of an assassination or"—I level a pointed look at Reven—"kidnapping."

Vos crosses his arms, not bothering to hide his suspicion, amusement skirting it with the kind of disbelief that says he won't be convinced easily. "I got close before I left."

I almost vomit in my mouth. *This man got close? To Tabra? Mother*

goddess.

“She looks *exactly* like you. I dare say identical down to each fleck of gold in your eyes,” Vos casually accuses in a slow, deliberate cadence that is both unfamiliar and immediately puts me in mind of the genteel authoritative way of speaking, at odds with the iron in his gaze.

Reven is a mountain, still and unemotional in a way that might be scarier than visible anger.

I focus on the easier of the two men and dredge up a condescending smile that has Vos’s cold amusement dimming. “That’s her gift,” I explain in an over-patient voice. “She’s a mimic. Although I will say she already looks much like me in the first place—same height and coloring and so forth—so it doesn’t take her much effort to hold the illusion.”

Or no effort at all.

“They’re not even looking for you,” Vos points out next.

I flick him a dismissive glance. “Are you so sure about that?”

He opens his mouth but hesitates.

“They can’t make a big show of it,” I say. “Soldiers will have been sent from one of the other cities instead. Most likely Syphmem. Maybe Enora or Polieh.”

Lies. All of these words. But I’m pretty proud of myself for sounding convincing. I bet even Omma would lift an impressed eyebrow.

Reven hasn’t moved, all broody, intense kidnapper again, and he studies me for long enough that I have to keep from shifting uncomfortably.

“What happens when you don’t return?” he finally asks.

I glance away because what I’m about to say is definitely made up. “She can’t stay on the throne indefinitely. We’ll have to figure something out before they fake my death and put a new ruler on the throne.”

I’ll have to tell him the truth soon, though. Otherwise, he’ll expect me to do something about it. Telling him means Tabra can stay on her throne

and I can stay here. Maybe go back and forth. That could work, couldn't it? I could finally be Meren...to one other person, at least.

A new hope surges to life inside me. I've been so focused on saving everyone else, on this sanctuary being about keeping me out of Eidolon's hands, I hadn't considered what it actually means for *me*. Could the Shadowwood become my own salvation?

"What's her name?" Reven's soft voice pops the growing bubble of excitement building in my chest. I catch the tautness to his voice, like a bow pulled back before letting loose.

"Meren." I hand over my own name without hesitation. "She's been with me as long as I can remember." Since the womb, in fact.

"Meren." He says *my* name slowly, as if tasting each syllable, and a delicious quiver tiptoes down my spine. One that throws me off balance. Then he looks up, pinning me with those bright eyes, tilting my world even more sideways. "Whose idea was this body-double thing?"

I clear my throat. "My grandmother's."

"Did she have one?"

"Yes." So easy, the sharing of secrets when I turn them into a different version of the truth. "It is a...err...tradition in our royal line."

Reven's expression doesn't ease. I glance toward Vos to find him watching with an almost bored expression. I'm not fooled. He's as alert as his leader.

"Tell me," I say. "Did anyone notice my absence?"

Vos glances to Reven, who nods. "No. Your *body double*"—I don't miss the intonation that bleeds with doubt—"arrived at the pre-coronation ball in a new dress, laughing about how she couldn't decide what to wear and changed."

"Well, finding the right pre-coronation outfit on such short notice is difficult these days."

Vos stares, but Reven crosses his arms, eyes narrowing.

Too much? Maybe this wasn't the right time to be flippant. "What about Eidolon? Had he arrived by then?"

Surprise flickers in Vos's eyes, and I can't mistake the glance he casts in Reven's direction. The one that tells me he knows at least something of Reven's relationship to the king.

Reven shakes his head, a barely noticeable movement, and Vos returns his focus to me. "The king arrived late that night, and your..." He pauses. "...other half did you proud in welcoming him to the palace."

Dammit, Tabra.

"Worried she'll take your place forever?" Vos asks with a speculative stare, apparently catching at least a hint of my real reaction.

Mental note to punch this man in the face the first chance I get. "If what Reven has told me is true, even the small amount he's hinted at, then Meren"—thank the goddess I don't stumble over my own name—"is in trouble. I need to help her."

"How?" This from Reven.

"Let's start by sending a message." It's the best I can do, even after he knows the truth. Aryd still needs its queen.

"You know that proof I promised?" Reven might as well have been carved from the hard rock of the cliffs surrounding Tropikis, he's so tense.

Again, I try not to shift warily on my feet. "Yes."

"Now I need some from you." The words cut, a demand from the Shadowraith.

Proof.

An idea comes to me, like a flash of dying starlight. Maybe the Goddess Aryd is silent like all the others, or perhaps she guides her people with deft, subtle hands, because she's given me the answer.

The amulet against my skin pulses strangely at the thought.

I step back again. “Fine.”

Reaching for that shimmering kernel of power inside me, I will it forward, already picturing in my mind what I will create.

With fizzy, bubbling warmth coursing through my blood, my hands start to glow. In the dim of the trees and the additional odd sort of presence created by Reven’s protective shadows, the yellow light is unusually radiant. Brighter than I’ve ever seen, and I have to swallow back my own gasp of surprise at the intensity. I force myself to focus on the ground between my feet, where particles of sand lift into the air.

It takes more effort in this dominion because sand is not the main makeup of the soil. I have to concentrate hard, yanking and tugging and sifting until I have enough in the air, swirling and floating, to manipulate. I think about what I can make and swallow a smile.

Because Reven gave me the answer earlier.

At the urging of my will, those fire sprite–like embers, brilliant with each burst, spark from my hands as I add heat to the mix. The sand comes together, melting into a shimmering orange mass as I force it to bubble and gel. Through will alone, my fingers dancing through the air as I manipulate my magic, the glass before me forms into a cohesive mass, which I mold with my memories of the ones I’ve made for my sister.

I create the simple, trumpet shape of the moonflowers that grow inside the palace walls and only bloom at night. Appropriate for a man who lives in darkness.

I expect a wave of homesickness to hit with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer to rock, but none comes, and a frown tugs at my brow. Once we convince Eidolon that Tabra isn’t the one he wants, and she’s safe—well, that’s assuming he doesn’t kill her. Still, is it possible that I could have found a new life here? One of my choosing?

An ache blooms inside, loss already building, because having freedom

and a life of my own would mean leaving Tabra and Cain and my desert home—my people—forever. Is that what I want?

Yes. It is.

Shock reverberates through me so hard that I lose my focus and the flower disintegrates, dropping to the ground with a hiss in a scattered pool of pale granules.

Clearing my throat, I tip my head and meet Reven's gaze head-on. "I didn't say I was very good at it." Neither man says anything, but it's Reven I look at. "Satisfied?"

"Yes." He pauses and glances to Vos. "You?"

An unamused snicker is his answer. "Not in years."

"How sad for you," I murmur sweetly.

Vos's eyebrows shoot up, and then he barks a laugh. "I thought she was supposed to be sweet and easily frightened."

Reven spears the man with a chilling stare even a demon would envy, but Vos doesn't even blink, turning back to me. Although I don't know why. Reven said pretty much the same thing when we first met.

After a moment, Vos bows formally, even adding a click of his heels, which could either be a gesture from Wildernyss or Tyndra. "My name is Voserian," he says with a nod. Then winks. "Everyone calls me Vos. I am from Tyndra, before you ask."

That answers that. And also the calculated looks. The Goddess Tyndra, after all, blessed her people with the gift of strategy.

He doesn't straighten, waiting. Appropriate when greeting a domina. "Rise," I say quietly, not thrilled about a ritual that immediately puts us on opposite sides of an invisible line.

Too many lines in my life wall me off from others, and I'm swiftly coming to realize that I need help, and uncrossable lines make asking for it difficult.

Vos lifts his head. "Welcome to the Shadowwood, domina."

"I'd say it's a pleasure, but you did try to choke me to death." I leave off the questioning-my-identity part. I can spell hypocrite in several languages.

"I expected an imposter to be kicking and screaming by the time I arrived." Vos shoots a sly grin in Reven's direction.

"You missed that part," Reven says in dry tones that make me want to laugh.

"You kidnapped me," I shoot back instead. "What did you expect? A hug?"

"I expected you to be afraid."

And therefore pliable? Tabra probably would have been, but I can't go back and fix my reactions now.

"I was *terrified*." Something inside me wants him to know the reality of that. "I thought you were taking me away to cut me into pieces and send only a finger or a toe home as proof of my death."

Vos whistled. "That would take a special kind of depravity."

"Let's just say that it wouldn't be the first time for my family," I murmur.

Vos frowns at that, but Reven... Reven goes all chilly again.

Too much. I'm definitely giving away too much, so I don't elaborate. No one knows about those dead queens for the simple fact that each remaining twin had taken her sister's place with none the wiser. Except Eidolon, of course. I wish I could get into that man's thoughts.

Which is funny, since a version of him is standing in front of me, none the wiser.

Vos tips his head. "Your double makes an excellent queen, by the way."

The implications in the words could go so many different directions. I decide to ignore them all. "Often a better one than I'll ever be."

Truth. A more willing one, as well. Tabra's never acted anything but

happy to be what she is, except the times I would tell her about my desert escapes. Then her face would turn wistful and the questions would come.

Finally, Reven seems to snap back to himself, though not in a good way. Studiously blank. “I’m afraid now that Vos has arrived...”

The message is clear. They have things to discuss without me around.

“Trust,” I mouth at Reven, who turns away, though his lips hitch to one side. I’m able to pull that much from him at least.

If I’m honest, I need time to process what I’ve learned today, anyway, and have a more solid plan for what to do about Tabra before I approach him. “I’ll find a way to amuse myself.”

With a dip of my chin for both men, a gesture a queen would make out of respect rather than deference, I walk away. Only a fool would imagine the Shadowraith’s gaze trailing after her or picture concern in his eyes.

A tiny sound has me glancing over my shoulder in time to see the girl from the night before—the one with navy-hued skin and white hair—throw herself into Vos’s arms, peppering his cheek with kisses.

So she was real. I’ve never seen anyone with that coloring. Maybe she’s a water sprite? Or an ice sprite, if such a thing exists? Vos laughingly tickles her, so she jumps back, and then they’re walking in the opposite direction with Reven.

Who, by the way, isn’t watching me at all.

29

What If...

I make it only a few buildings into the heart of the village before a voice calls out, “Princess Tabra!”

I turn to find a tall man dressed in traditional Wanderer clothing, blue in color, which means he’s from the Lazuli Desert, the loose-fitting garment draped around him in the style of the eastern zariphates. He’s handsome in that resilient, hardened way I’ve always found most born into the zariphates to be. Something about their inner strength, maybe. An underlying tenacity born of surviving in such an unforgiving, exquisite land.

I take in the rest of him. Hair the color of wet sand graying at the temples. Tawny skin unmarred by time, though clearly he’s older. Warm eyes. Gnarled hands.

And...oh, son of viper.

A face I recognize. A memory from years ago.

I school my features into bland curiosity. “Yes?”

He moves to stand before me, gaze searching mine, brow furrowed. Then leans forward slightly, touching his hand to his heart, then his mouth, before tipping it toward me. A traditional greeting from a Wanderer to his Zaripha. That ache of homesickness I was expecting earlier strikes without warning as I return the silent greeting, going through the motions in the opposite order, which makes him smile.

“My name is Horus. I am from Aryd, as I’m sure you can tell. A few of us here are.” He glances around, though no one else comes forward, which isn’t a surprise. People of Aryd tend to wait. Watch. It’s the patience ingrained in us, I think. He says nothing about recognizing me. Perhaps I’ve changed enough since I was a girl. My face less round, body filled out, no longer gangly.

“How long have you been here?” I ask.

“Five years.”

That long?

The question must’ve reflected in my eyes, because he smiles hesitantly. “I was one of the first. You obviously realize I was born a Wanderer.” Due to the way I accepted his greeting, no doubt. “I was Outcast when I refused to give my sister to our zariph as his third wife.” His lips curl in an anger I suspect has not dimmed with time. “He kicked me out and took her anyway.”

Princesses don’t apologize. Omma’s and Grandmother’s and even Tabra’s voices sound in my head at the same time.

I ignore their voices. “I’m sorry that happened to you, and especially your sister. Do you like it here?”

It’s a question I hadn’t dared to ask yesterday with hundreds around me who might take exception to it after Reven disappeared, leaving me to fend for myself.

The smile that lights Horus’s eyes to the color of mink is unmistakably genuine. “I have found a new purpose here, domina. I am a hunter by trade, and I help to feed these people. In exchange, I have a home and acceptance.”

Not safety, I notice. But a Wanderer can handle himself, even a Vex, so maybe that’s less important to this man. If I’m going to stay here, though, I should try to find out more.

“Would you…” Horus hesitates and bends forward a little before jerking himself back upright, like he’d come close to bowing before asking his question. “May I show you around? I think you’ll find the same answer from everyone here—though, as you already know, we each come to this place in different ways.”

The only reason I hesitate is an internal debate. How should I greet these people? Last night I was Queen Tabra. This morning at breakfast I

was the Shadowraith's guest. Inside I'm just the poor sand shrew who hopes she can help these people and maybe even make a home among them once I make sure my sister is safe.

I'll be Meren the friend.

So I give him a sincere smile. "I would appreciate that, Horus."

This time, he doesn't stop himself and offers a small half bow. It's a gesture that would have been appropriate at court, and I wonder how highly ranked he'd been in his zariphate before he'd been cast out.

"This way." He waves an arm, careful not to touch me as we walk side by side to the building nearest us.

First, he takes me toward the shop displaying clothes from all the dominions. As we get closer, a woman steps out. More like a girl my age, except her hair is silvery gray and her eyes the same, like pools of mercury.

"This is Vida," Horus says.

When no recognition lights those unusual eyes, I smile. "I assume I have you to thank for the clothes in my room."

Vida nods, and by the way she bounces on her toes, I get the sense she's holding back.

Why?

I glance at Horus, who says nothing. So I turn back to Vida. "They are lovely. I don't think my own royal seamstresses could have done better. Thank you."

On a burst of breath, she rushes over, throwing her arms around me with a laugh that is pure exuberance. "I just knew you would love them!"

My first instinct is to stiffen. Aryd values touch too much to give it freely. I wasn't raised with hugs, but her enthusiasm is so honest and innocent that I hug her back.

"Vida!" Horus sounds shocked.

The girl sucks in another breath and lets go of me, only to put her hands

on my shoulders when she catches my expression. “She doesn’t mind,” she tells him and grins. “We’re going to be terrific friends,” she leans in to whisper conspiratorially.

I blink. Is she Imperium? A seer of some sort, to make a prediction? “I’d like that.” Other than Cain, people don’t offer to be my friend.

She nods like the exchange of words seals it. Then she spins around, links her arm with mine, and tugs me into her shop. “Now, is there anything I can make you?”

But I’m too busy staring at the hundreds of items inside. Everything from farmers’ garb to gowns fit for a queen on her coronation day. “Wow.”

Vida chuckles. “The Goddess Wildernyss is the patroness of the arts. I try to honor the gift she gave me in my own way.”

I let her show me around while she chatters about everything and anything at the rate of sand dropping into a sinkhole, until eventually Horus reminds her that others are waiting to meet me.

Only, when I step back outside, that old tension climbs right back up my spine to settle in my shoulders, because I’m still in danger of discovery. Even if I forgot for just a moment.

With every single step at his side, I work over what I might say or do if any of the Vanished from Enora recognize me not as Tabra but as the poor waif who lived with her aged aunt in their city.

Please don’t recognize me.

A Bad Sister

Thankfully, I didn't run into anyone from Enora. Yet. I know it's just a matter of time, what with the stories of people in town being taken by the Shadowraith.

After my tour of the village, I return to my room. Like yesterday, my head swims with names, stories of how different people ended up here, what they did, and maybe more importantly, what they don't do now.

There weren't many fighters among the people I met and no discernable Imperium. All Vex as far as I can tell.

Most are villagers, tradespeople, craftspeople, and farmers. Given their places in life, Imperium abilities would have been unlikely anyway. The few hunters among the bunch, like Horus, are the only ones with skills that could be defensive.

What if someone decided to attack the Shadowwood?

After all, Eidolon can't be naive to its existence. Reven might be more powerful here shrouded in his shadows, or however that works, but I doubt even he would be able to hold off an army. Killing seven men wiped him out. I doubt even more that he can hide so many people at once.

The stress is going to age me before my time.

I sink to the bed and close my eyes, allowing the facade of Tabra to slip away. I've managed to keep the panic at bay, buried under logic and simply putting one foot in front of the other, but it's a lot.

The worry for my sister is gnawing away at my insides with each passing moment, leaving holes that I imagine are only growing larger. Wounds that might never heal if anything happens to her while I can't be there to protect her. To do the only thing I was raised to do—put myself between her and the king. I can't even do that now.

How much of a danger to Tabra is the king? Especially when he realizes

she doesn't have the ability to make him more portals? What if he's after something else? The proposal is something he hasn't done before. Marriage to the Queen of Aryd would make him next in line for the throne if she died.

Seven hells. Is that what he's after? The throne?

Only, if that's the case, why now? If he knows about twins in our family—which we've always assumed he does, especially given the way we pop back up after one of us dies—then he'll know that I'll just show up if he kills her. Doesn't he? Maybe that's what he's waiting for? If he kills me, too, he gets the throne for good. But if what Reven guessed is true, he might need me too much to kill me. He's never tried to marry a queen before, either. That's new. So what is his end goal? Why is he doing any of this? There is no way that he actually wants to secure an alliance.

I'm going round and round and round. The most important thing right now is Tabra.

I would have heard, even here, if Eidolon had killed her, wouldn't I? Or if anything else bad happened? Vos would've said.

That thought has me breathing a little easier.

The soft tread of feet on the stairs reaches my ears. Reven, most likely. He'd sent word that I was supposed to meet him for lunch to be introduced to the leaders next.

Guessing this is a group I need to impress, I decide to change, pulling clothing from the rack in the corner. A lilac silk set this time, in the style of the Tyndran authorities, and a dress rather than shirt and pants. The fabric looks incredibly expensive with detailed golden embroidery not only on the belt but along the hem of the skirt and the long sleeves. The matching overcoat sports a short train.

Vida is seriously gifted. This is as nice as anything Tabra ever wears. A garment truly fit for a royal.

I smile. Maybe I can sit beside Vida at breakfast tomorrow.

With no onyx slab to check my appearance and no dressing table, I sit down on the corner of the bed to arrange my hair. Something about that simple action gives me space to think.

No good thoughts, though.

Because I have no answers. Everything is a big giant question mark in my head. More of the same back and forth. No matter what, I can't risk Eidolon actually needing my power. Or am I just choosing to save myself? I don't think I am. After all, the king could use me as leverage against Tabra, and vice versa. I need to be cautious now, wait and see.

I hate waiting.

The impatient knock at my door is so unexpected, I jump. Opening it with a creaking protest from the hinges, I find not Reven but Vos standing outside. More like leaning against the doorframe, all cocky and full of aristocratic charm.

I've already learned that he can turn lethal if he wants, though I'd gotten the impression that his hands around my neck had been more a warning than any real threat. I can also see now a clammy sort of sallowness beneath his skin. Is he sick? Or is the angle of the sun playing tricks on my eyes?

Regardless, he's watching me with all of the beady concentration of a hawk. "Princess," he says. Not sounding sick at all. "I've come to escort you to dinner." He holds out his arm, crooked for mine. A courtly gesture.

I don't move. "Thank you, but my hair isn't finished. I can find my own way."

He crosses his arms. "You don't like me much, I take it." Amusement and impudence all rolled into a handful of words.

"You tried to strangle me."

He cocks his head, gaze trailing over the skin of my neck. "I don't see bruising. I guess I didn't squeeze hard enough."

No wonder Reven likes this man. They can both be asses. “You’re lucky I don’t bruise easy.”

The jaded teasing falls away, and suddenly the man before me is deadly serious. “Reven saved my life, and this is my home.”

The way he says it carries a weightiness that catches my attention. “And you thought you needed to protect them both from *me*?”

A shrug. “I’m not a subtle man.”

“There’s subtle, and there’s a sledgehammer.”

On a cut-off snort of amusement, he straightens from his slouch against the door and assumes a courtly bow with a flourish of his hand. “My sincerest apologies, domina, for trying to strangle you upon our first acquaintance.” He straightens. “Truce?”

Then he holds out a hand to shake like he would to a man he’s made a bet with. Technically a faux pas with royalty. We don’t shake hands in that way, and one should wait for us to extend ours first, anyway. He’s still testing me, I see.

“You still don’t know me,” I point out, not moving. “Everyone has secrets. Royalty more than most. I could still be dangerous.”

It is the closest I let myself come to offering the truth, and a bit of an apology for my continued deception.

“Would you hurt him? Or endanger these people?” Vos asks, his eyes belying the small smile playing about his lips.

“Never on purpose,” I say slowly. “I want to help if I can. But I am, first and foremost, a princess of Aryd. My duty is to my people.”

“Queen,” he corrects. “Even if the wrong woman was crowned while you were gone.” He waves the hand he still holds out. “So...truce?”

Why not? I clasp his hand. “Touch me without permission again, and I’ll cut your balls off.”

Vos’s grip tightens. “That’s quite a mouth you’ve got, domina.”

I really need to do better containing...well...me.

“What if I were a woman? What would my punishment be then?”

“That takes a more subtle approach, and as you said, you’re not a subtle man.”

“Indeed.” Vos chuckles.

He waits while I finish my hair, then draws me out of my room, looping my arm through the crook of his to start us down the stairs. “You’ll do.”

“I’m on the fence about you.” I soften the words with a pat to his arm.

“I’ll take over from here.” Reven’s voice sounds from behind us, more iron than velvet.

We pause on the steps, hardly wide enough to accommodate the two of us, to find him standing on the platform above, watching with closed-off severity, his gaze focused on my hand resting over Vos’s.

I go to tug away, but Vos clamps down, his expression turning calculating as he gauges his leader. “You sent me to escort her. An easy task as she’s quite...appealing. Don’t you agree?”

No response from Reven.

Vos doesn’t even appear to notice. “This darling girl and I have made a truce,” he informs the silent man on the stairs above us.

I blink at the predatory glint that sparks in Reven’s eyes. What? Was I not supposed to get along with his people?

Reven and I don’t move.

“So Vos gets forgiven despite strangling you?” he asks, his voice dropping to a low rumble.

I frown. Is Reven jealous that I haven’t done the same with him? Forgiven him for stealing me? Doesn’t he realize I already have? Otherwise, I would have left his unconscious ass in the forests of Wildernyss. I’d be back in Aryd, likely taking Tabra’s place and trying to fend off Eidolon without knowing he’s actually after my power rather than

hers. But it would be nice to hear him admit a few things.

“*He* asked,” I point out.

“You want me to apologize?” His voice takes a more sinister rasp, but instead of fear, unwanted warmth flushes through me.

Goddess, that voice might be my undoing.

But now in my mind it’s linked with the memory of the soft feel of his lips against mine, his fingers in my hair, and the sudden ability to breathe easier.

I’ve always thought of attraction like rainclouds in the desert. Here then gone without much to show for it. Only this isn’t just blowing away or burning off in the sun. That’s a problem. I swallow, then become instantly frustrated with that small, telling sign as his gaze tracks the movement. That better not be satisfaction tugging at his lips.

I’m proud that my voice is steady when I say, “Only if you mean it.”

Any hint of a smile disappears as he snaps his mouth shut with an audible *click*. Then he opens it again.

But I cut him off. “Forgiveness means you acknowledge wrongdoing first.”

“Taking you was the *only* way.”

“It wasn’t.”

“I won’t apologize for protecting my people.”

“And I have a hard time forgiving a man who would take me away from mine when our shared enemy is literally within the walls of my palace,” I hurl back.

Why is he acting this way? I thought maybe in the library we’d at least agreed we’re on the same side, but now... *Oh, the hells with what I thought.*

“Come, come, children. No fighting before dinner,” Vos croons.

“Stay out of it,” I snap. At the same time, Reven growls, “Shut up, Vos.”

“You wound me to the core.” He clutches his breast dramatically with

one hand.

The glares we both turn on him have him releasing my arm. Slowly. Vos holds both hands up in a gesture of surrender, even backing down a step, away from me. “I can tell when I’m not wanted.”

He leaves us glaring at each other.

When it becomes obvious that Reven isn’t going to make any kind of move, I shake my head and turn to go down the stairs after Vos. Reven follows, muttering words under his breath I can’t quite catch. Why couldn’t he brood for a few more minutes alone first?

Only, when I turn left to join the rest of the village at the long communal tables, he hooks a hand through my elbow, his touch instantly sending another rush of unwanted, inconvenient, pulsing warmth through my blood. What in the dominions is wrong with me?

“I’m sorry,” he mutters.

I pull up sharply at that, staring at him. “For which part?”

His lips crook in wry self-recrimination. “All of it.”

I blow out a sharp breath. Damned if I don’t want to smile back, and my anger burns out like a backfire. “A blanket apology...are you sure you want to go that far? I mean, I have a stack of grievances we could—”

“Don’t push it.”

“You know, you really should be nice to me.”

“Nice isn’t my thing—”

“Mine either.” Sort of my version of an apology for snapping at him.

He stills, gaze skating over my face. “I didn’t like him touching you.”

I swallow again. If I thought the warmth before was inconvenient, the wave that swamps me at his simple words threatens to set the entire forest on fire. All this *feeling*, and I have no idea what to do with it.

“Oh.” I hide a wince at the inane word.

It seems to shake him back into “business” mode, though, because he

abruptly turns and starts us walking.

“But—” I glance over my shoulder in the direction of the communal table. The opposite direction.

“We’re not eating with them.” He flicks me a glance from the corner of his eyes. “It’s time for you to meet the true leaders here.”

31

A Shadow Has No One

I try to re-channel Tabra, gliding along beside Reven, both of us quiet now, though I suspect for different reasons. He takes me to a building at ground level that is set aside from the others. This one is different, closed in on all four sides with no windows. At Reven's appearance, shadows creep up the walls until the entire structure is covered with thick vine-like ropes of blackness.

Why? So we won't be overheard? Or some other reason?

He opens the only door I can see and ushers me inside. A thick wooden slab of a table is laid for dinner and sporting bowls of food that fill the air with the rich scents of roasted meat, fresh-baked bread, and exotic fruit.

Vos is already here, tucked into the far corner of the long room. Seated at the far end to his right is the girl, the one I've seen already. Closer up, I take in more of her appearance: younger than I am by a year or two at most, with shoulder-length white hair stark against deep blue skin that is closer to a twilight sky than navy, and narrow-set black eyes that seem to frost around the edges.

I try not to stare.

It helps that a slight movement on the other side of the room catches my eye. Horus is standing there.

He nods, and while I nod back, I'm tempted to lift an eyebrow. He didn't mention he was one of the leaders here. Reven steps up beside me, but I get the impression he's being careful not to touch.

He does a quick round of introductions. "Horus, I believe you spent time with today, and you already know Vos, who is, for lack of a better term, the man in charge around here. The young woman beside him is Tziah. She is..."

“With me,” Vos supplies.

The rigidity in his voice is a warning that this girl is under his protection for whatever reason. Only I don’t sense a romantic bond. Curious.

Tziah nods.

“She hasn’t always been blue, if that’s what you’re thinking,” Vos tacks on, almost defensive.

Actually, I’d been busier trying to figure them out. “I assumed she must have something supernatural in her. An ice sprite, maybe?”

After all, humans come in all shades, shapes, and sizes, and there are many creatures in this world, like sand nymphs, who are mostly human but bear their own unique coloring.

“No.” That’s all Vos says. Which says a lot. There’s a story there, I’d bet.

“She’s from Mariana,” Horus offers, and Tziah nods. I study her, trying to see anything of a Marianan in her. A maritime people, they live around a protected bay the Devourers can’t get into. It makes up a majority of the dominion.

“She can’t speak,” Reven tells me quietly. “When she opens her mouth —”

Tziah does so, her lips seeming to form words, but only a terrible noise, like a den of snakes but a thousand times louder, emerges from her lips. My skin crawls, and I find myself inching closer to Reven until she closes her mouth, cutting the sound off so abruptly, the silence is almost loud.

“If she holds out long enough, she can incapacitate those around her,” Reven says.

I shiver at the thought of that noise used as a weapon. Are the people he’s set up as leaders here all Imperium? It would make sense to try to put their powers to use.

“How do you prefer to communicate?” I ask Tziah directly.

She smiles, her face lighting up with it like I've done something right—even Vos smiles. Then she holds up both hands and points with one to the other, which she uses to wave hello. I nod my understanding and wave back.

“Tziah’s heart for the people in the Shadowwood is what keeps this place alive,” Horus says.

The girl’s cheeks deepen in color, which I’m guessing is a bit of a blush. Already I like her. She’s the kind of person who radiates a delicate sort of sweetness, reminding me a bit of Tabra.

“There are a few others,” Reven continues. “Hakan from Savannah. You met Bina earlier today at our library. She’s from Tropikis.”

The librarian is part of this leader group, too? “Where are they?”

“Busy,” Vos says, and his tone this time isn’t playful but serious.

Okay... I’m definitely not in the circle of trust here yet. Not that I would expect to be.

“Horus is my best fighter,” Reven says after a beat.

“Really?” Vos drawls from his corner, suddenly back to what I’m starting to realize is his natural state of whimsy. “*Horus* is your best fighter? My poor heart, wounded twice in one day.” He covers a small cough with his hand.

“I am Vexillium. I have no power,” Horus says, ignoring the other two men. Not apologetic. Closer to daring me to scoff and carrying a fissure of underlying resentment.

I can relate to resenting the station or circumstances birth landed me in, and I already know part of his story, which only adds to my empathy, so my smile is easy, or at least I try to make it so. “Worth doesn’t come from an inherited ability.”

Horus relaxes. The time we spent together today probably helps him realize I’m sincere, so I dare a grin. “Some of the most powerful Imperium

I know are useless pricks.”

A tiny choking sound comes from Vos while, beside me, Reven just shakes his head, but at least he loses some of the starch in his posture.

I cross my arms, trying to hide a smile as I give him a measured look. “You’re surprised? I’m still on the fence about lumping *you* in that category.”

Horus’s expression turns so pious I’m surprised a halo doesn’t appear. “This man saved us—”

“She knows.” Reven stops him. “She’s teasing me.”

“I wouldn’t call it that,” I murmur. Then, to the rest of the room... “He’s gotten used to me. I’ll grow on you.”

“Like a fungus,” Reven mutters.

Was that *him* teasing?

The way Horus snorts tells me he’s equally surprised by Reven’s response.

Vos, meanwhile, clears his throat. “Hakan, when you meet him, can’t be touched. He’s Hylorae. His gift is lightning.”

“Good to know.”

“Bina is like Horus, though,” he tacks on, again sounding defensive—but of the people not in this room, who he seems to assume I’m going to judge for being Vex.

It strikes me, in that small moment, that these people must be friends. The ties that bind them have history. A history I don’t know and can only guess at. But it hovers there, in the looks that pass between them and the way they treat each other, even the absent ones. Equals.

Something I’ve never been. Not as a princess. Not with Cain and the Wanderers.

“Anyone else?” I wonder aloud, glancing at the door.

“They wouldn’t know what to do with more of us,” Vos tosses out, and

the room seems to ease with the words, each of them amused. Well, Vos grins. Horus allows himself a small quirk. And Tziah rolls her eyes.

Reven, however, instead of trying to answer the questions I'm sure he can see in my eyes, takes a deliberate step farther away from me. "Now that you've been introduced, I'll go. Give you time to talk."

He's out the door before I can squeak a protest, and the group in the room takes a collective and obvious breath. Which tells me something new—*they* are friends. *He* is not. The Shadowraith stands apart.

He also left me alone. Again.

"Damn Shadowraith." I go after him.

Straight out the door into the night, I stumble at the sight of him not ten feet from the door, half man and half shadow, made even more stark by the streaming light of late afternoon all around us. Intimidating and animalistic.

"Oh no, you don't."

The swirling form of shadow goes stone still, which looks strange stuck like that, and he turns a half-transformed face my direction. "What?"

Guttural and yet silky, that voice slides into my soul.

"You are *not* leaving me to face your people on my own," I inform him around the clenching of reaction happening inside me. "Not again."

After a beat, the shadows swirl again, only this time re-forming into a man. Then he's directly in front of me, expression hard, uncompromising. And yet I get the impression that he's thrown by my demand that he stay.

"Those people have been *voted* in as leaders here. Speak with them, leader to leader." He's back to ordering. "Tomorrow I will show you the proof I promised."

Confusion feels like his shadows churning in my mind. "I thought *you* were in charge here?"

A pause, then a single shake of his head. "I bring people to the Shadowwood. I keep them as safe as I can. But I can't be more than that."

“Won’t, you mean.” I say it slowly, not as an accusation but a realization as I study his features.

His eyes turn flinty. “Can’t.”

I search his expression for the truth I know is hidden there, and it comes to me softly. He holds himself apart for a reason. I’ve seen it in the surprised or even wary reactions of the people when he joins them. I’ve seen it in the way he can’t get away from them fast enough. I see it now in his refusal to be part of them.

He *knows* he’s dangerous.

I glance away. I have to. Otherwise, I’ll give in to the sudden urge to wrap my arms around him. Kiss him like he did me this morning with the intent to give comfort and show him that he’s not alone.

But he *is* alone. Even with those things inside him.

I cross my arms and look him in the eyes. “Well, *I* can’t speak with your leaders without you there.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” he mutters. Followed by, “Why?”

Because I don’t know what I’m doing. I don’t even know who I am—not really. Not anymore. I want to hurl the words at him. Instead, I drop my gaze to my feet and admit something I didn’t even realize myself until this moment. “I’m not used to being around others. Not alone.”

Even among the Wanderers, Cain was always with me. When he wasn’t, things had a tendency to happen. Not good things.

“What do you mean?” Reven looms closer to demand. “You are a princess of Aryd.”

“Who, until a few weeks ago, was never in a room without one of my viziers or the queen to help guide me.” Or even Omma, for that matter. I shoot him a glare from under my lashes. “And if you tell anyone else I said that—”

“I won’t.”

A surprisingly gentle finger under my chin lifts my gaze to him. His expression is still hard, though. “You really mean it.”

I frown at the strange tone of his voice, as if he’s angry about that somehow. I don’t know why he would be.

“Don’t leave,” I say. Not a plea but a command. Maybe I’m absorbing a bit of Reven after being around him nonstop for days.

He glances over my head at the low building, brows drawing low over his eyes, reluctance tilting his mouth down. “All right. But they won’t like it.”

“Why not?”

He doesn’t answer. Instead, he drags his gaze from the building back to me, and all that harsh beauty transforms into something softer. Understanding. He runs his thumb along my jawbone.

I should pull away. Walk away. But I want to lean into it. Despite the tangle of knots in my stomach.

“So brave with a kidnapper in a forest but scared of a few outlaw leaders of rabble,” he murmurs, suddenly at his silkiest.

“They’re not rabble,” I say, frowning, oddly defensive of people I barely know.

He huffs a short chuckle, eyes crinkling. “You’re right.” Then he shakes his head—more at himself, I suspect—and drops his hands from my face.

But I don’t get even a second to breathe a little easier, because he puts a hand to the small of my back. More touching. “Let’s go, trouble.”

All I can think as I let him lead me back inside is that he didn’t call me princess, and that maybe having him around while I probably answer more questions might not have been my smartest move.

A Queen or a Waif

All discussions going on in our absence immediately cease the second we appear.

“Sorted?” Vos asks, looking askance between us. None of them have moved.

“It seems I’ll be joining you this evening,” Reven states heavily.

Not exactly enthusiastic. No wonder they don’t want him around. He was right about how they’d react, too. I could cut the tension that swamps the room with one of my missing knives.

“About damn time,” Vos drops into the void of silence, and Reven sort of startles beside me, though it’s slight enough that I’m not sure the others notice.

So...he was wrong as well. They *do* want him here.

I get it. Kind of. Having my grandmother around was never comfortable, or even that pleasant, given the way she was. But the second she was gone, Tabra and I were both cast adrift, needing her guidance. Wanting the man who saved you and provided your sanctuary to be part of the decisions on how it’s run while still being wary of him seems like a natural response to me.

I clear my throat, since no one else appears to know what to say. “Reven tells me that you have been voted in as the leaders of the Shadowwood?”

That eases them somewhat. Horus is the one who nods a confirmation.

“So Tyndra, Tropikis, Aryd, Mariana, and Savannah are represented. What about Wildernyss?”

“No one stepped up from that dominion,” Vos offers. But they asked, which tells me a lot as well.

“Enough about us.” Vos drops his feet, which have been propped up on

the table this entire time, to the ground, suddenly all business. “Horus and Tziah have been informed about you and your double,” he says, waving a hand at the others in the room.

Damn. “Please don’t share that outside this group. It’s a secret we’ve kept in Aryd, and it has protected our throne for generations.”

“Our lips are sealed,” Vos assures me.

Tziah mimes sewing her lips shut, even tying it off with a double knot. Horus nods, though more slowly. Of anyone, because he’s from Aryd, I would expect the most reaction from him, but beyond a curious light in his eyes, he doesn’t seem upset or surprised. Reven, as usual, says nothing.

“Thank you,” is all I can say. Nothing I can do about it now.

Tziah breaks up yet another round of awkward silence by making an eating gesture. She may be the youngest, but she’s clearly the motherly one of the group.

I think we’re all grateful for something normal and mundane to concentrate on.

At our hovel in Enora, I eat in silence with Omma, both of us at opposite ends of the small table like a standoff. In the desert, I sit with Cain for company, and sometimes, when she wants to be annoying, Pella, all of us side by side on a thick blanket. In the palace, as queen I would be seated at the head of a long banquet table, surrounded by my grandmother’s and now Tabra’s sycophants and advisors.

Since the closest thing to this situation, in my experience, are palace meals posing as my sister, Tabra’s mask falls into place. I move without thought to the head of the table and sit, spreading my skirts around me as I’ve been taught to do since childhood. Silence greets the move, and I glance up with raised eyebrows as none of the others move to take their seats. “Problem?”

All three gazes swing to Reven, who I swear is laughing at me behind

those dangerous eyes. I try not to squirm.

“Not at all,” he says and takes the chair to my right. At which point I realize that, as far as these people are concerned, he’s the higher-ranked person in this room. That makes me the honored guest, and now I’ve taken his seat.

I think of offering to move but decide not to make it a bigger deal than it already is. *Princesses don’t apologize.* This time I bother to listen to the voices in my head reminding me of that. Maybe more of Grandmother is in me than I realize—when I want there to be, at least.

Hungry, I load my plate with the simple fare and tuck in with relish, only to realize that silence has again descended over the table. Another glance up shows every pair of eyes still trained on me.

Being stared at is getting tedious. “I swear I washed my hands and face before I came.”

Which makes Tziah spout a sound that might be a laugh. To them, I’m a queen, and queens are cleaner than any other people on the planet. But I’m more used to my life in Enora, and washing hands was a thing in our grimy hovel.

“You don’t mind our food?” Vos asks.

Oh, *that’s* what I did wrong? Because I am expected to act like a pampered princess, of course. “I’ve had worse...” Raised eyebrows indicate doubt about that. They wouldn’t be all that wrong in their doubts. Tabra has only ever been fed the most expensive delicacies since the cradle.

I’m stepping all over my own toes tonight.

“I’ve traveled for days. I’m hungry,” I tack on in a hasty fix.

That settles them, and they all tuck into their own meals. I hide another sigh. The way the lines are blurring between the girl I was and the woman I am supposed to be, I am going to have to watch myself more carefully.

Only my heart isn’t in it. Maybe thanks to a certain Shadowraith.

Ally.

The word whispers through my head. It's been teasing me. Reven is strong, powerful, and he wants to take down Eidolon. The fact that he basically *is* Eidolon is my biggest sticking point.

Still, maybe all the queens and pawns before me were wrong to try to hide behind our secrets. Maybe all we needed to do was find a more powerful ally. If that ally happens to be tied closely to the king himself *and* filled with evil, is it worth the risk, though?

My gaze trips to my right where Reven is seated, and I catch him watching me in that way he does. And like happens every time, awareness feathers through me, leaving a trail of sparkling heat. He's sitting close enough that, even through my skirts, I can feel the length of his leg not quite touching mine under the table.

"I don't think I'll ever figure you out," he whispers to me alone.

What surprises me a hell of a lot more than his words is the sudden wish for him to try. A new kind of ache settles nearer the region of my heart.

"So," Vos says from the other end of the table, pulling my attention to him. "Will you be wedding yourself to our shadowy savior?"

I inhale a sip of water, and it goes down the wrong way, sending me into a cough fit long enough that Reven is forced to slap me on the back. As soon as I have my breathing back under control, I grab my goblet of water and gulp it down. Seeing that I am not going to choke to death, Reven shoots a look at the others—unmistakable as a silent warning. "That option is *not* on the table."

Was it supposed to be? I thought the idea was to use me to build up the dominion, then hide me to keep me out of Eidolon's sticky fingers?

But becoming Reven's heartmate? Holy hells.

"My apologies," Vos says finally, with a small nod in my direction.

I don't trust my voice, so I wave a hand.

“What other news from Aryd?” Reven asks, the question dropping into the yet again awkward quiet that descends. I can’t say getting to know his leaders is going all that great.

Probably my fault. Omma would certainly say so.

Vos pops a piece of meat in his mouth, chewing thoughtfully, then swallowing. “I got a look at the men advising King Eidolon when he arrived.”

I sit up straighter at this. This sounds important.

“Pollux is still at his side, whispering in the king’s ear morning, noon, and night, and the king’s newest general, Quinten, was there.” His mouth flattens into a harsh slash.

Horus scoots forward in his seat, resting his arms on the table but gripping his fork and knife like they’re weapons. Reven was right. He’s definitely a fighter. “That’s a new name. Is he important?”

“Quinten appears to have the king’s trust like I’ve never seen,” Vos admits, almost reluctantly.

“You’ve seen the king before?” The question is out of me in a burst.

Vos’s and Horus’s gazes cut sharply to Reven, who nods, and Vos goes back to picking at his food. “I was his general before I came here.”

My blood congeals in my veins as all the implications hit. Not only is Reven basically Eidolon with a conscience, I’m sitting at a table with a man who once served the king. Who could serve him still. Who followed his shadows here.

I catch a tiny movement. Tziah inching her hand across the table to Vos, who covers hers with his. I don’t know why, but that small gesture soothes my worry. Is she tied to the reason Vos left?

“But...” Because it’s the only thing that comes to me. “If you’ve served him, then he’d know your face while you were in the Oaesys Palace?”

Vos chuckles at that. “Reven isn’t the only one skilled at not being seen

when he doesn't want to be."

"That doesn't make me feel any better."

He shoots me an insolent grin.

Reven settles back in his chair, though, almost as indolent as Vos in his posture, his expression turning brooding as he stares into the wooden tankard in his hand, which he swirls for a moment or two. "I met Quinten only once before." Reven pauses, thoughtful. "Like must have been drawn to like for the king and his new general."

"What does that mean?" I want to know.

His turquoise gaze lands on me and holds, drawing me in again in that way I can't understand. It's like he's fire and I'm a moth, flying too close, unable to look away from the light. Until I burn to a crisp, that is.

That seems to be the path I'm on. I shift in my seat to alleviate a smidgeon of the tension building inside me. Goddess, he's not even trying.

That kiss must've scrambled something inside me, because this is *all* me.

"It means," he says, "that evil inevitably finds other evil to help put plans in motion. Eidolon has been searching for a ruthless, unethical man to lead at his command. It seems he's found one."

"Fantastic," Horus mutters, and Tziah makes a face that says she agrees with that.

"Err..." I slide a glance toward Vos. Isn't anyone else in the room going to call out the obvious? "I guess *you* weren't ruthless and unethical enough as his general?"

Vos's answering smile is almost as menacing as Reven's can get sometimes. "I guess that depends."

But I'm not letting it go. If I'm tying myself to Reven, the Shadowwood, and therefore these people, I damn well need answers. "People change?" I prod.

I guess he's not used to others questioning him twice. He flicks a glance at Reven, who does nothing.

"You could say that. I'll tell you the story sometime."

Reven is quiet, clearly lost in his thoughts, until he raises his gaze to Vos. "Anything else?"

Vos hesitates, and I know Reven sees it because he drops the lazy posture, straightening, suddenly every inch the man who should be leading this group but refuses. "What?"

Still Vos flicks a glance in my direction, and my stomach ties itself in double knots. Not the confusing kind I've been struggling with thanks to the man to my right, either. This is dread, pure and simple.

Vos leans his elbows on the table, gaze intent on me, and now I'm sure of it. "Tabra's body double is going to marry Eidolon in three days. Only, he thinks he's marrying the real queen."

Three Days

I stand up so fast, my chair tips over, hitting the packed-earth floor with a loud clatter. I'm too busy floundering to really notice.

A long time ago, Pella pushed me into a well. She'd treated me nice—like a friend—for two whole days. She probably spent that long only because it took me the first day to stop viewing every kind gesture and word with abject suspicion. But the second day, when I finally relaxed and accepted she was sincere, she shoved me over the edge of the well.

I hadn't learned to swim yet, not at that age. Not exactly a skill Omma prioritized. Princesses in Aryd don't have reason to swim pretty much ever. I taught myself to swim afterward, but in that moment, I faced death head-on.

I remember screaming and thrashing, clawing at the stone walls until my nails shredded and my fingertips were bleeding. And then I was sinking. Watching through the murky, stirred-up water as the circle of light that was the top of the well grew smaller and smaller, my lungs burning, and knowing I was going to die in that bottomless pit.

This is what that feels like. Like drowning.

Three days.

Omma and Grandmother's voices telling me all the evil things Eidolon has done.

Three days.

Reven telling me that Eidolon is after my power, and the fates of more than my sister and Aryd are at stake.

Only three.

Every self-accusatory thought I've had about leaving Tabra in the hands of the worst monster in all the lands and seas, all the Devourers included.

Three damn days.

Reven jumps up at the same time, stepping closer like he's going to do that hands-in-the-hair thing again. And goddess, I want him to, but his touch might undo my control.

"I'm fine," I snap. Not really. Everything I'd hoped for just got turned on its head. But the need that rises to the top of all the screaming emotions is to try to fix this.

"Good," Reven snaps back. "Because, as much as I want to, kissing you again is a bad idea."

My eyes flare wide at the admission in front of the others, and immediately his do, too, before his face resumes that harsh mask. But even that image isn't going to distract me from the urgency driving me now. I look him dead in the eyes. "I have to go home. Now. Tonight."

At my words, his gaze flares with an emotion that roils in harsh denial. Then his face goes blank.

Off to my left, Vos swears softly. The others don't say a word.

I don't look away from Reven. I'm not going to change my mind, either. Sending a messenger isn't going to be enough now. Not to stop a wedding.

Tabra has been trained to be what she is by our grandmother. For eighteen years. For so long, she doesn't know how to be anything else or even to question it. Which means not leaving her post as the queen.

The only person she might listen to is me.

Reven is searching my expression with a narrow-eyed gaze. Looking for answers to questions like I'm a vault and he could force me open by his will and plumb all the secrets inside me for his own.

"I have to go back to Aryd." I repeat my demand, my secrets like rocks sinking deeper into a river inside me.

Telling him now is complicated. Dangerous. It needs to be a last resort. I was foolish to be so hopeful before, to even consider whispering the secrets of Aryd into his ear. Too many dominoes need to line up without being

tipped over before I can find sanctuary in the Shadowwood.

“That is not a good—” Horus cuts himself off at my sharp look.

“I am...” Hells. Time to pull rank. “I am the *Queen* of Aryd, coronation or no. I will not leave my throne to a girl who can only be a temporary placeholder. I definitely will *not* allow my dominion to be handed over to that *murderer* because I’m hiding here. Who’s to say he won’t kill her as soon as the ceremony ends and take the throne for himself?”

Reven remains unspeaking.

“We could wag the fool,” Vos offers as he inspects his nail beds like millions of lives aren’t balancing precariously on the line here. “Wait and see.”

“Three days isn’t enough time to wait and see.” I turn my head, looking again at Reven, but I get the cold, brittle sense that he’s abruptly distanced himself from me. “I have to go,” I whisper, the plea harsh in my throat. Desperate.

“I know,” he says. The two heavy words drop into the room, and silence ripples outward.

The shadows in the room, cast by the flickering light of the flames in the large stone fireplace, twitch like a knee-jerk reaction, though he doesn’t move.

Horus shifts on his feet. “You can’t—”

Reven’s hand flashes up, stopping him, and Horus snaps his mouth shut.

The Shadowraith—because that’s what he is in this moment; I can feel the shadows moving around us—is all leashed power and absolute surety when he turns to the others. “She goes, and we’re going to help her get there.”

“But we need her here.” Horus isn’t letting this go. “You told us. She can—”

“First I have to get my”—I almost said sister—“body double out of

Aryd. After that, we could come back here. I'll need to figure out what to do anyway, but she can't marry him. That much I know."

I feel more than see Reven's head turn my direction. "You would do that? You would return here?"

I look at him and have to bite my lip because despite that blanked expression of his, I can somehow see a sort of desperate hope underneath. This man has been alone for far too long, even among these people. Has no one ever sacrificed for him?

"Yes."

I promise myself, as soon as Tabra is safely out of Eidolon's hands, that's when I'll tell Reven. Everything.

Harboring two women the ageless king needs, he's going to have to know. Because coming here will only be a stopgap. It's not going to fix anything. Aryd still needs a ruler. Eidolon will still be after one or both of us. And Tyndra will still be sinking.

But I can't tell him the truth until I know Tabra's safe. If this doesn't work, it's best if no one else is the wiser.

It's all a risk.

Stealing Tabra away will bring more than one dominion down on Reven's head—because Aryd will raise armies to save their new queen. But I only have three days to stop this wedding, and this is the only way I see that happening.

Like Reven said to me in the Wildernyss forest not that long ago... sometimes there are no choices.

Reven cuts his gaze to Vos. "Can you get the double out by yourself?"

"No." I shake my head. "It has to be me."

His throat works, and an emotion harsher than I've ever seen from anyone floods his face. The room seems to collectively hold their breath. "Why you?" The words punch from him.

“Because she won’t leave the throne unless it’s at my...um...direct order.” I’ll figure out how to convince Tabra on the way there.

After only a small beat of hesitation, he finally nods. “We need to leave tonight if we have any chance of getting there before the wedding,” Reven says. “We can’t have Eido—” He winces, then alters what he was going to say. “We can’t have the king standing in as ruler in Aryd, with a right to the throne by marriage.”

I lose a silent, sharp breath of relief. Reven is on my side.

“I’ll take her there,” Vos says. “It will be easier to get the two of us in and out—”

“I’m going with her.”

Reven may as well have lopped off his own head, the way the room shudders to a halt. So much for all that getting-to-know-you stuff that this meal was supposed to be about.

Vos surges to his feet, leaning fisted hands against the table as he glares daggers across it at the man beside me. “The hells you say. We need you *here*.” He bangs a fist on the table.

Reven doesn’t so much as blink. His expression gives away nothing, except the burn of his eyes hints at a relentless decision already made. “I can get her there and both of them back faster and safer.”

“And have nothing left over to protect us when the armies of both Aryd and Tyndra figure out where we’re hidden and follow,” Vos points out, flinging out an arm.

Reven doesn’t move. “Can *you* get there before the wedding?”

“Yes.” At Reven’s level look, Vos’s lips pinch white. “Maybe,” he allows. “But it’s better we take that risk than lose you.”

“Even if I was willing to take the risk—which I’m not, because it gives the king too much power—can you stop Eidolon if he becomes a problem?”

Frost spreads from Vos’s fisted hands across the wooden table and up

the nearest goblet until the liquid inside it cracks the thing open like a walnut. “I can handle myself.”

Tziah reaches over, curling her hand into the sleeve of his shirt and sort of tugging. But he doesn’t look away.

Reven shakes his head.

“I can keep the queen safe,” Vos insists.

Reven’s gaze narrows, aiming potent rage at his leader. Vos stiffens but doesn’t back down. Reven glances at me, and something in his eyes glitters. Possession, maybe. That’s not quite right. Protectiveness is closer. Of me? Or the queen I’m supposed to be? Or himself?

“I’m not letting her out of my sight,” he finally says.

I have to build a wall around my heart. Otherwise I’ll wish that means he actually cares about me. Not just as the pawn in this game that is out of my control and out of my depth. Just...me.

“It’s worth losing me to keep both the princesses—the real one and the fake—out of the king’s hands.”

And now I’m shaking my head no.

But I’m sure Reven doesn’t notice because of the way Vos rears back, visibly floored. “You’d sacrifice yourself?”

Reven doesn’t answer.

“Well, isn’t that grand? Our savior, a lump of coal instead of a diamond. I knew I should have gathered all of the leaders for this.” Vos flings up his arms, and frost flies, glistening in the air as it drops to the ground. “You’re going to follow your dick to hell. We can all see how you haven’t been able to take your eyes off her.”

I curl into myself a little at that, uncomfortable with the speculative glances that turn my way.

“You’d leave the rest of us out to hang when they come for us,” Vos accuses. “And they will come for us. For *her*. Do all the people you helped

mean nothing to you?” This time the frost comes from his feet across the packed dirt floor, crawling toward me.

Reven snarls. “Watch it.”

I put my hand on his arm, and he flinches under my touch, then slowly drops his gaze to me.

“He’s right.” I utter the words softly, gently. Because mostly I want to hug him for the way he’s trying to protect me. But the people here are worth keeping safe, too. “I have people I trust in the palace who can help. With Vos to protect me as well, we can do this. Do both. Get her out and keep the Shadowwood safe.”

He stares at me long and hard, denial battling the truth. Finally, Reven gives a single, sharp nod.

Even though I asked, part of me—an even larger part than I’m willing to admit to—stumbles at the fact that Reven isn’t going to be the one taking me. Thankfully, he doesn’t catch my moment of weakness. When did the man I desperately wanted to escape from become the only one I feel safe with?

But he’s already looking away to Vos. “The fastest way is the portal in Tyndra.”

Uh...what? We could have come that way to get here? No days trekking in the woods. No cold. No death worm. No soldiers. No pathetic excuse for a bridge and no Devourer.

Vos straightens. “We don’t use that portal for a reason.”

My righteous anger fizzles. “For the newly initiated, what reasons?”

Vos is the one to answer. “Several. Eidolon. People finding where we are. Anyone tracking you here first.” He aims a hard stare at Reven. “All reasons that still stand.”

“We’re running out of time,” Reven points out.

I can see that Vos wants to argue, but he’s already won a big one, thanks

to me, and Reven is also right. “Fine. We’ll need your shadows to get us inside. That’s the safest way to not get caught.”

The two men are locked in some kind of silent, testosterone-filled battle of wills.

Then Reven nods again. Once. Sharp. “Keep her safe.” His words are an order. One I suspect comes with a death sentence if Vos fails.

Tempting to point out that I am also available to keep myself safe. But they’re having a moment.

Vos’s answer is dead serious. “I will. When do we leave?”

“An hour before dawn. Make your plans. Inform the others,” Reven says. Snarls, almost.

That late? But then it hits me... Does Reven need more shadow to do whatever he has to in order to get us to the temple? I glance around the others, who don’t seem to be questioning his plan. But they could just be in shock. This all happened fast. What do or don’t they know?

Right now, it doesn’t matter.

I bury my questions and start to work through what happens after we’re through the portal. Vos may be skilled at hiding, but I’ve been sneaking in and out of that blasted palace my entire life, and a plan starts to form in my head.

I’m coming, Tabra. I’m coming.

This is going to work. It has to.

PART FOUR
THE FOOL'S MATE

Where He Goes

Plans in place, I honestly expect Reven to pull another disappearing act. After all, if I'm right, he needs to go fill up with shadow. Instead, he turns to me. "I have an idea while we wait."

More? I'm not sure if I can handle more. "What is it?"

He dips his head, bringing his face closer to mine, voice lowered. "I need you to trust me. Can you do that?"

"Yes." I try not to show him how the answer came straight from the heart. I *do* trust him. Despite everything he is, or maybe *because* of who he is.

He blows out a sharp breath, and I chuckle. "Were you expecting an argument?"

"Yes."

"Am I really that difficult?" Omma said so often enough. Grandmother, too. Pella—even Tabra and Cain on occasion.

Reven shakes his head. "You're a fighter," he says simply. Like that's good enough.

He might be the only person in the world who appreciates that about me. Even Cain used to warn me that my smart mouth wasn't going to win me friends among his zariphate.

Reven barely spares the others a glance. "We'll be in the southern clearing until it's time to go if you need us."

Then he takes me by the hand, we're out the door, and I'm almost running to keep up with his long-legged stride. We hurry through the village. Vida, standing outside her store, grins and waves as we pass by her, completely oblivious to how the Shadowwood may not be the safe haven she loves for much longer. And it will be all my fault. I only have time to wave back before Reven's pulling me into the forest the same way I went the

other night when I found him by the tree.

Sure enough, the sound of the brook bubbling happily along reaches me just before we pause at the edge of the clearing, and I gasp.

The Sacred Tree, though cut off from me by the veil of shadow, which it is outside of now, in daylight is even more spectacular. The red of the leaves is a brilliant, rusty hue that is somehow both bliss and sorrow in the same color. They are stark against an equally brilliant white of its smooth bark, which glistens with the nectar it weeps.

Beyond the tree, the woods continue, but not in shadow. Based on the maps I've studied, I know that the warm springs that feed the Sacred Tree are close by, but I can't see them.

Awe doesn't begin to describe what being in the presence of this creation does to me.

Reven squeezes my hand, and shadows come up around us like a screen. Distracted from staring at the tree, I turn to him, except he's not looking at me. I study the side of his face—the cut of his jaw and those slashing brows are harsh. The natural angle of his mouth from this angle appears almost ominous. His shoulders, even loosely held, like now, are broad and strong. Everything about him shouts “stay clear of me.”

But I know how soft his lips can be against mine now.

He glances at me out of the side of his eye. Twice. Then points in the direction he was looking. It takes me a second to see what he's focused on.

A massive gray wolf stands at the bank of the waters, drinking. By its ragged, patchy fur and the whiter coloring around its eyes and muzzle, I'm guessing it's quite old. Old and run-down.

We make no sound, standing utterly still as we wait and watch. After a moment, it tenses and lifts its head, and I realize we're upwind. It turns its face our direction, sniffing.

I peer closer. Cloudy eyes. I've seen eyes like that before. Almost every

time I tried to sneak out of the hovel. “Is it blind?” I whisper.

“Yes. And she is female.”

Despite knowing she’s not using her sense of sight, I feel like the wolf looks directly at me. She even takes a step nearer, then another, and I hold my breath. Then she pulls her lips back, baring her teeth in a wolfy grin, and damned if she isn’t the spitting image of the Hag at her most wily. For a moment, I even think she winks at me.

Then she snorts and runs off, disappearing through the veil of shadows as if they don’t exist.

“What is it with you and animals?”

Reven’s growl of a question has me turning with a frown and a denial on my lips. “It’s *not* me.” Animals have never done anything around me before.

But he’s shaking his head. “The kirin, the harpy eagle—hells, even the death worm and basan all seemed to know right where you were.”

“Coincidence,” I insist.

“I haven’t seen the wolf in a long time.” Reven lowers the veil of shadows, and we cautiously step into the clearing. “I used to think of her as an ancient guardian of the Shadowwood, but I’d wondered if maybe she’d died. But the second you show up...”

I tip my head, considering the man at my side. “I’d say if anyone is the guardian here, it’s *you*.”

He shrugs one shoulder, clearly uncomfortable with the idea. It’s kind of cute, actually.

“Why does that bother you?” I push.

Rather than answer, he moves to a large flat rock at the edge of the water, raised like a table, and folds his long, lean form to sit on it, boots planted on the ground. Even sitting on a rock, the man still reminds me of a coiled snake—deadly ability pretending to be relaxed. He still has my hand

and tugs at me to sit beside him. I have to let go to jump up, wishing not for the first time that I'd been blessed with more height. My legs swing, not reaching the ground, but that's okay.

Assuming he isn't going to answer, I look around us. "So...what are we doing here?"

"I didn't start out intending to provide some kind of safe haven for people," he says, not looking at me. Then pauses again.

I quiet, letting him work through what he wants to say, turning my face into the soft breeze.

This place is so at odds with the danger and urgency driving the conversation we just came from. Part of me is desperate to get away, get to Tabra. The other part is just...tired. I can't do anything until it's time to leave, though. So I do my best to quiet my thoughts and just listen.

Reven's low rumble almost startles me when it comes. "I ran from the monster I was born from and hid here because these woods were rumored, even then, to be haunted. I wanted to keep the evil trapped inside me away from the world." He shakes his head.

Though he doesn't move and his expression doesn't change, he looks lonely all of a sudden. Not a weakness. No one could ever mistake this man as weak. I'm surprised he's showing me this much.

Tempting to take his hand again. "That's hard to do with more and more people finding their way to you," I murmur instead.

He huffs a weary-sounding laugh. "Yeah."

"How *do* they find you?" I've heard some of the stories, and I still don't understand exactly.

He lifts his head, looking out over the meadow, gaze distant like he's seeing the memories. "Different ways. Vos was the first. Something happened in Mt. Ynferno. Not my story to tell. He got himself and Tziah out. The only survivors. I had only put my shadows up in the Shadowood

for myself, and for some reason he felt drawn to the place. They'd intended to go through the portal in the temple and find sanctuary in another dominion, but instead they ended up here."

So Vos and Tziah found him? "But you've also found many of these people and brought them here, haven't you?"

He looks at me then, frowning his surprise. "They've been talking?"

Why is that odd? "Many here have shared their stories with me because I asked. But before you took me, I heard stories of people disappearing from all over"—I almost said Enora, but quickly correct—"all over Aryd. Some speculated that the Shadowraith took them. Though I'm pretty sure they thought the people were dead, not being sheltered."

He doesn't deny it.

"So how did you know?" I prompt.

Reven drops his chin, staring unseeing at the ground. "Night is when people lie in their dark room, or a dark alley, or an abandoned corner in some dark place—always in the shadows—and beg anyone or anything listening for help."

"You hear them?" I ask.

He pauses, then nods slowly, almost reluctantly. "Not clearly. The voices blend in with the shadows inside me. They have to be desperate for the thoughts to be loud enough."

He turns his head then, searching my face in that way he does. I don't know what he's searching for. "I'm not always sure where they are. And sometimes I get to where I think they might be, but they're gone."

Did he ever hear me? Come looking for me? Because I know I've sat in darkness and begged for escape. For a new life.

I'm afraid to ask.

"If you hear them and can find them, you go," I say instead. Not a question. My gut tells me that's what he would do. Who he is.

What a change from only days ago.

“When I can.” He glances around. “Sometimes I have to wait and hope they’re still there when I finally reach them. Often, I’m too late.”

I can’t help myself. I scoot around to face him directly, one leg hitched up on the rock and the other still dangling. I do this so that I can take his face in my hands, like he’s done with me, forcing him to look at me.

The first time I’ve voluntarily initiated touch between us. Recognition of that sparks in his eyes, and I feel it in my core.

“You are a *good* man,” I say.

The spark dies under a smothering of denial that tugs at his brows. “You don’t know me.”

“Is there anything worse that you haven’t told me about?”

“Worse?”

“Well...I know all about your starter.”

He frowns. “My what?”

“Like yeast to start bread—I refuse to label him as your father or your creator.”

That draws a reluctant smile from him.

“And,” I continue, “I know about the evil contained inside you. Anything else?”

There goes the smile, disappearing behind a scowl. “Isn’t that enough?”

Undaunted, I shake my head. “If anything, the fact that you’ve become what you have, saved and helped people and provided a haven, all while fighting the things inside you... I mean it. You’re a *good* man.”

And somewhere along the way to realizing this, my feelings for him have shifted to something warm and wanting and safe, and at the same time exhilarating and fraught. Maybe he was right to call me trouble. It came on fast and yet creeping, a part of me before I even thought to protect myself from it.

And I don't want to.

Everything I Could Do

A stiff breeze could knock me off that rock the moment that thought sinks in. Just like being willing to take risks to escape into the desert, part of me doesn't want to protect myself from the feelings—most of them inexplicable—that Reven stirs in me.

I wrestle with the truth of that while at the same time worrying I'm only feeling them because of everything that's happened. He kidnapped me, I try to remind myself. For good reason, but that reason is as flimsy as down from a sparrow. Still, a connection formed in the heat of high-stress situations probably isn't going to last. Right?

By some miracle, Reven misses all of this mess going on inside me. He glances away, skepticism about my words evident in the tense set of his shoulders and the hardness in his eyes.

Goddess, this man.

I press gently, forcing his gaze back to me. "You. Are. A. Good. Man." I pronounce each word clearly and carefully, willing him to hear me. Hear and believe.

Then I take his hand and, inhaling the fresh scent of him, press a kiss on the inside of his wrist, right on the scars, which sets my own lips tingling. A silent gasp escapes me as I lift my head.

With eyes that remind me of the ocean on rainy days, turbulent and crashing, Reven doesn't look away.

Neither do I.

I'd only meant to make him hear the truth of my words. But now I'm snared, like an animal in a trap I don't want to escape. "You smell like home," I whisper.

Surprise lights his eyes. "So do you. Like the arctic weeping trees that grow among rocks and boulders on Tyndra's shores."

I wonder if that plant is anything like the creosus willows that grow at the edge of water sources in the desert. Even wells sometimes. So tempting to wrap my arms around him and bury my face in his neck and inhale deeply to see if I can tell the difference.

Without thinking, almost like I can't help myself, I move my hand to brush a lock of his hair away from his forehead, the texture silky against my fingertips.

"Princess." A warning.

I don't listen, leaning closer. Because it suddenly hits me that I'm leaving him. I'm leaving him to save my sister, to possibly face Eidolon. If anything goes wrong, this might be the only chance I'll get.

One kiss. Just one. Real, not something to calm me down.

I keep my eyes open, watching for any sign that he doesn't want this, as I softly feather my lips over his. A teasing caress. Tentative, because damned if I know what I'm doing.

"Goddess forgive me," he mutters against my lips.

Suddenly he's moving. Hooking an arm around my waist, he swings me off the rock. I find myself in his lap, straddling him, a heartbeat before he takes over that kiss from where I started.

Gentle yet somehow more urgent.

His lips part mine, warm and firm and commanding, and I am happy to go where he leads, opening for him like a lotus flower rising and spreading out in the sun. Our breaths mingle, growing heavier as we angle our heads, turning the kiss impatient.

The fluttering in my stomach turns mushy and clenches at the same time.

At the brush of his tongue against mine, I make a small sound in my throat. Of what, I don't know. Need? Confusion? Delight?

I hardly hear myself, but Reven must have, because he pulls away

slowly. Putting his forehead to mine, he closes his eyes, breathing hard. So am I.

“Why’d you stop?” I wonder aloud. The shadows didn’t come out this time.

“We shouldn’t,” he says.

I hide a wince. Either my Shadowraith is wrestling with his overdeveloped sense of protectiveness, or he doesn’t feel the same way I do. It would be nice, once in my life, to be wanted. Not for what I can do or who I am or who I look like. Just wanted. My defensive emotional walls start bricking themselves back up, and I fall back on habit.

“Well, I suppose it’s for the best.” I lean back and sigh heavily for dramatic effect, trying for an easy, unaffected grin I’m far from feeling. “I am way too young for you.”

His brows snap down over his eyes at that. “I was separated from the king twenty-three years ago. That’s how old I am.”

Not counting the centuries of vague, patchy memories and history inside him, I guess. But I can’t tease him about that.

Okay, maybe I can.

“And I’ll be nineteen in two months. That makes you four years older. Practically ancient.” I curl that errant lock of his hair around my finger again. “I mean...” I widen my eyes in mock curiosity. “What was it like when the Mother Goddess Nova created the world? That must’ve been quite a thing to witness.”

He picks me right up and deposits me back on the rock beside him, but he doesn’t entirely hide his grin. “I was right before. A holy terror and a pain in my ass.”

Tabra would have been different. Picturing her here, dealing with even half the stuff I’ve gone through—she’d probably be holed up in a room somewhere, too traumatized to move.

Reven takes several steps back, expression turning determined. “I brought you here because I want you to try to make a glass portal.”

My spine goes ramrod straight at that. As changes of subject go, it’s a big one. “I can’t.”

“You can.”

“I make flowers. Bad ones. That’s it.”

He stares at me a long beat, and I stare right back, not backing down an inch. Then, without warning, his gaze drops to my lips and flares with heat. “Big trouble,” he mutters.

“You should have figured that out the first time I threw a knife at your head.”

He grins at that, a wide one that turns his eyes crystal blue, the lopsided hitch to his mouth adorably arrogant, and steals my breath in a *whoosh*. “*That* is the girl I need right now.”

As opposed to one he’d like to kiss. Ouch.

“I mean it,” he says, beckoning me to my feet. I guess touching is out again. “You have the rest of daylight and a decent portion of the night while I’m occupied. You might as well put it to use.”

I’m momentarily sidetracked. “Occupied doing what?”

He gives me a look. “You know what.”

So I was right. He does have to absorb shadows to bolster his power.

I drop the topic and return to his ridiculous idea. “Don’t we want to *not* create more portals? So that Eidolon doesn’t get that ability if he finds me?”

“It’s for your safety. If you can create a portal, you can get places more easily. Or maybe even create safer and faster ways in and out of the Shadowwood.”

Ways to bring more people in, does he mean? Or is this about protecting his people after they have both me and Tabra here?

Putting the Vanished at risk.

I hate that so much. That by being here, we're risking innocent lives. Worse, we're risking people who've already had a difficult life and finally found some peace.

"It's a lot to ask," he says. But gently, which is almost worse. He's coddling me now. "I know. A heavy burden—"

"I'll do it."

He pauses, searching my face. "My people will thank you."

He thinks that's the only reason I would do this? The Vanished of the Shadowwood are part of it, of course. But mostly, I find that I want to take some of the burden that's been on his shoulders so long and share it, if I can. Tightness cinches around my chest at the realization. I still have serious doubts that I can make any kind of difference, but I'll wear myself to dust trying.

"They're important. And so is Aryd." I back away from him, pulling my power forward, effervescent in my blood, my hands illuminating with it, casting a warm yellow glow around me. "But I'm doing this for you."

A Touch of Magic

So it turns out I can be a total coward.

My declaration leaves me more vulnerable than I like. At my words, Reven's expression shifts from surprise to scorching need, which tries to draw me back to him. But it's the wariness that's still there that threatens to break into my soul and steal everything.

I think it's because I see so much of myself in him.

So much of the child who wanted love but was mostly kept away from the few people who could possibly give her any. Someone looked at only as a thing, a tool, a means to an end, rather than as a person with a soul and heart. But, like I said, I'm a coward, so I turn my back on him and raise my hands, pulling sand out of the ground.

I think I feel him close to me, but a check over my shoulder shows he hasn't moved nearer. "Are you going to help me figure this out or not?"

He raises those thick, black eyebrows slowly. "You need my help?"

I turn back to what I'm doing. "I was never allowed to do anything with my power beyond make my flowers, and even that was secret. You use yours a lot. Feel free to share some advice." I don't let myself even glance at him. "I'm going to try to bring some sand up from the soil to work with."

He doesn't say anything, but this time I definitely feel him move closer.

I have to close my eyes for a second to hold my focus on what I'm doing.

Then we get to it. Together, we work through the remaining daylight hours on what I am becoming more and more sure is a lost cause. This should be easy, but it's not, and every effort is failing in one way or another.

As soon as the shadows of dusk start to stretch across the clearing, Reven raises his throne of shadow. Then the blue stones appear, like materializing from whatever pocket he stuffs things into, in a perfect circle

around him. The tree gives a great shake like she's sending him her blessing, and I want to believe it's the wind, but no breeze touches my skin.

I have to say, except for the whole evil-onion-layers bit, Reven's power over shadow seems much handier than sand.

"Should I go somewhere else?" I ask.

Indecision flickers over his face, the way he pauses as he sits. Then he shakes his head. "I'm okay for now."

Not exactly confidence inspiring.

"Keep going," he says as he closes his eyes. "I'll let you know when I'm ready, unless you figure out the portal before then."

I'm not sure where this hope of his is coming from after how badly this has gone so far. I'm certainly not feeling it. Because while he is calm and almost relaxed, I am... Let's just say I've learned something about myself today. Apparently sucking at something important, maybe even lifesaving, makes me pissy and prone to swearing and even violence. The malformed pieces of glass I've produced have taken the brunt of that so far.

I can't even make anything big enough to crawl through, let alone walk through. Previous efforts have cracked, shattered, toppled over, melted, or turned back to sand. At this point I'd settle for accomplishing a small handheld mirror.

Not exactly the rescuer Reven hoped for.

All I'm left with as I sit here are piles of sand all around me that I've pulled from the ground. I couldn't even do that right. The small creek now has a new bend to it that might become a pond, thanks to me sinking the land underneath. Meanwhile, I've made and remade my pile, then returned it to sand when my efforts didn't work, so many times it's not all sand anymore. I don't want that wolf, or anyone else, to cut themselves on a wasteland of glass.

All in all, a useless day. The goddesses got it right, making Tabra

firstborn.

I flop to the ground beside the rock where we kissed earlier and drop my head back against it. It's not that I'm physically exhausted from the use of my power. It's more from my own emotions. I'm only eighteen, and it feels like the fate of the entire world rests squarely on my shoulders.

Pressure clearly doesn't make this lump into a diamond. What were the goddesses thinking, putting any of this on me?

My amulet gives a tiny thump, like it's comforting me. I hope to the high heavens that Eidolon's gift to my sister, if it does anything at all, is a similar comfort. I doubt it, but I need to hold on to hope where I can get it.

With a deep sigh, I raise my hand, palm up, and pull my light forward. The glow has remained bright this entire day, and now, in the dark, even with two moons now hanging crescents in the sky like claws of light, I can barely stand to look at my own flesh, far more brilliant than when I would make my flowers at home.

Why? Because it's darker here? Or because practice and use feed the gift?

Almost without thinking, I pull a small amount of sand closer and heat it. I mold the glowing orange glass into a delicate petal and then allow it to cool.

This is easy.

I've done this a thousand times before, the flower forming under my direction without so much as a flick and swish of my fingers until I reach out and pick up a perfect glass lily—a symbol of hope and new beginnings where I come from—that's small enough to fit in the cradle of my palm. This one is ridiculously better than my first efforts when I was a child.

Practice. That's what it takes to manipulate my powers. Proof that Grandmother got a few things wrong after all. Unfortunately, practice takes time I don't have.

I wrinkle my nose at its smooth flawlessness. Perfect, and yet still a poor imitation of the real things. I glance over at Reven and am snared by the sight of him. Eyes closed, trancelike in his throne of inky swirling shadow, he's both man and darkness. Like me, he's flawed and broken. It's hard to look past the turbulent power that pours off him like the River Tropikis pours off the edge of Wildernyss, a terrifying torrent that could easily sweep you away, but I think I see him more clearly now.

I shift my gaze back to my minuscule creation and stare at the tiny, upside-down reflection of my moonlit face in one of the petals.

What good is making the larger glass to walk through if you can't make it work magically anyway?

Can I even create a portal in my glass? I stare harder into the flower, like it's an onyx ball a seer-woman in the slums of Enora uses to look into the future.

Nothing.

That's not how the portals work, Meren.

Because, of course, it takes *power* to activate it. On a deep breath, I bring my power forward again. Only, rather than forming or manipulating, I send it into a single petal of the glass itself. And wait.

Still nothing.

I puff out a frustrated growl. Beating my head against a stone wall would be more productive than this.

Jaw clenched, I try once more. This time, rather than just one petal, I push my light into the entire flower and picture what I hope is the safest possible portal for the other end. One without guards, at least when we were there. The one that Reven dragged me through the night he took me.

I imagine where it is in the Devotion Mountains inside the Queen's Tower and what the room looks like, so unlike any others, which are all found in temples with elaborate and rich decor all around.

A small burst of heat sparks from the amulet against my chest, and suddenly I'm gazing at multiple tiny versions of that very room reflected in each of the petals of my glass flower.

"Oh my goddess!" I'm so startled that it worked that I lose my focus and bobble my flower, almost dropping it.

"What?" The growl that comes from Reven swings my gaze to where he's seated.

Or rather, where he was seated. The throne is gone, and the shadows have disappeared. He's on his feet, hands fisted, gaze sweeping the glen for danger, his face cruel in its intensity.

"Nothing," I assure him, scrambling to my feet as well. "I—" I pause and hold up the flower I made. "I made it show me the other side of a portal."

He looks at my face, then looks at the flower and back at my face. Then, finally, he rolls his shoulders. Slowly, his hands unclench as he stands upright. He really was ready to demolish anything threatening us. Or me?

"Which one?" he asks.

I scowl. "What? No *Great job, princess!* or *I knew you could do it!*" After he's watched me struggling all damn day.

He cocks his head, waiting for my answer to his question.

"The secret one in the Queen's Tower." I'm grumbling now.

"You figured that out, hmmm?"

I shrug. "I'm a princess. I was made to memorize maps and information on all the dominions my entire life. I knew about the tower before you took me. Just not the portal inside it."

"I see." Why does that seem to bother him? "Do you think you can make something big enough for us to get through?"

With a grimace, looking at the small dunes of sand all around me, I shake my head. "Only if I sell my soul. But even then, I'd probably get

swindled.”

He doesn't argue, doesn't push. “Then we stick with the original plan.”

He prowls closer, and I catch my breath at the way he moves, at the peril that cloaks him now that he holds more darkness within him. The same way that she-wolf moved.

“Show me how it works?” His demand yanks me out of my thoughts.

Flower in hand, I repeat what I'd done. For a long string of seconds, I worry that it won't work. That a moment ago was a fluke. But before the worry can expand in my chest, the plain stone room on the other side of the portal in Wildernyss appears.

Reven wraps his hands under mine as he stares at the flower.

And I stare at him. So close to me now. Touching. After that taste today in the sunshine on that rock, the part of me that's had to hide and steal and fight to get anything that's just for me...that part wants *more*.

“Here.” I place the flower in his hands.

His eyebrows wing up, and now he's watching me, that wariness back.

I shrug. “A gift.”

To remember me by after all this is over.

I almost expect some kind of teasing remark—maybe even sarcasm. But instead, without a word, he draws forth that smoky pocket and disappears the flower into it.

Then he drops his hands to his sides, and, from the way he's watching me, I almost think he's going to kiss me again.

“Let's go find Vos,” he says instead.

Out of the Woods

Urgency nipping at my heels, I follow Reven back to the village and up to my room, hoping to cobble together some semblance of traveling attire. Interestingly, the first thing I see when I walk in is clothing laid out for me again. Vos or one of the others must have told Vida.

Mental note to thank her after I return.

The combination of what she's provided this time is a mishmash. Most of the garments are clearly from Aryd and meant for traveling. The same clothing I wear when I'm Meren in the desert—well-fitted pants and shirt, both in black, that are breathable and easy to move in. The other items, though, are not of Aryd—thicker pants, boots, and a lovely white-furred cloak. These I'll need for the harsh Tyndran weather outside the Shadowwood.

I don't waste time and change quickly.

When I open the door, it's to find Vos, not Reven, waiting for me. He has also changed into clothes meant for travel, his own white-furred jacket tossed negligently over one shoulder. He's not grinning or joking, though, so I'm dealing with serious Vos. Maybe even still angry Vos. I glance behind him, but no one else is there.

"Where's Reven?"

"Walking on water," Vos drawls.

I cross my arms, unimpressed.

"He said he'll meet us along the way. Ready?"

No. "Of course."

Tziah is waiting at the bottom of the stairs. She hugs Vos, who rests his chin on the top of her head. "I'll be right back," he assures her.

To my surprise, she turns to me, opening her arms in an invitation. Without hesitation, I step closer to hug her, little pricks pelting my heart at

the sweet gesture. Then she lets go, waving as we walk away.

No one in the village is stirring, the rest of the Vanished ignorant in their beds of the fact that the woman who'd been brought here as salvation is, instead, stealing away in the middle of the night. I pause at the edge of the buildings, looking back over my shoulder. A pain twinges in the center of my chest. The same one that strikes every time I have to leave Cain and the Wanderers to return to Omma. Or leave Tabra to return to Enora.

My hand creeps up to finger the necklace snug against my skin under my clothing. A habit Omma had, too, come to think of it.

Please let me make it back to the Shadowwood with my sister alive.

"Tabra?" It takes a second to realize Vos is calling my sister's name.

I turn back to face him and have to blink. My eyes must be playing wishful tricks on me, because I think I saw a pair of aquamarine eyes in the darkness over his shoulder.

Familiarity strikes softly. All those moments before this when I thought I wasn't alone in the shadows, when I'd sneak through the streets of the city and out into the desert...was he there? Did the shadows tell him about me? Did he hear the longings and secrets I told the dark? Maybe this is wishful thinking, projecting what I've learned of him onto lonely memories to make them easier to bear.

After a second, the sensation fades. There's nothing there.

At my nod, Vos takes a different path through the trees than I've gone before, warning me to stay close as the shadows grow, blotting out the crescents of the moons and turning everything even more shaded. Quieter, too, like the animals know not to come here, either. And colder. Shivering, I slip on my new cloak, which is silky against the only exposed skin at my neck.

Then, with jarring abruptness, the shadows part, and Reven is there ahead of us.

He takes in my appearance with one sweeping glance and stills. Not the other ways I've seen from him that involved danger, determination, study, or even anger. This is different. This is the way I'd once seen a desert howler fox stalk a vixen—not as prey or competition but to mate.

I gulp. If this is what Vos sees when Reven looks at me, I understand his concern. Because an answering tumble of sensation thrums through me, pulling me taut. Suddenly, thanks to a delicious, suffocating heat, my cloak is too hot, but I don't take it off.

You've got to stop this, I silently order myself.

My body ignores the command. Traitor.

"Are you sure about going yourself?" Reven asks me, the question sort of snapping me back to the mission. "I can't guarantee your safety. Not even to get into the temple here."

I hold his gaze. "I'll come back. I promise."

He blows out a sharp breath. Then, not moving his gaze from mine, he takes me by the hand and leads me off to the side. Standing close enough for me to inhale the fresh desert willow scent of him, he lifts my chin with a finger to talk to me in hushed tones. "You have your knives?"

They were among the clothes Vida left me.

"Do dead souls pass through the eye of a needle?"

He gives me a blank stare.

Do they not have that saying in Tyndra? "Yes. That means yes."

"Good. I know you can handle yourself. If you sense danger, don't wait for Vos or me. Run." I start to shake my head, and he gives my elbow a little squeeze. "We can't have you captured. You made a promise you'd come back to me. This is part of it."

Wait. "That's not what I promised—"

He dips his head, gaze penetrating. "I know. I'm adding my own terms."

The part where I'm coming back to *him*, or the order to leave him

behind if it means saving myself? There's a lot to unpack in those two amendments, but he isn't going to let this go. I can see it in the hard cast of his jaw, the way the skin over his cheekbones stretches tight. I truly have him worried, and the lonely child I once was—the one longing to be cared about just for herself—wants to reach out and grasp onto him. Curl into him.

I don't.

"I'll run if I have no other choice," I say. "That's the best I can offer."

His lips press flat, and he sort of growls, though not at me, I sense. Especially as his gaze drifts to my mouth and lingers there. "I guess I have no choice but to accept that."

I smile. "Smart man."

I get the impression that he's rolling his eyes at me, even though his face doesn't do anything. Then he straightens, looking over my head at Vos. "Let's go."

I expect Vos to continue leading us out of the woods, but he doesn't move, so I glance at Reven, eyebrows raised in question.

"This is where we travel by shadow."

"Shadow," I repeat warily. I've already been carried around that way a couple times. I can't say I want to do it again.

Turquoise eyes are laughing at me, the wisp of a smile playing about his mouth. "Not like before."

"Should I thank my lucky stars for that?"

His smile widens, turns into something more solid. "I'll take Vos first. Then you."

He doesn't see Vos's quick frown behind him, but I do. Why?

Before I can ask, Reven steps away and claps a hand on Vos's shoulder. Darkness rises up and consumes them so fast, if I didn't know what was happening, I would've wondered if the gates of the first level of the hells

had opened beneath their feet.

Almost as fast, in a reverse version, Reven returns. “I have to touch you,” he says. “Don’t cut off my balls.”

“You just touched me—” I cut that argument off as it sinks in that he knows about my use of those words at all. I narrow my eyes. “Did Vos tell you that?”

He laughs outright this time. “I heard.”

And now I have part of an answer, at least. Reven laughs with his entire body, eyes crinkling at the corners even after he’s done. That brief moment of happiness lights me up inside.

“Yeah, well. That’s a last resort for the truly...evil...” I trail off, realizing what I’m saying too late.

He steps into me, surrounding and yet not touching. “Evil exists in all of us,” he murmurs. “Even you, if you’re pushed, I imagine.”

Not an answer.

“I do know something about that.” I’m not the pampered royal he thinks. Even more, I’m not as sheltered as my sister, and my entire purpose in life is driven by the fear of evil. So I do know.

He huffs an unamused, almost sour laugh. “I think I realized that the first time I ever saw you.”

I frown. Me or Tabra?

Any response I might have made is cut off when he lifts both my arms to wind around his neck, then wraps one arm under my coat and around me to place his hand at the small of my back.

Uh, this is *not* how he did it with Vos, but I’m too busy trying to contain my overwhelming awareness of how our bodies are pressed together to comment. His hands warm my skin underneath my thick coat.

It’s a losing battle.

Shadow envelops us, but all I see is Reven.

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Proof

Unlike previous experiences with his shadows, I can still see. I'm also not floating. The only sound is my breath, coming faster now. Darkness swirling and cocooning us, it feels like we're standing still, our feet on the ground, and yet, at the same time, we're moving. I can sense it, just not see it.

So I focus on him. And in those glorious, vibrant eyes, I find tranquility.

The kind I'd often imagined experiencing walking along the beaches on the other side of Aryd's glass walls on those perfect sunny days when the water is crystal clear. Assuming no monster came for me, of course.

A flicker of...something...twitches at Reven's brows. Another shadow?
He squeezes his eyes shut.

"Reven?"

Only, as quickly as they overtook us, the shadows disappear. He opens his eyes on a deep breath and nods over my shoulder. "Look."

I turn around in the circle of his arms and gasp. Reven has brought me not to the temple but somewhere else. We're outside, and I can make out silvery fields of snow, billowy with drifts.

"It looks like home," I murmur to myself.

At night, in the moonlight, the deserts around Enora appear white, the crystals in the sand sparkling in the beams, a blanket of stars overhead. I always liked to think of them as the millions of souls who made it to Allusian and are watching over us from the heavens.

Reven's sinful voice wraps around me and me alone. "I know," he says, warm breath brushing against my cheek. "I've seen them, too."

I startle. Did I say all that out loud?

Reven's hand, now on my stomach, shifts, dipping lower and smoothing around to feather over my hip, as if he's testing my curves. It suddenly

dawns on me that I'm snuggled in nice and tight against his chest, like lovers watching the stars and making plans.

All my wants fight all my responsibilities. The safety of the Shadowwood is gone, and reality is intruding.

I need him. As an ally. But I probably shouldn't let myself want this. Want him.

Awkwardly, I step to the side, and he lets me go. I'm too afraid to turn and meet his eyes. Maybe he hadn't been testing my curves. Maybe he'd just been trying to move me away.

I try to cover my unease with words. "How far did we come?"

"About twenty leagues."

Wait a second. I plonk my hands on my hips and glare at him over my shoulder. "Why the hells didn't we travel to the Shadowwood from Aryd that way? We could have saved so much damn time!"

Not to mention the death worm, and the basan, and the soldiers...

Reven *tsks*. "You kiss your mother with that mouth?"

My first thought is that I don't want to ruin it by pointing out my mother died in childbirth, thanks to me. But seriously—*this* is when he decides to tease?

I cross my arms. Which only has Reven's gaze dropping, then raising so slowly that a blaze of heat creeps up my neck and into my cheeks.

"I'm serious," I insist. "Why not?"

Reven shoves his hands in his pockets. "I have to save my power, so traveling by shadow is a last resort. And we avoid using this portal in general. Even more so with you. I didn't come this way because I'd stolen a queen. I didn't want to make it obvious or easy to find where I took you, so we couldn't come directly here."

He frowns, and I get the sense that he's holding something back, but his expression is almost perplexed rather than stony. I decide, for once, to drop

it.

“Okay, so why are we here now? Why did you bring me to *this* spot instead of the temple?”

With a gentle finger, he turns my head away, the opposite way we’d been looking a second ago.

The first thing to hit me, and I don’t know why it didn’t sooner, is the scent of ocean—fresh and salty and windswept, curling together with the almost tangy scent of pine trees—the combination reminding me of crossing that awful, rickety excuse of a ladder and the Hollow.

I blink at the sight laid out before me.

A small, stone house with thatched roofing sits so close to the waters, the ocean is lapping at its walls. My stomach bottoms out with fear for the people who must live there. Why in the name of the mother goddess would anyone build there at all, let alone without more protection? Are they asking for a quick and terrible death?

My last time this close to monster-infested waters rises up and, without thinking, I grab Reven’s wrist, ignoring his grunt. “The Devourers,” I say quietly, carefully.

“Rarely here. This is the narrower passage separating Little Tyndra from the mainland. Most of the Devourers can’t fit past the icebergs that guard both ends.”

“Most?”

He grimaces. “The sinking of the land has widened the gap somewhat.” Then he points at the house. “That dwelling used to be a league from the shore.”

I suck in sharply. Peering closer, I can see other evidence of this. The spiking tops of trees are sticking out of the water.

Reven’s proof for me.

Tyndra *is* sinking. All of it. The mainland worse than Little Tyndra, but

I can see hints of it around there, too. The same way Wildernyss is raising into the skies, higher with each passing year? Why?

“I don’t think I can fix this,” I whisper with a shake of my head.

It’s more land than I’d pictured for some silly reason. A whole dominion? Learning to make my tiny flowers took years of practice. I can’t even make glass big enough to walk through. How in the name of the Allusian heavens am I supposed to be able to lift an entire dominion?

“Let me worry about that,” Reven insists in a voice gone gruffer. “First, we need to get your double and get you both back here safely.”

He nods to the left, and I swivel my head to find, in the distance, the spires of two massive towers rising above the barren land, one on this side, one on the other side of the channel, barely visible against the night sky. Like the walls in Aryd, they don’t reflect moonlight, and their bulk blocks out stars. To me they appear...sinister. Like no temple I’ve ever seen. Not even the black-walled temple in Oaesys, which is dark and ornate yet somehow still welcoming.

Night shrouds the structures so that I can’t see the tops or the bridge that I know connects them up high.

I’m suddenly beyond grateful for Reven’s shadows, getting into a place like this.

“Goddess please guide our feet,” I murmur. Pray, more like. Mostly to settle the sudden attack of nerves scrunching in my belly.

“*Permitte divas cetera,*” Reven whispers beside me in the old language. One only authorities are taught, at least in Aryd. I know the phrase, of course. It means *leave all else to the goddesses*.

“*Quis custodiet ipsos divas?*” I change the phrase from “who guards the guards” to “who guards the goddesses.”

He shoots a quick look at the skies, as if he’s expecting lightning to strike from the cloudless expanse for my insolence.

“You risk too much, princess.”

I huff a laugh. Omma would agree. “I’ll tell you a secret.”

He waits in silent question.

“I still pray, despite all evidence that the goddesses are either dead or no longer care for their creations.”

“What do you pray for?” Reven asks.

My first instinct is to pop off with something flip like “the patience of all the saints.” But his curiosity is a spark around me that only I can see. It’s rare for someone to care about me. Even about such a simple thing.

His question is tricky, though...what do I pray for as Meren or as Tabra? Which answer should I give? A little of both. “Many different things. Guidance for me, for the viziers, for my grandmother until her recent death, then for her place in Allusian. I ask for different things for my people, depending on needs.” I shake my head, then shoot Reven a pointed look. “Including those who have been disappearing into the shadows.”

Reven huffs. A sound that might have been a laugh. “Do you still pray for that?”

“Maybe I word it a different way now,” I toss back.

“Well let’s hope the goddesses hear you this time,” Reven mutters, though more to himself. “We’d better go. Vos is waiting.”

He tugs me back into his arms, and shadows rise around us. Only this time it takes longer to get where we’re going, and I can feel the way his chest is rising and falling against me. I glance up at him, and again, he’s squeezing his eyes shut.

The second we arrive in a long, empty hallway, I’m sure something is wrong, because Reven lets go of me to pitch over, hands on his knees, sucking in air. I bend over with him, hand to his back, and can feel how hard he’s struggling.

“What’s wrong?” I ask. “Are you tired?”

He pulls away from my touch, his face forbidding. “No. I... My control is slipping.”

His control over the shadows, he means. That can't be good.

“What have we here?” an unfamiliar voice taunts.

We both jerk up to find a door open and a soldier standing there. Inside the room behind him, Vos lays in an unconscious heap on the floor. Meanwhile, more doors open, and three more soldiers step out.

They're dressed in the same armor as the ones who attacked me and Niri in Wildernyss, but these ones also wear long, white fur-covered cloaks, which must help them blend into the snow.

Camouflage. Smart.

Any second now, Reven is going to take care of them. Or shadow us out of here. Or something.

“Two more trespassers,” the soldier by Vos muses. “Interesting.”

“Reven?” I whisper. “Any time now.”

“Fuck.” Reven's muttered word has me jerking my gaze to him. He stares back with the closest thing to panic I've seen the man show. “I can't —”

He can't. My eyes go wide for a heartbeat. Is this the same as before in Wildernyss? Did he exhaust himself getting us here, and now he's too weak to hold the shadows back, let alone fight?

Hells. Desperate instinct kicks in, and I turn my head to address the soldier, words tumbling out. “We're lost. Maybe you can point us the way out of here?”

One of the soldiers slams the hilt of his sword into Reven's head.

He drops to the ground, head hitting the cut stone floor with a crack that makes me wince.

My blood turns to ice. I glance at the two bodies on the ground, my promise to Reven coming back to bite me in the ass, because I'm *not* going

to run. Even with my knives, I am beyond certain that I can't fight off all the soldiers and make it to the portal.

I do the only thing I can—raise my hands in a sign of surrender.

Pain shatters through my head, my world tilts, and I collapse to the ground.

Reven's slack face is the last thing I see before I'm out.

Into the Hands of Enemies

Consciousness returns slowly, like my head is stuck in a bog. Even so, the first thing that hits me is how freezing I am. I'm almost numb with it. The parts that aren't numb ache so hard, my body is shaking, trying to generate warmth. All except my cheek and part of my right side, which are strangely comfortable.

Light, overwhelming in its intensity, penetrates my eyelids, and I squeeze them tighter shut, trying to block it out. But what I should be doing is waking up.

Yes, wake up, a small voice inside me urges.

Before I manage to crack open a bleary eye, other sensations filter in, one at a time. I think I must be lying on icy ground and something else lumpy and warmer. Familiar. My head hurts like someone gouged a hole in my skull and filled it with hot coals. A nasally voice I don't recognize is firing off questions.

"Why are you here?"

Me? Why is the owner of this grating voice bothering me?

"We are coming to give an offering of thanks to the Goddess at the Sacred Tree."

I twitch involuntarily at the deeper, silkier voice coming from under my ear, all around me. Reven. He must be the lumpy source of warmth I'm partially lying on.

I struggle to open my eyes, to understand what's happening, to place myself anywhere that makes sense, reaching for control over my muscles and finding none, my head a wasteland of fuzziness and agony. Memories hit with a throb-inducing spike, sending a wave of nausea through me.

Oh goddess. The soldiers. Reven. What happened?

“Stay asleep,” Reven whispers at me.

Not difficult when I can’t even make my eyelids function properly. But I still and listen as whoever is here drills Reven with more questions. Ones he answers without hesitation—some kind of cover story, claiming we are Tyndrans. Finally, footsteps clomp away. His interrogator is not happy, by the sound of it. By that time, I am able to force my lids open, only to encounter a turbulent gaze close to mine. I was right. The lumpy thing I am laying on is his lap.

He smooths my hair from my forehead, the gesture surprisingly tender. “How are you feeling?”

I have to clear my throat to make my voice work. “Like someone collapsed my skull, shoved the hellfires inside, then froze my remains deep within the heart of an iceberg. Thanks.”

He searches my face for a long moment, then shakes his head. “You’re a walking trouble magnet.”

“You realize that you’ve been with me for all the trouble, right? Maybe *you’re* the magnet.” I must still be woozy, because my instinct is to wrap my arms around him and bury my face in his neck, grateful that he’s there. That I’m not alone. I frown instead. “My knives?” I go to feel for them, but he stops me.

“They declawed you while we were both out.”

Terrific. I groan and settle back against him. “Why aren’t we dead? I feel dead.”

“There’s blood in your hair, but I can only feel a knot.” Reven’s scowl is ferocious, sending a different kind of chill through me. “I’m going to kill the bastard who did this to you.”

The sky is covered with gray clouds, but the sun hitting both the clouds and the snow is brilliant. It’s daylight. How long have we been here? Where *is* here?

“You didn’t kill him already?” I grumble, only half joking.

Then the *rest* of our ill-fated journey comes back to me.

The guards in the temple. Vos lying unconscious on the floor.

Reven, compromised.

“Not yet.” Reven shifts under me. “And we have a bit of a problem.”

I don’t like the sound of that. I squint at him. “What?”

Contrition clouds those seafoam eyes. “The soldiers think we’re Vex. I told them we’re bondmates, newly connected. Vos is our...companion.”

Bondmates? Good goddess almighty.

Binding is serious magic. Rare. A vow and ritual well beyond simple marriage. One reserved for two people who trust each other implicitly. More than that, two people who don’t just want to be together but who *have* to. Through the rest of eternity. From this life into heaven, the hells, or the next life. A compulsion, I’ve heard.

My mouth drops open. “Why’d you do that?” And more importantly, why does my mind immediately plunge into a chaotic jumble of visions of *exactly* what it’d be like to experience the intimate bonding ritual with Reven? This is not the time or place.

“Vex here come to offer thanks to the goddess when they bond.” He scrubs a hand over his face. “I said it to explain our presence, but also hoping they wouldn’t try to separate us.”

Separate us?

For the first time since waking, I glance around only to jolt as it finally hits me that we’re in a cage of sorts, one not tall enough to stand in. Metal bars surround us on all sides with a metal sheet for a roof, all welded together. The bars appear to be planted deep into the snow-covered ground. Which explains why my entire backside is numb.

What’s more, we’re surrounded. From my vantage point on the ground, all I see are canvas-walled tents. Rows and rows of them. To my left, the

ground naturally drops away, and hundreds more are laid out.

Goddess save us. This isn't a few soldiers. It's an *army*.

The sounds of the camp buzz in the air. The hustle and bustle of hundreds or more. They must be cooking their meals, because the scents of fire and meat waft to me. A burst of laughter sounds from nearby, followed by good-natured ribbing. I guess someone lost a bet.

We're still here.

My fuzzy brain is finally starting to piece everything together and put it in the right order. Because, if we're still here, that means Reven hasn't been able to get us out.

"Why haven't you—"

His hand clamps over my mouth. "Careful," he warns. "We don't know who might be listening."

Wide-eyed, I nod, and he lowers his hand.

I change my question to "Can you get us out?"

He shifts under me again, and his voice, when it comes, is like someone took a knife to the fabric of night. "It's taking every single thing I have to keep what's inside me locked up."

He was already struggling before the soldiers knocked him out. "Why?"

Reluctance works over his face, and he drops his head back against the bars. "I'm pretty sure it's you."

"Me?" I squeak.

The shadows inside him are a problem because of me? A million thoughts fly through my mind trying to work that one out, and it takes me a moment to realize I'm babbling a lot of them out loud.

I cut myself off abruptly. "Sorry," I mutter. "I talk when I get stressed."

Amusement glints at me. "You think I didn't realize that the second I took you?"

I actually find myself wanting to smile back. Laugh, even. See? I react

badly to stress.

He glances around us. Then back to me, serious again. “The...things inside...get stronger on the mainland and in the temple. Trying to return to the king, I think. I knew that, which is why I...”

“Powered up?” I supply.

He nods. “But it’s been getting harder around you. To control them.”

I have no idea what to say to that.

A shake of his head, mouth an unamused slash. “I think maybe it’s because I’m so...protective...of you. It started getting worse once I took you.”

Great. One more thing that’s my fault.

“There’s no way I can do anything to get us out anytime soon.” He shoots a pointed look at the bright skies.

Right. So, he’s holding back evil—barely—and can’t recharge, however that works. And we’re in a cage. Together. And I make it worse.

Damn, I really wish I had my knives.

Maybe we should talk about something else. “Are there always this many soldiers here?”

“No.” At the grim roll of thunder in his voice, I push back to look at him more closely. Because I recognize suspicion in the tone.

“Where’s Vos?” I ask. I don’t see any sign of another cage.

“I don’t know.” Even grimmer. Yup. Definitely suspicious.

Maybe Vos managed to escape, or maybe he’s being kept somewhere else. Separating us to check our stories seems like a smart move. “Did he come this way when he followed us back to the Shadowood?”

Because if he did, and these soldiers had been here, he would have warned us. Right?

“No. He came the same way we did.”

There’s something not right about that. “The ladder was broken,

though.”

“There’s a second one.”

I should have guessed that. This is not a man who leaves things to chance. “Then he didn’t know. He was on the floor, unconscious.”

Reven grunts, which could be agreement, disagreement, or a comment on the weather.

Translation: Subject closed.

Fine. He can worry about Vos’s connection to the Tyndran soldiers by himself. I study our cage. “Can we dig under the bars?”

“These soldiers have a metal Hylorae. He buried them deep.”

I force myself to sit up, groaning with the effort and swaying a bit as the pounding in my head, like the drums Aryd’s military uses to stay in step, threatens to topple me either into passing out or vomiting every scrap of food in my stomach.

With a lot of deep breathing, I push through the pain.

“Let me try.” There’s got to be sand in the ground under the snow. Look at what I did to the creek without meaning to. What if I can do the reverse effect and make it push the cage out? It would be like skin pushing out a deep splinter—only a lot faster. I hold out my hand, ready to call my power up, only to have Reven snatch me by the wrist.

“Wait.”

“For what?”

He nods at something over my shoulder, and I turn to see a man standing at the end of the row of tents. He’s dressed in white-and-blue military gear, much fancier than the soldiers on the hill or even the woods in Wildernyss. His back is to us.

“If he turns this way, we need to put on a show. As bondmates.”

40

Chaste

My mouth goes dry. “Um, don’t bondmates touch a lot?” That sounds problematic for a man who’s trying to contain a large amount of evil that seems to have a problem with *me*. I don’t even want to think about my own reaction to him right now.

I almost expect him to smile or tease me, but he’s not the Reven from earlier, from in that clearing. The mask that hides all his emotions is firmly back in place. “They do, but we don’t have to go far. Just enough that they believe us.”

Because if they don’t believe us, they won’t let us go. If neither of us can get us out... We need them to believe.

Ah hells.

“We’ll keep it chaste,” Reven says. “To be safe.”

So he doesn’t lose control of what’s inside him, he means. Got it.

My mind flashes back to the kiss on the rock, which is completely unhelpful. How am I supposed to hide the way my body lights up at his touch? And at the same time pretend to be a bondmate obsessed?

This is such a bad idea.

“Look at me,” he says.

I do, but his expression doesn’t reassure me. He’s calm. Deadly calm and grim with it.

“Chaste,” he repeats. “We can do this.”

Maybe *he* can. I’m already a mess.

His gaze flicks over my shoulder. “He’s watching.” He raises a hand to wrap a lock of my hair around one finger.

I try not to bite my lip because I like this simple touch. I like the way it makes me feel tethered to him.

“Ready?” he asks.

We have to put on this show now? “You tell me.”

Another glance over my shoulder, and he nods tightly.

I guess we’re doing this. My body feels like an awkward assortment of limbs and emotions as I try to figure out where to put my hands. His knees? His shoulders? Why am I so bad at this?

I tentatively wrap my fingers around his wrist. “Good?”

Light flares and dies in his eyes, like night devouring the stars. “Too good.”

I jerk my hand back like he’s on fire. Stars. If I can’t even touch his wrist, we’re in serious trouble. Needing a redirection, I blurt out, “Tell me something no one knows about you.”

His eyebrows wing up. “You want to know this right now?”

“Yes.”

Lips pursed, he twirls my hair around his finger again. “I don’t remember my family.”

His words hit me in the chest. I didn’t expect an answer like that. I was thinking he’d say he never learned to swim or something. I manage to rearrange myself against him so that we’re chest to chest, eye to eye. Close. Intimate. “That must be hard. The not knowing.”

He studies me for a long moment. Then, like at the ladder, his hand slides up under my hair, fingers splaying against the back of my neck. Is this still for show? “I’m not used to taking care of someone. Of wanting to.”

Goddess. My lungs feel like they can’t decide if they want to burst or stop working altogether. This feels like dangerous territory. Does he mean what I think he does? I clear my throat. “You want to take care of me?”

“Yes.”

When he slips his hands deeper into my hair, I sigh. And give in a little. “I think maybe I want to take care of you, too.”

He stills beneath me. “You’d be the first.”

I can relate. My life has only had a smattering of people who care. More often than not, I'm by myself. Time with Cain and Tabra is few and far between.

Reven traces a finger across my forehead, down my temple, along my cheek, and to my chin, which he tips up with the slightest pressure. All thoughts of life before Reven vanish. His touch is a whisper and yet leaves a trail of sensation along that path, awakening my body with effervescent bursts of sensation.

I shiver. Chaste can apparently be *enticing*. A whimper escapes me, and he stops.

"Maybe..." He swallows. I can feel his hands shake. "Maybe try to not make noises like that."

"Maybe try to not make me want to." The words are out before I can stop myself.

His eyes flare with heat...and darkness. "Princess, touching you is quickly becoming an addiction."

I hide a shuddering breath.

He closes his eyes and clenches his jaw. "*Damn it.*"

A small sound of distress escapes me. The edge to his voice has my body tensing, ready to flee, but his hand tightens in my hair. To trap me?

His eyes snap open, and my gaze collides with his, expecting to see a shadow. He's still himself, thank the goddesses, only this isn't controlled or angry Reven. Or cold Reven. Or understanding Reven. The man who looks back at me is all blazing need, something he's never let me see before. Not even in the clearing.

He's letting me see now. Or maybe he can't help it.

A muscle in his already-clenched jaw ticks, the strain of holding what's inside him at bay visible. Shouldn't these soldiers have known better than to cage a monster? How close to the edge of unleashing hell is he?

Before I can ask, Reven wraps both hands around my thighs and yanks me onto his lap, straddling him like I had on the rock.

Whoa. Okay. This is *not* chaste anymore. But he's still Reven, so I wait, wide-eyed and wishing, to see what he does next. Because my own control is so tenuous, it might as well be nonexistent.

My stomach tightens as Reven moves his hands up my legs with excruciating slowness, his thumbs creeping ever closer to what is now my pulsing, heated center.

"I dream of this," he rumbles. "Of being close to you."

His words are a shock. He dreams about me? This man made of evil and shadows who keeps himself apart even as he saves others?

On a shuddering breath, he trails his hands over the flare of my hips, the dip of my waist, where his fingers curl possessively into my skin, his thumbs barely brushing the sensitive undersides of my breasts. "Tell me what you dream about."

I lean into his touch, my head swimming. "I used to dream of finding a place where I can be me. Of having someone who sees me for who I am and not what others want me to be. Of being...loved."

"And now?"

I lift a hand and run my fingertips across his cheekbone. "Your eyes. And I hear your voice in the shadows, whispering my name." My face heats, and I duck my head.

"Goddess..." His growl is filled with frustration and longing. A reflection of my own turmoil, and I'm drowning in it. Drowning in him.

His hands spasm on my waist, and his body goes rigid. "*Fuck*. I can't hold them."

The violence in his voice freezes my muscles, even as my mind and emotions tumble. But then fight or flight kicks in with a painful burst of adrenaline, and I make to scramble off his lap.

“I see that your bondmate is awake,” an impatient voice says behind me.

Rattling Cages

I freeze halfway off Reven's lap. He's still as stone, eyes closed, not even breathing.

A shadow ripples across his face.

Panic stabs through me. If Reven's protectiveness of me makes what's inside him harder to control, how is he going to hold on while the threat is talking to us and I'm in his lap?

"Look at me, woman," the soldier commands.

Reven growls at that, the sound otherworldly and a warning to the man. Or is that one of the things inside him?

Goddess, what a mess. We'll be thrown in a prison or sent somewhere worse, somewhere one of us would be recognized, if I can't salvage this situation, and that'll be exactly what the shadows want. I need Reven.

I dip my head and nuzzle his neck right below his ear. "Hang on, okay?" I breathe.

He grunts and shifts beneath me, fingers digging into my hips.

I take that as a yes. *Here goes nothing.*

Bracing myself, I whisper a soft, sweet kiss over the ridge of his cheekbone. When nothing bad happens, I do it again.

My hair has fallen loose, or someone unbraided it. Reven, maybe, as he checked my head wound. Before I can lift a hand to scoop the heavy fall of it out of my face, Reven moves, sliding it back in a slow, sensuous touch that is somehow also an exploration of the whorls of my ear.

I bite my lip to keep in a whimper, but one of those would probably help our cause—if it doesn't unleash all the things inside the Shadowraith I'm straddling. Ugh. Thinking of some of the lewd things I've witnessed on the street outside the hovel, I let out a tentative moan—oh my goddess, I sound ridiculous—and I know I messed it up when he tenses underneath me again.

“Relax,” Reven whispers. Then nips at my earlobe.

A relieved breath *whooshes* from me, and I sag against him. He sounds stronger again. Like himself. For now. That fact alone should make me feel a smidge better. Instead, worry bands my ribs, squeezing. I don’t think we’ve convinced the soldier yet.

The man bangs the bars of the cage with his fist, and I jump. I also look at him directly for the first time. The soldier has bags under his eyes that look like bruises against his pale skin. “Your name?” he demands.

“Meren.” It slips from me without even a beat of hesitation, and I have to hide my flinch at the mistake. I could hardly use Tabra’s name, though, I reason.

Reven must’ve felt that tiny movement, because he also stills, then lifts his other hand to smooth it down my back, pressing me closer into him, pressing harder the lower that hand gets until I settle more fully in his lap. The core of me nestles against his body. I’m bombarded by sensation. Heat. Hardness. The aching need to press into him.

Oh yeah. We’ve left chaste *far* behind.

“What’s *your* name?” I force myself to ask the soldier. A pathetic attempt at distraction for all three of us but especially me.

“Easy.” Reven whispers the warning.

“I’m asking the questions here,” the soldier snaps. A captain, I realize now, based on the insignia stamped into his armor. “Why were you traveling this way?”

“To offer the Goddess Tyndra thanks and sacrifices of fire for our binding.”

He stares back silently, distrustful gaze slipping between us, assessing. “I guess I don’t have to ask who this man is to you,” he mutters, face turning sort of purple with frustration.

Everything about Reven goes tight beneath me and around me, hands

curling into my flesh almost painfully. His pupils dilate, eating up the blue of his irises. I catch a swirl of shadows in the blackness.

“Stay with me,” I whisper as I look at Reven, taking in the lines and valleys and planes of his face. Forms I am unexpectedly, intimately familiar with, more than I have any right to be.

Another shadow slips across his skin, and his eyes go dark. He’s losing the battle, and when he does, things are going to get bad. I think of the soldiers who attacked me and Niri in Wildernyss. The kind of bad that won’t end well for these men. Goddess only knows what the shadows will do to me.

In a last-ditch effort, I put my hands against his cheeks and press a kiss to his lips, willing Reven to hold on. “My bondmate,” I murmur, loud enough for the captain to hear. I try to imbue the words with reverence—and intent.

Use me as an anchor, I’m trying to tell Reven with my eyes, my touch. *Stay with me.*

The soldier harrumphs. “We’ll see what the general has to say about you when he arrives.”

I jolt at that. The general. Capital G.

Has Eidolon sent his trusted advisor to deal with this? What was the name Vos gave at dinner? Quinten. The one who had been with Eidolon in Aryd? The one who’s met Vos before and would recognize Reven’s resemblance to his king?

“How long do we have to wait?” I call after him, hoping he misses the panic in my voice. “When does he arrive?”

“Soon enough.”

Not an answer.

Why are nonanswers always so much worse?

The second he turns the corner, I scramble off Reven’s lap. “He’s gone.

We can stop—”

A sound—like a man at the edge of his control and in pain with it—escapes him, and suddenly Reven’s across the small space, lips on mine, claiming me.

And heavens help me, I whimper and open up to him, matching him fevered stroke for stroke. The questing dart of his tongue I answer with my own, and his hands grip my hips, dragging me back to him. I wind up on his lap again, the hard, long length of him pressing against me through the barrier of our clothes.

Despite the turmoil of *want* consuming me, I need to see. Need to know this is Reven.

I wrench myself away from the kiss and scan his face. My breathing hitches as I stare into desperate eyes. *Turquoise* eyes.

I throw my arms around him. “Thank the goddesses.”

He buries his face in the crook of my neck, breathing hard. “I’m sorry.”

The adrenaline of the last few minutes comes crashing down, and I have to choke back a laugh. *Sorry?* For which part? The forced proximity? The intimate show that got out of hand? Or the fact we nearly unleashed all of Eidolon’s evil shadows?

A chill replaces the heat between us so fast, a Tyndran wind may as well have blown through. I go to move off Reven’s lap again, but his grip tightens. “Don’t.”

Why? Because he’s afraid someone’s watching, or because he’s about to lose control again?

His expression sober. “I put you in danger.”

“It’s not your fault.” Truth. “But we have a new problem. Will this General Quinten person recognize you?”

“Yes. Quentin will recognize me because of who I look like.” Unease squeezes his voice.

“So we need to get out of here quickly.”

“Quicker is better.”

Which means not waiting for night and Reven to get us out. I’m not familiar enough with Vos’s power to know if he can help. He might not even be conscious yet, anyway...or even on our side, if I go down the suspicious route.

I do my best to concentrate. “Is it clear for me to try my power?”

A long pause follows the question. “Yes. But try to hide the light.”

How am I supposed to do that, exactly? Usually, I aim my hands at whatever I am working on. I’m not even sure what will happen if I don’t, but I guess I can try to keep them fisted. At least I won’t need to create glass, so we can avoid the sparks.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

I feel him smile into my hair.

Keeping my head on his shoulder, I turn it to the side, toward him, like I’m snuggling into him. I tuck my right hand between us, aiming my fist toward the ground on his other side. Then, reaching deeper than I’ve had to in the past, I touch the light inside me.

I gasp as the tingling sensation of my power coming to the surface collides with the need my body is still struggling with as I lay against Reven, his body heat and scent all around me. I hardly even notice the cold now, even though it’s bitter, because I am *sizzling*. Alive.

Holy hells.

“Okay?” Reven asks, his perfect, silken voice doing nothing to help my little problem.

“Mm-hmm,” I manage.

Ignoring the way that buzzing coalesces and centers inside me, I focus on feeling out the sand. Here, despite the snow, we’re closer to the beaches that line the channel between Little Tyndra and the mainland, and there’s

more sand in the ground to manipulate than in the Shadowwood. I know where we are because the tower is close, rising above us. If we get out, we can run there and go through the portal. Hopefully before they even know we're gone.

I try to lift particles, shift them away from the bars of our cage. Except they won't move—like pounding a fist against a solid wall. I concentrate, my earlier headache returning with the effort. “Warn me if anyone is coming.”

Before he can agree, I dare to open my hand palm outward. The glow hardly penetrates the brightness of day, and though I can sense each particle, each crystalline fragment of sand below us, they still do nothing at my command.

Nothing.

Discomfort spikes through my head, and cold seeps into my bones.

I must've tensed in his arms, because Reven lifts a hand and runs it soothingly down the back of my head and my spine, pressing in with just enough force to ease my muscles. “Relax.”

“It's not working.” Frustration and fear build, layering onto all the other emotions I'm collecting inside me.

Only, instead of concern, he sort of hums a sound that says he isn't surprised. “You need time to recover after that knock to the head.”

And other things.

I blow out a harsh breath of aggravation. “I'm going to kill these assholes.”

He snorts a laugh. “My princess has a potty mouth.”

“They deserve death.”

“I know. Get in line.”

I let a long breath go. “What are we going to do?”

Rather than answer, he straightens, listening. “Someone else is coming.”

A young man or maybe a woman—it's not immediately apparent which—makes their way to our cage. Maybe a few years younger than me. A thin face, tattoos that go up their neck and into their braided hair, and the clothing of a Tyndran soldier, covered by a long cape. But instead of standing back and scowling like the last guy did, they squat down and smile.

Umm...what now?

"My name is Wren," they say. "I'm from Savanah."

What is a Savanahan doing with the Tyndran army?

My question must show on my face because they shrug. "Tyndra and Savanah were twin goddesses. Our dominions share our sacred trees. Of course we're friendly."

Friendly. Not allies. An interesting way to put it.

"I am a healer."

My eyes widen involuntarily. This is an Imperium with an ability dominions have been known to go to war over.

"What kind?" Reven demands.

Wren's grin is charmingly lopsided. "Only physical. I can't do anything weird."

So would that make this healer a Hylorae? I don't know what weird things other healers can do, and I don't ask. I have enough to deal with.

"Does anything hurt?" Wren asks like they actually care.

I study the healer closely. Savanahans are known for honesty the way Arydians are known for patience.

I glance at Reven. "My head," I say.

Wren nods. "Reach your hand through the bar."

Reven grunts, clearly not liking that, but if it means getting out of here faster, I'm willing to risk it. So, remaining where I am against him, I reach out, and Wren grasps my hand. Immediately, warmth radiates from where

we touch, and I gasp.

Reven tenses more, moving under me like he's going to stop this.

"No," I tell him. "It's fine. Just...tingly."

Wren eyes us both warily. Meanwhile, the warmth builds, moving up my arm, then shoulders and neck, and into my head. Soon, all the pain is gone.

Taking a deep breath, Wren releases me, but not before I feel the way their hands had started to tremble. Whatever this healer did to fix me, it took a physical toll.

Wren stands to leave.

"Wait," I say. "Why did you do that?"

The healer's brows lower. "We all have orders."

They'd been ordered to heal us? "Why?"

"You may be in a cage, but that's for *our* safety. We won't treat you like animals." Wren squats back down. "Our job is to protect the people of Tyndra. If that's what you are, then you have nothing to worry about." They tip their head. "You should rest. Even with my healing, the body still needs that after trauma."

On that warning—one I get the feeling was meant as a comforting assurance—Wren leaves.

Reven adjusts how we're sitting until he's leaning against the bars, which can't be comfortable, feet outstretched, and I'm sort of bundled up in his lap, my head on his chest. Thank heavens for my heavy cloak, which is long and now acts like a blanket over my updrawn feet. I suspect he's keeping my poor body, used to the climate of the desert, off the snow.

"The healer is right. We rest," he says.

"Rest?" That's a terrible idea. We need to get out of here. Fast. Now that I'm feeling better—

"Either they decide to believe us and let us go before Quinten shows...

or we try again later after you've had a chance to recover more. Also before he shows."

Because if we're still here when he arrives, we're dead.

Layers of a Monster

A cold, broad hand wraps around my wrist, squeezing.

“Are they back?” I grumble. Is it time to put on another show that involves more reality than I should admit? It’s still sunny, though the light is dwindling.

Silence greets my words, and that hand tightens painfully. I lift up, since I’m lying on top of Reven for warmth, and stiffen so hard it hurts, my breath deserting my lungs.

This isn’t Reven.

I mean, it is him...but it’s *not*. As if I am staring at a bastardized version of the man. One of the layers. A Shadow whose teal eyes are cold and hard in his face, glittering at me in a way that sends alarm rather than need coursing through my bones.

I jerk to sitting, my hands propped on his chest.

“Reven?” I remember to keep my voice soft, glancing around. No one is nearby. Many of the soldiers marched out of the camp about an hour ago. Who knows if anyone is listening.

“So...” the Shadow says in Reven’s voice but not—he sounds harsher, growlier. He casts an insultingly speculative gaze over me. “*You’re* what all the fuss is about, hmm?”

The stranger beneath me manages to both sneer and grin at the same time. A combination so foreign to the man I’ve come to know, it sits uneasily on his features.

“Where’s Reven?” I wince at how tentative my own voice comes out, but this other version of him is scaring me. Can he hear the rapid tempo of my heartbeat? It’s thundering in my ears, drowning out other sound.

His expression morphs in a way that makes me want to lash out and run at the same time. The hand holding my wrist twitches. “He’s made some

poor choices. But taking you wasn't one of them."

What does that mean?

"You'll be a perfect prize for our maker."

No. I scramble off him but can't go far, hitting the bars of the cage with a ringing *clang*.

He latches onto my ankle and tries to drag me back. "After I get us out of here, I'll take you to him. He'll be so pleased to have you both."

A new fear joins the other. The king *does* know about twins in our family. If he gets me, he'll be able to kill both of us and claim the Aryd throne. As long as I'm out here, a threat to taking the throne in Tabra's place if she dies, maybe my sister is safe.

I can't let him take me.

Stomach crawling, skin crawling, too, instinct kicks in, and I rear back and drive one booted foot into his face. He releases me with a growl, which gives me enough time to roll as far away as I can get in our small container. I squat, my back pressed against the corner bars, head angled because the top of the cage doesn't give me much room.

I really, *really* wish I had my knives.

This man who is not Reven...he doesn't move.

He stays sitting with his back to me, hunched over, hands to his face, and takes a deep, shuddering breath. I swear the damn man huffs a laugh, one with no humor whatsoever. Finally, after a painfully long moment in which I catalog all the ways my life has gone completely wrong, he lowers his hands and looks over at me.

Reven.

Thank goddess.

"It's gone," he says, sounding like himself. He scoots around to face me slowly, cautiously, the way he might approach an injured animal.

I jerk back, even as my fight-or-flight instinct settles slightly. I

recognize this version. The one I trust—even more than I realized until right this second.

“I...” He shakes his head. “I’m sorry. I won’t touch you again.”

This is a thousand times worse than I thought. “What just happened?” I whisper, not moving an inch.

He takes in my defensive posture and my expression, the way I am breathing hard as I come down from that burst of horror, and pain ripples across his features. “One got through. It’s getting harder to hold them back the longer we’re in here.”

I’ll say. I settle back onto the ground, not moving closer but sitting cross-legged where I am. “Are they back under your control?”

Reven nods, then spits blood on the ground outside our cage. That came from my kick, I realize. “Was that necessary?” he asks.

“Definitely.” I blow out a sharp breath. “That layer was an asshole.”

Reven chuckles, but it’s tinged with bitterness. “That layer isn’t even the worst one.”

I don’t want to find out what the worst looks like.

“Do you ever worry that you’ll lose control and this current...er...” I wave a hand, indicating his person. “This layer of you will never come back?”

“Every damn day.”

Goddess, what a way to exist.

I pull my knees up to my chest and wrap my arms around them. I’m already painfully cold without his body heat, and sitting on the snow has my ass turning into a lump of ice. Nothing I can do about it, though. “No wonder you keep yourself apart.”

He doesn’t pretend to misunderstand me, knowing I mean from the Vanished in the Shadowwood, from the leaders like Vos. Even me.

As a girl who’s spent her entire life apart, even when surrounded by

people, I get it. I don't want to relate more to this man, because the road that kind of connection is already leading me down feels murky. But too much of me is already invested. "I know how that feels."

Reven tips his head, regarding me with a level of understanding that makes me want to squirm.

Mostly because, even after what just happened, what I really want to do is plop myself right back in his lap, rest my head on his shoulder, and unload every burden I have. I tighten my arms around my knees to keep from moving.

"Do I need to be worried?" I ask instead. "About the worse layers, I mean?"

He grimaces and runs a hand through his hair. "They won't kill you. Yet."

Fantastic. Although I have a feeling I know what this is about. The Shadow's words in that cage... "Why not?"

Another grimace. "They..."

"What?"

"They're drawn to you. But their interest is darker. Dangerous. Tied to the king, I think."

The words drop between us. Stark. Hard. Uncompromising.

"He said he wanted to give me to the king, like a prize," I manage after a long moment. I kick at the snow with the tip of my boot.

Reven props his arms on his updrawn knees and thinks about that. "Maybe my assumptions about his wanting your power are right."

Except, he said the king would be glad to have both me and Tabra. I almost say that out loud, except Reven would then ask why the king cares about a body double.

"It's also a chance for them to...taunt me," he says, breaking into the thought.

“Um. In what way, exactly?”

He just stares at me, eyes telling me a thousand words he can't say.

Oh.

“I think that's why I'm struggling to hold them back,” he adds. “Especially now that I've kissed you. They can tell that I...want you.”

I flush, but a shiver—not the good kind—racks through me as I blink, then blink again. What am I supposed to say to that?

“I won't let them get to you,” he promises, jaw working, eyes flinty. Not anger at me. Anger at what he has leashed inside himself.

I can't say I understand completely. As someone who leads different lives, I know about having different faces, each one meant for different people and different situations. But to have parts of myself out of my control? I can't even imagine it.

But there's more going on here, and it scares me just as much. When I'm with a Shadow instead of with Reven, there's a strange connection there. Not desire. Different. Inexplicable. But there. Teasing at the edges of my consciousness.

I have a feeling Reven *really* won't like that.

“Do you think you can get us out of here now?” he asks.

In answer, I pull my power forward. It's much easier after the rest I've had, even as interrupted as it was. The tingling sensation isn't buried deep inside anymore.

The glow reflects off the snow on the ground, and I shut it down fast, though I'm not able to swallow my gasp of hope.

Please, goddess, let what I'm about to try work.

43

Hylorae

“Cover me.” I can’t hide this on my own and work my power at the same time.

Reven crawls over—even cooped up in a tiny cage that makes him hunch over, the man still moves in a way that makes my mouth water. He sort of curls himself around me, his body a buffer from prying eyes as I reach for my power again. My palm grows brighter, illuminating the space between us.

“Have you ever had a splinter?” I ask.

“No.” The words brush across my ear.

Of course not. “I guess shadows don’t get them.”

Trying to move fast before anyone sees or Reven starts to lose it again, I imagine the sand in the soil. Feeling it out, sifting it from the dirt.

Reven hisses through his teeth, and I snap my head up at the sound.

“What’s wrong?” I whisper.

“Nothing. Keep going.”

I don’t look away. “Why’d you make that sound?”

“I’ll tell you when we get out of here. Now *focus*.”

He’s right. Dropping my gaze, I tell the sand what to do. I can’t see it yet, the particles working under ground covered by snow. But I picture it. I feel it, almost the same way I feel my blood in my veins when Reven touches me. The sand is collecting and sifting through the denser soil, coiling around the ends of the buried bars of our cage. I close my eyes to see it better.

Then, after what feels like an eon, the cage shifts. Then shifts again. Snow falls off the top, making a soft hiss as it hits the ground.

“Is that you?” Reven murmurs.

“I really hope so.”

“Not funny.”

“It was a little funny.”

The ice around the top layer of soil has the cage in its clutches, though. I drop the sarcasm and push harder, but nothing happens. One more time, harder still, and the frozen ground gives way with a series of soft crackling pops.

Reven and I both still, holding our breath and listening, but no cry sounds, no shout of alarm from the soldiers remaining in the camp. So I continue. Freed of Tyndra’s icy grip, the cage starts to shimmy as if the ground itself rejects the metal, pushing it up and out.

My splinter idea is working.

The metal Hylorae had forced it deep, so it takes a lot of work and patience. By the time I lift it all the way out of the ground, even Reven can stand at his full height. Rather than try to topple it over—it’s too heavy to lift—I keep going, building and stacking the sand underneath it. Lifting and lifting until the metal cage appears to float up on tiny pillars of sand. As soon as it’s high enough off the ground, we shimmy out from underneath. My pulse pounds erratically, like ricocheting arrows, a physical presence inside me, both from the effort and with the knowledge that any second one of the guards could catch us. We need to get out of here.

“Let’s go,” Reven says.

“Hold on.” Despite expecting to be caught any second, I want to leave no trace of how we escaped. I don’t want to give Eidolon or his lackies even a hint of who was really here.

With that in mind, I reverse everything, pushing the bars back down into the ground. Or, more like pulling, the sand sinking out from under them and reabsorbing into the soil. My very own quicksand trap. Softer now, after already having to give way, the weight of the metal helps instead of hinders, and this part goes faster. Finally, our cage is back the way it started. Just

without us in it. Every speck of sand returns to the ground and out of sight.

“Now we can go.”

With steps as silent as we can make them on snow and ice, we skirt the camp. Reven is solid on his feet while I’m slip-sliding all over the place. He basically has to keep me upright, which slows us down more. I feel like I’m clumping along on peg legs rather than feet. In my head, I blame the cold for my lack of grace and traction. We try to stay at the backs of the cloth-sided tents. From shadow to shadow we move, and every time we’re in the light, I cringe.

Slowly and carefully, we make our way to the other side of the camp without encountering another soul.

The second time a flicker of movement happens nearby, right as we turn down another row, I realize Reven is managing to skirt every guard walking the encampment. At one point I eye him, a hundred questions rampant, but he shakes his head, and we keep going.

Until we find Vos.

I don’t know how, but Reven leads us directly to where he is being held in a cage similar to ours. His eyes are closed, but he’s breathing. In the harsh light of late morning, the swelling taking over half his face is glaringly awful. I’m guessing the soldiers recognized him and beat him all to hell. No wonder they didn’t believe our story.

A potent mix of guilt and fury join my very real trepidation.

“Vos,” Reven whispers.

Lavender eyes—or eye, rather, since one is swollen shut—blink open slowly. He’s in rough shape but awake. “How’d you get here?” he mumbles.

“You okay?” Reven asks.

He grimaces, then winces because that probably hurt his face, but he nods. “Right as a ruby.”

“Good. Follow me,” Reven whispers. “Give us a second.”

Like before, he sort of curls his body around me, and I repeat the steps on Vos’s cage that I used on ours until Reven is able to help him scoot out from underneath and I’ve returned it into the ground in the same way.

Vos pushes to his feet. It hurts to watch, but he’s moving under his own steam, and I don’t question our luck.

“Don’t make a sound.” Reven folds a hand around mine, like he doesn’t want to lose me on the way out. Vos follows.

Now that we have all of us out—so close to getting away—my skittering heart wants me to run as fast as I can to the tower looming nearby, to escape. It’s pounding so hard, I worry I’ll alert the entire army—even the ones who marched off earlier—with the sound.

I tune my ears to every nuance around us as we make our way through the camp, listening for the soldiers and skirting pockets of them. The end of the line of tents comes into sight, pitched where snow becomes icier ground just before a short spit of beach that leads out into the water.

My stomach rolls over as I imagine a tentacle slipping across the shore. Uh...I’d rather take my chances with the soldiers. This is way too close to the ocean.

Then I spot an impossible thing.

Boats. Multiple rows of them are tethered out there, the waters crystal clear.

Heavens to hells.

They would risk the Devourers, even in this relatively protected pit of waters, to travel by boat? Do Tyndrans have a collective death wish? But that’s clearly how they all got here so quickly. There’s no other explanation. This many would take days to get through a temple portal.

“The prisoners!” A shout goes up, zapping fear up my spine. Then another. And another.

“We can’t make it to the tower,” Reven says, not bothering to whisper anymore.

What? There’s no other way out—

“The boats. *Run.*”

The Greater Threat

Even though I want to scream at the thought of getting near that water, let alone in a boat, I take off, stumbling and falling to my knees at least twice only to scramble up with Reven's help and keep going.

Sound rises up from the camp like a lightning storm in the desert. All around us, soldiers pour from their tents, some half-dressed and fumbling for their clothes, trained to be alert and ready to fight at the slightest hint of need.

As I dash past the last tent in the rows, a hand reaches out from between the flaps and grabs me by the wrist, yanking me around sharply.

"Got you."

But Reven still holds my other hand, so I'm jerked in two directions, wrenching both shoulders with a splinter of pain. Before I can react, Reven spins into a kicking maneuver I had no idea he could do and plants his heavy boot right in the soldier's face.

The man drops to the ground in a limp heap.

Reven and I take off after Vos, who is already wading out to the nearest boat. We splash in after him, and the damnably cold water is a body shock that threatens to stop me in my tracks. Worse, the shallows are apparently made of a small shelf that drops off sharply to deeper water, and now we have to swim through water so miserably freezing my bones are screaming with the terrible agony of it.

This is way worse than sitting on the snowy ground.

Usually, I'm a good swimmer—not remotely thanks to Omma. After the well incident, I made Cain teach me in a nearby oasis. Now, though, the heaviness of my sodden cloak and thicker clothing weighs me down, and I'm moving so slow. *Too* slow.

By now, the camp is up in arms. The few who've seen us are shouting

and running our direction. I don't know how Vos got into the nearest boat as fast as he did. In seconds, he has both of us up with him.

"Cut the anchor!" he bellows.

He knows how to man one of these? I am lost and useless on a boat. Unlike Tabra, I've never even had the privilege to sail on one of the royal barges that take pleasure cruises in the Sea of Terra, the freshwater lake at the center of Aryd on the shores of which Oaesy sits. A Devourer-free lake.

"Can you freeze them?" Reven asks Vos.

"Not without freezing us in, too. Keep them off us while I get us out of here."

Except he doesn't know that Reven *can't*.

Shivering so hard my teeth might knock themselves out of my jaw, I step out of the way, flattening myself against the wooden side of the small ship, which only gives me a better view of the enemies coming after us.

Do something, Meren.

I look around wildly. There has to be a weapon around here, but there's nothing that I can see. Maybe they took all the weapons to shore?

"Hurry!" I yell as they get closer, the nearest soldier hitting the water with a splash and starting to swim for us.

My body buzzes with panic. If we are caught, we'll only become more interesting to our captors. That or dead. Why would innocent people need to run, after all?

Do something. That little voice is louder.

Maybe I can—

I lift both my hands and yank the magic inside me forward so hard and fast, my skin rasps with a razor edge of pain. The sand beneath me is easy to reach, though, thank goddess. It lines the floor of the channel, not buried by soil or covered in ice.

Power crackling in my palms, I hesitate. I think of my attempts at portal making yesterday. Failures, all of them.

Reven shoves his face in front of mine as our boat lurches. “Don’t think. Just *do*.”

With those galvanizing words, I raise my arms, picturing a wall of sand raising between us and the men after us, like the glass walls that protect Aryd.

But nothing happens.

At least nothing beyond a vague swirl beneath the waters, turning them murky. Definitely no wall.

I’m shaking, wet, freezing, hurting, and *terrified*. “It’s not working!”

But Reven isn’t by my side now. He’s helping Vos get the sails hoisted. I am on my own to keep the soldiers off of us.

Right. No wall. Something else.

Instead of looking to the mass of armed fighters rushing through the camps in our direction, I focus instead on the one in the water nearest to our boat. I aim my palms directly at him and speak with the sand. I tell it to take the shape of a whip, picturing what I did to Pella’s face that one time.

Then I raise my arm in a fluid motion, like physically wielding the weapon myself. With a flick, I lash it at him, and a thin rope of sand bursts from the water and snatches him by the ankle, then yanks up and flings him. With a scream, the soldier catapults into the air and flies away from the boats to drop onto the land with an eruption of snow all around him.

I swallow down my surprise. I can’t believe that worked.

Several of the soldiers after us stare slack-jawed and bug-eyed. But they don’t pause for long.

Do it again.

With my sand whip, I repeat the action, focusing on the next closest. Then another. And another. But they’re coming faster, and there’s too many

of them. Our boat finally starts to move, inching away at the speed of a sandslug.

I eye the shore. Even if we manage to escape, all they have to do is get in the remaining boats and come after us. I change my focus to the rest of the vessels. If I can't get a wall of sand to happen, what else can I do to stop them?

"Watch out!" Vos pushes me to the side as a soldier's hand grasps the edge of the boat right in front of me.

She must have made it up the side of our craft undetected. Vos grabs some sort of club thing that rests in a series of holes built into the sides of the boat and slams it into the woman's head. But the soldier grasps a fistful of his shirt as she tumbles backward.

I lunge for him as his feet fly up into the air, his body hanging off the rail, and manage to knock the soldier's hand free. Vos and I drop back to the deck with a jarring *thud*, hard enough that we both crumple.

"Thanks," he says, then jumps up and runs off to help Reven.

I hop back to my feet to lean over the rail. We've moved past the rows of other boats.

Sink them.

I need to sink the boats.

The way I had with the whip, I focus on a single craft. In my mind's eye, I picture the sand beneath it. Then I focus on heat, sparks flying off me in a cascade that I hope like hells doesn't set our own wooden boat on fire. In the depths of the waters, unable to see if it's even happening, I fire and melt and mold the sand into something sharp and piercing, pulling the particles in tight and hard.

Then I slam both my arms up into the air.

With a boom of water and a thundering snap of splintering wood, a very real glass spike impales the boat closest to us, shooting up through the thick

timber and shattering it.

Holy goddess. I gape at the sight, triumph and a good amount of shock flooding through me.

Dropping my hands, I try to pull the spike out, but the glass is stuck. So instead, I starburst my fingers and dissolve it. The irony that I had a lot of practice at turning glass back to sand yesterday isn't lost on me. When it's gone, the water rushes in through the hole left over.

I do it again to the next boat. Then again. By the fourth, I am panting hard with the effort, both because of the energy it takes to wield my power like this and because the cold from my wet clothes has seeped so deep inside me.

I'm dwindling fast. I just want to sleep.

But there are four more boats that need to go under first.

Ignoring my body's protests, I keep going. After the sixth boat, I am shaking so hard my muscles have turned into limp noodles. Boneless and useless. I lean against the rail, my ice-crusting fur cloak crackling.

I let the rail hold me up and gather the sand for the next boat. That one I have to ram with my spike three times before getting through. Spots dance in front of my eyes, reminding me of Reven's shadows.

"Duck!" I am vaguely aware of his shout, but we're farther from the boats by now, and I just have one more to sink. Only one more to destroy so the soldiers can't get around the sunken graveyard of vessels I've made.

I stay where I am and reach for the sand, holding my hand out over the water.

A body tackles me to the deck, hitting hard enough that my head cracks against the wood, pain fragmenting through me. At the same time, I can't mistake the telltale rhythmic *thuds* of arrows striking all around us.

Above me, Reven swears.

I force the haziness from my gaze through sheer, teeth-gritted will to

find him sitting up, an arrow sticking straight through his shoulder from the back.

“Goddess help us,” I whisper. Except, the words slur.

The amulet around my neck suddenly wakes up, and warmth blazes through me. Miraculously, at the same time, the haze of pain clears from my mind.

I struggle to my knees in front of him. “Are you—?”

A shadow looms over us, and I snap my head up to find a soldier coming over the rail. He jumps, aiming for Reven with a wicked-looking curved knife outstretched. In that same instant, I recognize him. This is the same man who captured us.

“No!” I shout.

Of their own volition, both my hands fly up, and what’s left of my pale yellow light turns overwhelming. I don’t even have time to picture what I’d do, pure, gut instinct taking over.

With a splash that sends water straight up all around us, sand shoots out of the water, over the edge of the boat, and flash-heats into multiple glass spears in an instant. Several impale the soldier through the back. He drops to the deck, dead before he hits, blood spewing from his wounds and across the wood floor to my feet.

Reven whips around to stare at me, expression stunned.

I’m utterly drained. Unconsciousness reaches out with soft, insistent hands to drag me under. Even as I fade, I feel myself smile at his expression. “Who’s all-powerful now?”

Death by Glass

It's still daylight when consciousness returns. On a painful, full-body shiver, I open my eyes to find myself still lying on the deck, covered in a coarse blanket and another rolled up under my head, staring into the cloudy eyes of a corpse. My hand is in front of my face, and I realize the little grass ring the girl gave me when I first met the Vanished is gone.

In the same moment, everything that happened sinks in all at once. Groaning, I push to sitting. Gray skies are turning darker. The boat sways softly beneath me, water lapping at the hull, almost like a quiet lullaby.

Damn. That's twice I've been knocked out, and we haven't even made it out of Little Tyndra yet, let alone to Aryd. This is not how this trip was supposed to go.

At least you're still alive, a tiny voice in my head pipes up.

I don't find this voice helpful at all.

"We have to get to Aryd in less than three days," Vos is saying somewhere nearby. Or arguing. At least I'm not the only one worrying about that.

"We can't risk getting caught again," Reven insists. "With the portal in Tyndra inaccessible, the only way is through a portal in Wildernyss."

"So bloody well take us there," Vos snaps.

"I can't," Reven says after a long beat. His voice has turned stony. Is he going to tell Vos why?

"The soldiers have to be in Little Tyndra for a reason," he says instead.

Is he thinking they're coming for him? Or maybe the Shadowwood? That Eidolon has discovered his hiding place? He's not coming for me, unless Tabra slipped up—but even then, how would they know where to find me?

Vos must make the same logic leap. "They're twenty leagues away from the Shadowwood."

Another longer pause greets that. “Where in the dominions did they come from, anyway?” Reven asks. “You didn’t see any hint of them when you came from Wildernyss the other day?”

I wince. Now, while we’re still out in the open and being hunted by trained soldiers, is probably not the time to start throwing accusations around.

Vos’s answer is almost as cold as the wind. “You damn well know I came from the ladder. And if you’re saying what I think you are, then screw you.”

Well, that’s an answer of sorts. It’ll have to be good enough. For now. Because I have no choice. I need Vos to get me to Aryd if Reven is going to stay with his people. Which he should.

Trying to keep my stomach from revolting at the motion, I scoot around to face them. “We need...” I start, speech still slurred, which makes me frown. Why isn’t my mouth working? I’m warmer now than before. I clear my throat and try again with better results. “We need to split up.”

Reven whips around and crouches in front of me in one fluid motion. Somewhere along the line, the arrow was removed from his shoulder, blood staining his shirt with a blacker sheen. It occurs to me that he’s lost his coat, too. How is he not blue with cold?

“Don’t ever do anything like that again,” he growls, anger radiating from every line of his taut body.

“It worked, didn’t it?”

How does his jaw not crack with the pressure he’s putting on it? “That’s an order.”

I snort. Or try to, anyway. “I outrank you.”

“Not in the Shadowood, you don’t.”

“Bring out the heralds.” I wave a hand in the swirling motion of a courtier. “We’re not in the Shadowood, your shadowness.”

“Damn it—”

I shove my hand at him, cutting him off. “Help me up.”

My legs are wobbly still, so it takes a second to get me upright. I’m not entirely stable, so I sort of lean against the rail as a precaution against the rocking motion.

“We found clothes,” Reven murmurs to me alone. “You should change.”

I study him. He’s wearing the same things as earlier, but he’s dry. “Why aren’t you still wet?”

He shrugs. “The shadows protect me from anything environmental. I didn’t get wet in the first place.”

Even without his powers in full control? “Must be nice.”

“It is. Go change.”

I will. After we decide what we’re doing. “I suggest we split up,” I say again.

From where he stands behind Reven, Vos’s eyebrows attempt to disappear into his hairline.

I ignore that reaction. “We get to land, then I sink the boat so they don’t know where we came ashore. From there, Reven goes back to the Shadowwood, and Vos and I take the long way through Wildernyss.”

“No,” Reven rasps out.

Vos ignores him, nodding his head. “The bridge comes out on the other side of the Zirium Groves in Wildernyss. From there, it’s a fairly simple journey to the temple.”

“You can barely stand,” Reven points out, doing an impressive impersonation of an iceberg, going solidly cold and deadly.

I side-eye him. “Do you have a better idea?”

His pause is full of fury. “No.”

“It’s settled, then.”

Which seems to be a signal to get moving. Vos leaves us standing at the

rail and starts to work ropes, very slowly, turning the boat toward the Little Tyndra side, I assume. Reven stays at my side, looking not at me but across the water to the mainland side, deep in thought. Or maybe wrestling with something.

“It really does remind me of the desert at night.” I smile, chasing the memories.

“I’m surprised you’ve spent so much time there,” Reven murmurs.

I try not to stiffen at the comment. It was just an observation. But I don’t want to answer as Tabra, for once. I want to answer as Meren. So I do. “It’s been my escape since childhood.”

I feel more than see him turn his head to study me. “You needed to escape?”

I face him, but whatever he was thinking a minute ago is gone, replaced by a man who only seems to look forward. Make a decision and move on. I like that about him.

He also looks at me like he truly wants to know the answer. I decide to give it to him. “My life has never been my own. Every decision, every event, has been mapped out from the time I took my first breath.”

He says nothing, listening without judgment. Why does that resonate within me even more than his touch? Maybe because Reven is equally isolated, though for different reasons.

“So yes,” I say quietly. “I need an escape.”

After a single heartbeat, he nods, accepting that truth.

No one ever listens to me—the Meren version of me. I am second, always, to what has to be done and to my sister’s place in this world. I shouldn’t fool myself that it’s any different with this man. But I can at least admit to myself—finally—that I *want* it to be different.

Which makes it easier, somehow, to come to my own decision.

It’s time to tell him who I am. Tell him *everything*. I have no idea what

his reaction will be, but the knowledge, soul deep, that doing this is the right thing, settles inside me.

He needs to know. I want him to know.

Wind whistles by as the boat picks up speed, and I huddle into my ruined coat. “Reven? I—” I pause, scrunching up my face as I think of the right words.

“What?” He tips his head. “Do you need to rest? Food?”

That’s what he sees in my expression? I almost laugh. Such a big decision, and, apparently, I look hungry and tired.

“In a minute.” I swallow. No going back after this. “I need to tell you something. It’s...important.”

Even the breeze filling the sails quiets, the material rattling with the disruption. The man in front of me says nothing. Just waits.

“No one knows this except the line of queens in my family.” Not even my father was told before his death. Still, I hesitate. Why can’t I just say it?

“You want to trust me with a secret.” A statement, not a question. But one filled with surprise, the emotion peppered through the words like seasoning. Like he isn’t sure why I would.

“I’ve never trusted anyone in my life,” I say slowly. Not even Tabra entirely. Or Cain, if I’m honest. I was always waiting for him to tell me we couldn’t be friends any longer.

Reven waits, sea-colored eyes turning intent, more brilliant than the waters around us, accepting that like absorbing a blow.

“But...I find that I trust you.”

He jerks away, leaning his hands against the rail, the muscles of his shoulders and back rippling with tension. His knuckles turn white as he grips the wood. “Part of me wants to say thank you and let you tell me. The other part wants to warn you not to.”

I glance toward Vos, but he’s on the other side of the boat. He can’t hear

us. "Because of what's inside you?"

Not looking at me, he runs one hand over his jaw, the rasp of a day's worth of growth faint but distinct over the sound of the lapping water. "Yes."

"If anyone understands, it's me. I promise you." Eidolon has been my enemy almost as long as he's been Reven's.

He does turn at that, studying me for a second before he smiles, or his version of it, shadows lingering in his eyes. Then he straightens, shoulders back with purpose in the way he carries himself, and I allow myself my own small smile because I can see he's made up his mind to hear me out.

Make a decision and move forward. At the very least, I can trust in that when it comes to Reven.

He's watching me expectantly now.

So I take a deep breath. Here goes nothing. "I'm not—"

"You're bleeding." Vos is suddenly behind me, the urgency of his voice breaking through my confession.

"What do you mean?" Reven snaps and moves to stand with him at my back. By the sharp litany of swear words that pour from him, it must be pretty bad.

"That's got to be blood from the soldier," Vos says.

The blood that was all over the deck? I sigh, relief instant. Of course. I passed out in it. My poor white fur coat must be ruined, between the ocean water and blood. Vida will be sad about that.

"No," Reven says. "It's not."

"Holy hells," Vos mutters after a second.

Not good.

"You're scaring me." From the side of my eye, I can see that they're both peering closely at something. I start to turn around.

"Don't move," Reven orders sharply. "Stay as still as you can."

I do what he says, but the fear is stronger now, developing claws. Feeding off the fear he's not hiding from me.

"How is she even standing?" Vos whispers.

Oh goddess, it's *that* bad?

Reven moves around in front of me and very slowly, very gently pulls back one edge of my ice-crusting fur cloak. Then I see it.

Vomit wells and burns at the sight of a pure, perfect glass spear tip protruding through the right side of my abdomen, my shirt soaked in congealed blood around it.

Mother goddess. I impaled myself on one of my own spikes. Big enough that I know...goddess, I know without any doubt that this can't be healed.

"I'm dead." The words tumble out on a harsh whisper. This can't be how it ends.

"No. I can fix this," Reven says. His voice is less than steady, though.

I lift my gaze to his. "No one can fix this." Maybe not even the Healer from before.

He takes a breath. "The shadows can. There's a ritual. I've had it done on me once before. It can heal you."

The scars at his wrists? Is that what he's talking about? I'm distracted from those questions by the doubt swirling in his voice. "What's the catch?"

"It might poison you instead."

Poison?

"Your soul," he elaborates. "Because of the shadows."

Oh. Right. So I have a choice between certain death and a poisoned soul. Those options rot, so my mind frantically searches for door number three. But there are no more doors.

I bite my lip. "If I die, Eidolon doesn't get—"

"Don't you dare say it," Reven snarls.

So I close my mouth, but he knows where I was going with that thought. I can see the acknowledgment in his eyes. Eidolon won't be able to use me against anyone if I'm dead. Maybe it's better. Maybe I was always supposed to die for my people, one way or another.

He steps closer, his hands on either side of my face gentle but insistent. "You are needed *here* in this life."

Needed. As in, saving my sister and stopping Tyndra from drowning.

I close my eyes. Why don't I feel the pain? I'm more numb than anything. I'm no doctor, but that doesn't seem like a good sign.

"I could freeze her wounds," Vos says. "Leave the spike in until we get back to the Shadowwood to do the ritual. It might knock her out, too."

I open my eyes.

"Do it," Reven commands, not taking his gaze from mine.

But this is my decision to make. I turn my head slowly to find Vos watching me, real concern in the lines of his face. His eyes grow kinder, warmer, as he waits for my order.

"Do it," I whisper.

Then the winds suddenly pick back up, filling the sails and moving the boat forward, cutting through the water, like the world is telling us to hurry up. Because I'm running out of time.

"We should lay her on something to carry her with," Vos says.

He runs off—to where, I have no idea, because I'm trying to hold still and not die. Then, with both of them helping, we somehow lay me on my back. Apparently, the glass snapped off at my back flush against my skin. Which is helpful.

Then Vos brings his hands up over me, his yellow glow of a Hylorae more orange than my amber color. Cold a thousand times worse than the winter, immediate and terrible, burns through me and drags a scream from my throat. But almost as fast as it starts, unconsciousness drags me under.

Again.

I'm getting sick of all this passing out.

46

The Rite

I open my eyes to yet another ceiling overhead. Or...no...not overhead. A wall in front of my face because I'm lying awkwardly on my side.

Everything rushes back, and I make a sound that is definitely panic as pins and needles of thawing start pricking unpleasantly all over my body. Still, the warmth of the room is a balm. Not dry and penetrating like Aryd, but not the bone-deep cold of Tyndra, either.

Where are we?

"She's coming out of it," Vos's voice says from somewhere behind me.

"I can't believe that worked." I think that's Horus's voice. How is he here? Is Tziah here, too? Bina? The other one I haven't met yet?

Reven's face appears in front of me, sideways but close, so I guess he's squatting down. He looks awful. Drawn, pale, like he might be sick. "We made it back to the Shadowwood. But we have to move fast to get you back on the road, and you have to be awake for the ritual."

He smooths a hand over my hair. Is his hand shaking? The concern in his eyes is so stark, it wraps around my heart.

"Ready?" he asks.

I manage a nod, my gaze clinging to his, trying not to let fear overtake me. It suddenly strikes me that I've lived in almost constant terror since meeting this man. That can't be good for my health.

"Are you..." How do I put this without giving his secret away to the others? "Can you—"

"We're back in the Shadowwood," he says. "It's night. And the...others want you alive, too."

Oh. Right. Because they want to take me to the king who needs my power.

Reven doesn't move, though, searching my gaze. "Leave us." A

demand, not a request.

But I shake my head. “They can stay. Your leaders should be part of... big things.”

“We’ll fill them in later,” Reven growls. “*After.*”

I can make out Vos now over Reven’s shoulder, and I can tell by the way his eyes turn flinty that he thinks Reven’s hesitance has everything to do with him.

Reven doesn’t look away from me.

Horus is the one to lead them out. “Come on.”

Vos’s lips twist sourly. “It seems we are needed elsewhere. One of the levels of hell, perhaps.”

“I hear the second one is lovely this time of year.” I can’t help it. It just pops out. But I’m lying here with a freaking glass spear in my side about to be saved by a ritual that could poison me. I’m not exactly in the headspace to get lighthearted humor right.

Reven bends a look on me that’s probably supposed to be quelling, but I still catch the trace of amusement.

Horus pauses at the open door, through which the tall, moon-kissed trees of the Shadowwood are visible beyond—almost steadying, now that I know where I am. “Be well, domina,” he murmurs, then disappears outside.

I bite my lip, because for a Wanderer to call me that is an honor.

Vos stops at the door, waiting. Apparently for Tziah. But instead of joining him, she kneels down at the head of the bed where I lie and smiles encouragingly at me, frosted black eyes kind. Then she presses a kiss to my forehead, like a little blessing. She and Vos leave without further comment.

The *snick* of the closing door acts as a catalyst. Like a shot from a bow, Reven begins.

He checks a book laid open on a small table beside where I’m lying, then bends down and strikes flint over a single candle, the fire flaring to life

and setting the room softly aglow. In the small flame, he lights a stick of incense, the heavy, cloying scent swirling around us. He touches the end of it first to his forehead and then mine, with a small sting of the heat and leaving an ashy imprint I suspect on us both, purifying us for the ritual.

I've seen the priestesses do the same at the temple in Enora.

He lays the burning stick in a tray. Then, holding a candle between us, he looks at me. "Each time I pause, repeat the words I say."

"Okay."

With a deep breath, he begins, gaze steadily holding mine. "We invoke Tyndra, goddess of strategy and the stars." He looks pointedly at me, and I repeat. Then he continues. "With no sacrifice but the fire in which all others will be made. We ask for your blessing of knowledge as we carry out the rite of shadow healing."

Fire. I've always wondered why Tyndra, with her icy dominion, was the goddess of fire. I realize he's waiting, and I repeat his words stumblingly, hoping I get them all correct. Then he carefully sets the candle down on the floor behind him.

Next, he picks up another candle and lights it with the flame of the first before facing me again. "We invoke Tropikis, the goddess of healing and life-giving plants. To you we offer a sacrifice of water." He tips a goblet over the candle, the few drops sizzling with a hiss as they hit the flame but don't put it out. "Darkness is about compromise, filling the voids left by light. We ask that you let it lead to blessings."

He sets that candle down apart from the first, starting to form a circle around us, I think. I've only ever read about various rituals like this, never seen one performed.

The next candle now, lit again by Tyndra's candle. "We invoke Wildernyss, the goddess of the arts and storm. To you we offer a sacrifice of wood." He holds a small splinter over the flame until it burns on its own.

“We ask that you let this woman’s loyalty to the shadows that bind be a blessing in your eyes.”

He places the candle on the ground, half a circle formed now. Another candle is lit. “We invoke Aryd, the goddess of magic and the moons. To you we offer a sacrifice of land.”

Once I finish repeating after him, he looks to me expectantly. It takes me a second to realize what he wants as he holds up a small bowl. From inside it, I use my power to lift a few grains of sand—all I can manage—letting them hover over the flame, glittering in the light, before dropping them into the fire, where they turn orange.

“Patience is the truest form of blessing, as is a life tied to shadow. We ask that you bless her with this gift,” Reven said.

A life tied to shadow. What am I giving up in order to save my own life?

Still, I repeat the words.

Another candle. “We invoke Mariana, goddess of music and the sun. To you we offer the sacrifice of metal.” Reven holds an arrowhead over the flames. Possibly the one that went through him. He waits until the metal turns an angry red. Which takes time, but I guess we just promised patience. “Passion is the beating heart of life. We ask that it be a blessing to all who dare let it in.”

I know what he’s doing. Each goddess is associated with a natural element and a spiritual one. He’s invoking all that—metal and passion, wood and loyalty, earth and patience, knowledge and fire, and compromise and water. The last will be air and...honesty.

That could be a problem.

After I finish repeating the words, Reven leans over the candle, his gaze intense and glittering in the flame. He tilts his head but pauses when he’s so close his breath brushes over my lips. Stomach clenching with reaction,

without question I close the distance and kiss him.

His lips are cool against mine. Truly chaste. Which means the wave of warmth that rushes through me at the touch is all me. I can't hide my gasp.

I would have leaned in for more, except he tips the candle toward me and the flame singes my skin. With a start, I jerk back and then whimper at the dull, throbbing ache in my side.

There it is. The pain.

I'm definitely no longer numb. Like that simple kiss has brought my nerve endings back to life, but it's also waking up the hurt. I squeeze my eyes shut as a lance of agony reaches through the pleasure and grabs onto me, trying to drag me down.

"Hells," Reven mutters from above me.

Then I hear him hastily moving to the last candle.

"We invoke Savannah, goddess of fertility and animals. To you we offer the sacrifice of air." I open my eyes to repeat the words and watch through the radiating pain as he waves the candle in a circle seven times. "And ask you to bless our sacrifices with our vow of honesty."

The words pour from stiff lips. Honesty. I still haven't told him all my secrets. But it's too late now.

Reven sets the last candle down, and we both stiffen as all the flames in the room gutter, shadows crawling and climbing from the corners, filling the space between and entering the circle where we are—the magic buried in every grain of the dominions at work.

"With these sacrifices and rites," Reven says in a voice gone silkier, "I bind this woman with shadow."

Woman.

Am I, though?

I'm still young, feeling my way through life by instinct. Still unsure, no matter how I may put up a front to any and everyone, including myself. Still

learning how to navigate the worlds in which I've been forced to try to thrive.

I swallow. "With these sacrifices and rites, I bind..." I swallow again, this time around an arrow of pain, then continue repeating his words. "Bind myself with shadow."

I don't know what I expect. Nothing, honestly. But the second the last word leaves my lips, everything about the world falls away except for Reven, and the shadows descend, closing in over us. Not merely an absence of light. No, the shadows pounce on me like the predator who wields them.

Reven grabs my hand and holds on tight as my body lifts into the air. Then pain. Wrenching, horrible pain that makes me think my body is being ripped in two, but brief. Over before I can scream.

A clunk sounds. I crane my neck to look down and find the glass spear tip on the wooden floor at Reven's feet.

I only have time to gasp because the shadows surge forward, pouring into my gaping wound.

"Reven?" I can't help the dread stealing my voice.

He tugs my hovering form down hard and, still holding my hand with one of his, buries the other in my hair, his face close to mine. "Eyes on me," he says. "Don't look away."

But I can feel them. The shadows. Writhing like snakes inside me. "Not the evil ones," I say to him. Plead, more like.

And goddess help me, the expression of utter despair that crosses his features shatters my heart. "No," he says. "I have them leashed inside me."

I can do this.

Just as I think that's true, all the shadows disappear inside my body, as if sucked down a drain. Except I'm the drain. I glance down again and gasp. Through the gaping tear in my clothes, I can see the wound is closed, but instead of skin, it's the same kind of scars Reven carries on his wrists.

Darkly silver and shiny like pewter. I'm held together by shadow.
And all the pain is gone.

One Thing for Us

I'm lowered by an unseen force until my feet touch the ground softly, Reven still holding onto me, leaving us standing together in a quiet room with the candles alight around us.

I meet his eyes. "Is it over?"

He's breathing hard, the only sound in the room. Some harsh emotion works over his face, too fast to pin it down, and he swallows. "Let me check."

With gentle fingers, he pushes my clothing back, exposing the skin of my belly and revealing again the large silvery scar in my side. Breath punches from his lungs, expression rippling with awe. Almost like he can't help himself, he brushes his fingers over the newly formed flesh.

I gasp at the contact as sparks of need flare from that one touch, absorbing into my bloodstream and arrowing straight for my core, the intensity nearly overwhelming.

Reven slowly pulls his hand away. Is he even aware of what that touch did to me? Did he feel it, too?

He straightens only to frame my face with his hands, his forehead against mine. "Thank the goddesses," he whispers. "I thought I'd lost you."

Those words, more than anything else—more than the connection, more than the spark from his touch—make me want things.

Want *him*. Just him.

I swallow and lift my hands to circle his wrists and brush my thumbs over his scars lightly. Then gasp as that sizzling reaction lights in my body again.

He shudders at the same time.

Then he's slowly pulling me close, lips on mine...and I'm sinking into him.

Finally.

One arm slips down to band my waist, pulling me tight against him while the other splays in my hair, anchoring me as his mouth does wicked things to mine. And goddess help me, his fire sparks my own, which has lain smoldering close to the surface all this time. Tinder waiting for flint.

For his touch.

Just this once, I promise myself. Because the world is waiting outside this room. A world where we can't. Where we shouldn't.

Just one small thing for myself. And for him. For the Shadow who recognized evil. For the little girl who longed for a hug or a kind word from those who were blood kin. For the good man who tries to protect the world from the wickedness that lives inside him. For the resentful teen who hated leaving the desert to return to her secret royal duties. For the reluctant leader who would rather sacrifice himself than live. For the young woman whose only job is to die to save her sister.

My hands are buried in the silkiness of his hair, and the tension building inside me only feels better the closer I get, so I'm pressing against him hard.

"Princess."

Goddess, that voice. Velvet over iron is how I will always, always think of it. A man of contradictions that I find as addicting as his mouth on mine.

"Don't stop," I whisper. "Don't...don't push me away."

He stills. Though he doesn't step away or let me go, the grip of his hand now at my hip bites into my flesh. His expression spasms, and he closes his eyes tight, breathing hard, his forehead furrowing.

I can't mistake the debate raging inside him. He's going to stop. I can see it as he lifts his head before he even opens his mouth.

"What if this is wrong?" His gaze is tortured. "The last thing I want to do is hurt you."

“I want this. I want you. *You*, the real man in my arms.” The words are both plea and demand. “Even if it’s just for a moment.”

Holy fires of hell. If I thought he was intense before, the look that comes over him now is near to feral—all craving and leashed desperation—and I might just burn up as I stand here, breath held, waiting. “You’re tearing me apart. Don’t say that unless you mean it.”

I want what’s coming next.

I curl my arms around his shoulders, burying my face in his chest, breathing in the scent of home, and press a kiss to his corded neck. “I mean it.”

He’s still stiff against me, still fighting it. I won’t push anymore because I’ve been pushed into so many corners in my life and hated it. Resented it. That’s the last thing I want for him. Disappointment threatens to drive a stake through my heart.

“Okay,” I whisper and loosen my arms. “It’s okay. We can stop—”

He groans and sort of surges against me, one hand smoothing over my backside, urging me up on my toes.

“I won’t let them touch you,” he whispers. An assurance. A promise.

I fit against him so perfectly, like a lock and key. He cants his head, claiming my mouth again, swallowing the catch in my breath, the whimper of relief.

This kiss, though—this is softer, slower, and deliciously deeper. Like he’s given himself permission to indulge in something he shouldn’t and has decided to enjoy every single second, every nuance of what he’s taking. What he’s giving.

I trust him with my own fear, silencing all the previous voices in my head that might speak out against this. All the worries about that connection of shadow, about what he needs from me versus what he wants. Because his body is telling me everything I need to know, the hard ridge of him pressing

into my softness.

Reven wants me. He wants *me*.

He licks at my lower lip, then draws it between his teeth and licks again, and my breath hitches into him. At the same time, the fingers at my backside slowly start inching my dress up, the cool night air caressing my exposed skin like a lover's hand.

Too slow, though. He's taking his time exploring, like he's never touched a woman before. Agonizing. I will that hand higher.

I'm moving against him without reason or thought, little sounds coming from some place I didn't know existed inside me until now, whimpers of need and pleasure, and he swallows them all, feeding groans of his own back to me.

Will he take this further?

He reaches bare skin, his fingers skating over the back of my thigh, then higher, tracking the line of my underclothes before slipping inside to trace the crease of my ass, though he stops short of where I want those questing fingers to go. Where every nuance is pulsing. Throbbing.

I moan against his mouth, the sound greedy. Out of control. "Keep going," I both beg and demand against his lips. "Want me to show you the spot?"

He shakes with laughter against me. Jackass. "I'm having fun figuring it out," he murmurs.

I would demand he pick up the pace, except I don't want to stop what he's suddenly doing to my mouth with his—commanding, plundering, owning.

Breathing, by the way, is overrated.

Then he's pulling his hand away and I'm protesting. He steps back, chest heaving, and I wonder if he's reaching for more control, my heart tripping, body tensing to run as I wait to see if a different face emerges.

But it doesn't.

Reven comes back to me and whisks my clothes over my head, then his shirt is off, followed just as quickly by the undoing of my breast band. I watch his face, a tiny part of me worrying he won't like what he sees. I'm too chesty. Too short.

The flare of color over those angled cheekbones, the way his gaze drinks in every part of me, tells me he more than likes what he's uncovered. And the fact that he does only sends more heat through me, rushing and pooling and gathering. Is it possible to reach fulfillment from a mere look?

"Goddess save me." The words seem almost dragged from him. Then he shakes his head, lips forming a sinful smile. "Definitely trouble."

48

Revelation

He moves even closer, hands reverent now, tentative with each new part he touches and then not so tentative, all that intensity focused on touching me, exploring, fascinated. He takes a shuddering breath.

I'm on fire.

Like melted sand, red-hot, molten, and malleable—he can form me into whatever he wants. I'm more than willing.

With each bolder touch, tension builds. He brushes the backs of his fingers across a sensitive spot, and sensation starbursts from there. The groan that comes from him, as if my response surprises him in a good way, finds an answering shudder from me.

And a blush. But it feels too good to let the awkwardness make it stop.

I want to touch him. Carefully, I reach out, pressing my hand over his heart, the skin there warm, his muscles bunching. I lift my gaze to his to find him looking at my hand against his skin. I think he likes it.

Swallowing hard, I start to explore. See if I can make him tremble like he's doing to me.

Then he bends his head, black hair stark against my candlelit skin, kissing his way across my collarbone, then farther down. He does something with his teeth that sends sensation after tumbling sensation through my body.

At my gasp, he lifts his head, gaze concerned. "All right?"

I nod, the heat of blush rising again. "I liked it."

He grins, devilry in his turquoise eyes.

I reach out, almost can't help myself, and trace his face with my fingertips. "Where did you learn—"

Maybe I shouldn't ask.

He grins again anyway. "You saw my library."

There are books about this? I think my entire body must turn red, flushed with both embarrassment and now wondering what else he learned from those books.

He drops his head, mouth against me again, and I can't take my eyes from his hand trailing over my stomach, my hip, and down my thigh.

Not over my scar, though. Probably a good thing. The way that shadow-flesh sparks for him, one touch might tumble me over too soon.

Instead, his wandering hand brushes and strokes its way up my thigh and under my one remaining garment, straight to the core of me. No one has ever touched me this way. I close my eyes, holding tight to his shoulders.

“Tell me what feels good so I...” He pauses, shoulders trembling. I open my eyes, not sure if he's struggling for control or with what to say. He pins me with a gaze so filled with determination that he make this good for me, I sigh. “I want to know what makes you...”

I nod when he searches for words again.

“There,” I breathe as his questing fingers touch a spot.

He does more of that. A lot more of that. “Definitely there,” I moan. And Reven places his lips to my shoulder and groans against my skin, the rumble of it shooting bolts of lightning through my blood, which make me squirm against his touch.

Of their own volition, my hips cant, chasing the touch, and I want *more*.

He moves his hand, and I mewl a protest.

His hand leaves me, and suddenly shadows swoop me up and lay me down. Cool air against skin tells me the last of my clothing is magically gone.

So is his.

Reven is all sinewy muscle and hard planes to my softer curves. I trace the band of muscle from his stomach to his hip but am too nervous to go

farther down. Instead, I lift my hand and trail a finger down the inside of his arm, stopping short of the scars, and smile at the way he shivers under my touch, then grunts when I don't get to the most sensitive spot.

I'm a little afraid to. What if it brings out the shadows?

"I feel you there," he says. Almost like an apology.

I meet his eyes, but the hardness there doesn't make me flinch. "I know. Me too."

Moving lower, he traces the edges of the silvery flesh on my stomach with the tip of his tongue, and molten, incandescent sensation slams through me. We *both* moan. He lingers there, building that throbbing again with tongue and teeth, slow, teasing torture until we're both panting.

The level of this connection...I wasn't expecting it. I don't think he did, either. The intensity of it threatens to overwhelm everything.

I think I might be okay with that.

The shadows around us twist, and Reven jerks back. I know for sure he's reaching for control, his chest heaving with it. "It wasn't supposed to —"

I cup his cheek, holding his gaze until he breathes easier. "You saved my life," I whisper. "No regrets."

He drops his forehead to my shoulder. "Beautiful soul," he murmurs.

Then his hands are back on me, going unerringly to the spot we found together earlier, moving faster now, pressing harder. He's a fast learner. I don't say it out loud, too occupied with the moans spilling from my lips as that wonderful, terrible pressure is building.

"I need..." I stop to bear down on his hand, chasing a fulfillment I've never experienced before. Not even sure what I mean. Just that. That I need.

Suddenly, his face is at mine, eyes filled with urgent need that mirrors my own and yet still searching.

"You're sure?" he asks.

I hesitate, and, feeling it, so does he, starting to pull away. But I hold tighter. “You said Eidolon can’t have children. You can’t, either?”

I feel him relax under me as he realizes what I’m asking. “No.”

I nod, near to frantic. “Then, I’m sure.”

His smile is so blazingly bright I stare hard, trying to commit it to memory. I don’t think that happens often.

He settles between my legs, the feel of weight and his rougher, warmer skin against me only adding to the sensations.

Then pressure. Stretching me, pressing inside me until I’m overflowing with him. Connected to him in a way I don’t understand. This is real, and hard, and true.

He laces one hand through my hair, cupping the back of my head. The other, he entwines with my hand, up near my head so he can lean on his elbow. His gaze eats me up, like he’s memorizing my face.

Warmth spreads across my cheeks again, but in a lovely way. To be wanted so much. I refuse to let a smidge of self-consciousness make me look away. Because in this moment, he is beautiful.

Stark, severe, and beautiful.

He swallows, and only then do I notice how tightly he’s holding himself. Are the Shadows trying to get out? My heart squeezes hard—with fear or something else, I’m not sure.

Jaw flexing, muscles straining, he breathes out, and I almost think he’s going to stop. But then he starts to move.

Oh, thank goddess.

I’m not sure where to put my feet or where to hold on. His crooked smile says he’s working through the same questions, but we figure it out together. Never looking away.

Slowly, those earlier sensations build again, layering inside me, filling me with that pressure. And I’m captured by eyes so brilliantly blue-green

and full of what I think might be wonder that the breath in my lungs *whooshes* away.

It would be easy to tumble fully into love with this man when it feels this way.

As our bodies strain and dance together, I reach for something I've never had. I smile, letting him see more than I have before—how nervous I am that I'm doing this right, how much I adore what's happening right now, even the slight awkwardness. I'm letting him see *me* and hoping like hell I won't regret that, but unable to in the moment.

His eyes widen at the sight, then turn bluer, fierce possession lighting his own.

A tingling sets up at the base of my spine. That's...new. And...and I'm searching for something still out of my reach.

“Reven.” His name on my lips is a plea, a question, and, underneath all that, a total faith that we'll get there together.

He moves fast, surging into me in such a way that I can only hold on for the ride. And yet that sense of something too far away to grasp is still there.

“Kiss me.”

He obeys immediately. Lips against mine, tongue sweeping into my mouth. Possession and wanting in every touch.

The kisses we shared before had hints of incandescence. But this...this is revelation.

Sensation draws in tight, then ignites outward, lighting up every nerve ending. Lighting up my soul as Reven groans long and loud, and I'm swallowing his passion, crying my own back to him.

Not everyone gets to have this. I may be young, but I know that much.

I drift back to reality wrapped in the cocoon of strong arms holding me protectively close. I flash my eyes open, searching his for any sign of the Shadows.

He's still tense, muscles hard with it, but he smiles, and I smile back, relieved. Gently, he traces the shape of my face, and I lean into his touch, letting myself relax into the bliss of aftermath.

"Is it always supposed to be that way?" I'm showing my innocence and ignorance.

His eyes crinkle at the corners, but he's not laughing at me. His expression turns too pleased for that. And cocky. "All I know is what the books say—but I'm guessing only for the lucky."

Only the lucky. But I'm *not* lucky. I'm cursed.

Almost like that word in my head triggers a landslide, my vision goes black. I'm still awake, though. Still conscious. I can still feel Reven's hold on me, steady in the sudden nothingness.

What's happening?

"Reven?" I call out, but my voice is just an echo in my head.

Then images. Thousands of images flash through my mind's eye. Memories? But not quite memories. These are all moments in Reven's life, but I'm seeing them from outside of him like a voyeur. Or a seer. Chaotic and out of order, emotions clouding each one, pummeling me.

Reven in the forest. Alone. Reven peeling away from what looks like an older version of himself. Eidolon standing over a vaguely familiar young woman—*soul Infernae* whispers through my mind—then shadows descending on her. Gods, was Reven there for that? The vision jumps to the next scene before I can process.

Reven struggling with whatever lurks inside him, trying to rip it out of his own being and failing. Reven carving those marks in his wrists with claws of night only to pass out and wake back up later with the wounds closed back up like mine. Mother goddess...that's when he tried to kill himself. It didn't work because the Shadows performed the same ritual he's just done on me. Reven opening his eyes to be overcome by light and color.

Then people arriving over time, and his taking them in or finding them. A reluctant savior.

He ran. To put a stop to the king's evil.

There is a stillness in the desert sometimes. An unbreakable kind of unmoving so deep it feels like the world has stopped spinning and the sands that mark time through the eternal hourglass in Allusian are stuck. That's what this feels like.

Because I know that he believes he is a monster. The same as the Devourers. The same as Eidolon and his other shadows. *That's* why he distances himself from everyone.

But all I can see is the sacrifice.

The heart of him. I am seeing his heart. His journey. His truth. He's... amazing. Goddess, this man.

Holy hells, is he seeing my life?

The amulet still around my neck flash heats, like a shooting star—bright and brilliant, then gone. I come back into my body in a *whoosh*, right back in the center of the candles where we've just made love. Where I've given him all of myself.

The flames flicker and go out, the only light coming from the cracks around the door and window.

I take a few deep breaths, trying to reorient. Then I look straight up into blazingly furious, accusing eyes.

"You are not Tabra," he snarls. "You, princess, are *Meren*."

PART FIVE
CASTLE THE KING

The Truth has a Way

I stare at Reven, for once at a total loss for words. Because I *was* going to tell him, just not like this. And yet all I can think is that I like the sound of my name in that hard, smooth voice. Like a caress.

I have never been more aware of what each individual part of me is doing than in this moment. Breath blowing through my nose hard enough to make a sound in my head. My body still entwined with his. My entire being feels wobbly, though I am not sure which part of what has happened is causing that.

But mostly I am aware of my face.

Shock holds my expression immobile as I stare at him, trying to get my brain to contribute to the conversation.

“Who are you?” Reven’s voice is an unforgiving snarl. His grip on my hand tightens, betrayal in his eyes so bleak, I flinch. “Answer the question...Meren.”

Okay, maybe I don’t like the way he says my name when it’s like *that*, a harsh curse of a word.

I clear my throat. “My name is Princess Mereneith Evangeline XII of Aryd. Princess— *Queen* Tabra is my twin sister.”

If a gaze could inflict physical harm, Reven’s would definitely have maimed me. A blaze of fury flares in those cerulean depths, and yet no answering fear rises up inside me.

He jerks away from me, and my gaze traces over the sublime contours of his body, which is rigid with anger.

He throws a wad of clothes at me. “Get dressed.”

I swallow and do so as quickly as shaking hands will let me, aware he’s doing the same by the rustle of noises. I only pause when I realize he’s provided me with new knives. I want to say something but don’t, strapping

them on.

When the room goes quiet, I get to my feet and face him. I'm not sure how long we stand there, staring at each other. I'm trying to get everything inside me to line up, thoughts and emotions all tumbling together, then pulling me in a thousand directions.

"The body double setup was the truth?" he asks. But I don't mistake the quiet of his voice for a softening of his anger.

"Yes. But I'm the double, not her." I sigh. "Second born, second best."

He makes a sound deep in his throat, but I don't know what it means.

"Goddess," he mutters more to himself. Then pins me with a searching look, one rippling with surprise. "That was you. In Enora. The girl at the gate."

Shock is an old companion by now. "How did you know?" My face was covered, and I disguised my voice.

"I don't know. Something in the way you feel in the dark. Familiar."

Oh. "I live in Enora when I'm not standing in for Tabra. Sometimes I escape into the desert."

He jerks his gaze away as if coming to terms with something. But maybe I'm wrong, because when he turns back to me, he's controlled again. "If you're the princess's twin, that makes you royal." His brows lower. "Why are you acting like some kind of glorified bodyguard?"

Obviously, like me, he saw only flashes of memories during that mind-share. "As I said—family tradition."

His jaw works. "This is truly *not* the time to be flippant."

"I'm not," I assure him. It's not flippancy—it's guilt. I should have told him sooner. I know this. "I was going to tell you. The secret I was going to share on the boat, before we found the glass in my side."

He crosses his arms, not voicing his doubts aloud, but they're there to see plainly. I sigh again, then start telling him. Everything. Doing my best

to explain the hows and whys.

He listens in stone-statue mode with the intense staring. The man should think about taking up with gargoyles—he'd fit right in. But he doesn't interrupt. At one point, I think maybe he's angry again. Something in his face shifts. A Shadow, maybe? But he says nothing, so I keep going until it's all out there. Unvarnished truth. The basics, at least.

“So I took the wrong princess but got the right Hylorae,” he muses when I'm finished.

I drop my gaze to the ground because I don't want him to see how that hurts. Deep. Once again, the person I am underneath—Meren Evangeline— isn't worth anything on her own. Even after what we shared.

I should be used to it by now.

“What about the whispers of an uprising you told me about? Was any of that true?”

The question brings my head up. “Yes. I hear about it when I'm not with my sister. When I live among the people.”

“So your sister needs you there,” he mutters, more to himself than to me. He frowns. “What is your sister's power?”

“It should be soul-related, but she hasn't come into it yet. I was early with mine, so Grandmother made me keep it secret.”

He runs a hand over his jaw, brows pulling down into a frown. Then he pauses, gaze turning distant like he's sifting through memories, head cocked and shoulders growing tenser by the minute.

“The sand nymph,” he whispers to himself. He snaps his gaze to mine, urgency in every nuance of his expression. “A sand nymph was at your birth. I saw her, in the visions just now.”

I frown my confusion. “Of course. One comes to the birth of every royal and authority in Aryd, or anyone else who can afford them. They bless the newborn baby.”

Or babies, in my case.

“I don’t think she was there to bless.” He frowns, again looking inward, but shakes his head hard like he’s trying to knock the memories into some kind of sense. “She...” He squeezes his eyes shut, and I can see them moving under the lids.

I stand there, waiting, so confused and tired of being that way. Because if I learn one more horrible thing that I can’t do anything to fix, I might scream.

Darkness pulses around him, and his eyes flash open, troubled, grim. “She was there to *curse* the baby. The women in the room didn’t catch what she was whispering, but I could hear it in the vision.”

Icy dread reaches through my body to strangle my insides with a searing grip. “What?”

No. Oh goddess, no. Tabra.

“The nymph started to curse Tabra, but she stopped—” He cuts himself off. The rage that roils over his features is not at me, and yet it scares me maybe more than anything else I’ve gone through in the last few days. “She cursed you instead,” he says, the words as heavy as lead.

Shock holds me as still as the desert on a windless night.

He must see it in my face because suddenly he’s in front of me. Not touching, not cupping my head. I think he’s still too angry with me for that. But he’s there.

“What kind of curse?” I force myself to ask through stiff lips.

He shakes his head. “I couldn’t see that. But I think Eidolon has been waiting for it to kick in—”

The blood drains from my head so fast, I’m probably white as the snow fields. Because Reven was wrong in his assumptions about me and the king. “He doesn’t want me.”

He frowns. “What?”

“Eidolon doesn’t want me. He wants Tabra.”

Reven turns even more intense, if that’s possible. “What do you mean? Of course he wants you. The sand, the portals, the curse...”

It all made sense, which is why I believed him. But this curse... The sand nymph was sent by Eidolon. I feel the knowledge deep in my bones. Perhaps the king could use me for those things Reven said, but if the curse was supposed to be on Tabra, not me, then the sand nymph defied the king.

Her reason right now doesn’t matter. But the king’s...

Oh goddess. Why did we never see this sooner? “I think he needs a soul power.”

“What?”

I clear my throat and say it louder. “What if he needs a soul power?”

“Explain.”

I wish I could reach out, hold on to Reven, center myself on him, because I have to say this. “I told you why I’m Tabra’s body double. But Eidolon is why we do this. Because he keeps taking Aryd queens and killing them.”

He waits for more.

“Almost every one he’s taken were *Enfernae* who wielded a *soul*-related power.” The words come out as a stark whisper. “One could heal broken souls. One could feel souls, like identifying personalities. There are others.”

He shakes his head sharply. Once. Twice. “No.”

“It makes sense. You were there for at least one of those killings, and *she* had a soul power.”

He rears back at that. “How—”

“I saw it in my visions of you. Don’t you remember?”

“I—” He shakes his head. “The memories before I split are...difficult.”

As in, the Shadows won’t let him see.

We both fall silent, thinking.

“But you said the queens he took...” He’s pacing the room now like a caged Devourer. “He never came for your grandmother’s twin?”

“No.” Omma’s power is even lesser. “It doesn’t happen every generation. There doesn’t seem to be rhyme or reason for it.”

“What does she do?”

“Omma can see which afterlife a soul will be sent to.” I always thought she was a little bitter about that. It’s not exactly helpful. Which could be why Eidolon didn’t bother with her. “Maybe weaker powers aren’t worth the effort or risk?”

Reven shakes his head. “That’s not it. There has to be a reason he’s more interested in the Enfernae than the Hylorae. Has he only ever taken the queen? Never the second born, the body double?”

“It’s a mix of both. So maybe it’s not about who’s queen.”

“All those taken were Enfernae?”

“No.” I’m nodding slowly now, thinking over every detail Omma and Grandmother ever told me about this. “But what if he got those few Hylorae on accident? Or something.” It’s a stretch. “What if he’s waiting for a specific manifestation of the soul ability, but we haven’t produced it yet? It would explain why he lets the twin stay on the throne after he kills her sister. He needs our line to continue until he gets what he needs.”

There are holes I’m not seeing to this explanation, but it feels right. An immortal king doesn’t just torture a royal house for centuries with no reason.

He *needs* us.

“That has to be it right?”

Reven deflates a little, then goes quiet, like he’s turned his gaze inward again. “I was wrong,” he whispers.

“What about?”

He blinks as if returning to me. “The reason I thought... Goddess, I

assumed he wanted you for a portal because of a memory from when I was his shadow. Not the one you saw, apparently. He was demanding a woman make a portal. When she couldn't..." He swallows. "He killed her."

Holy mother goddess of all that is dear and dreadful in this world. Reven was there when my ancestress was murdered? No wonder he took the Shadows and ran.

"But you're right. If the nymph was supposed to curse Tabra, who will be a soul *Enfernae*—" He closes his eyes abruptly. "Fuck."

"What?"

"Me." He opens his eyes. "The curse—at least, I think—was because of me. He sent the nymph only a few years after I left and took all his Shadows. It's so obvious."

"Um. Not to me."

"The nymph would know which one of you was the soul *Enfernae*. Might even know what form your sister's powers will take. Whatever he wants from that half of your line, even if she doesn't have it, he can't risk letting it—her—slip away. Because I stole his Shadows. I took his immortality. She's his last hope."

If I had gone white before, Reven does his best to compete now. The fact that this man, who I've known such a short while and yet have come to see as someone almost unbeatable, could experience even a portion of that fear only feeds my own.

This has to be the king's plan. Or at least part of it. Whatever *Eidolon* needs from my line, he must be desperate—the curse, that amulet, and now, in less than three days, he's going to marry my sister.

He has *never* done any of that before. Not that I know of.

If we're right, Reven and I have both made terrible mistakes.

The shadows shift around us strangely.

I take a quick peek at Reven's face and very carefully take a step back,

the same way I would step away from a coiled snake. Because the face looking back at me is no longer him.

A Tangled Web

“So...” I say, instinctively slipping my hand behind my back and reaching for one of the knives strapped under my clothing. Except I can’t hurt Reven, so I don’t grab it. “Which layer are you?”

By the set of his face alone, I can already tell that this is not the one from the cage, nor the one from the forest in Wildernyss.

Shadow’s lips stretch into an oily smirk—an unnatural look for his face. “Told you about that, did he?”

“Yes.” I try to see past this creature to the man I know is locked inside.

“Ever the bloody do-gooder,” Shadow mutters, then tips his head, considering me. “Though maybe he did something right, capturing you for us. Our king will be pleased to have a prize like you on a leash.”

“I’m not leashed to *you*—”

“You belong to all of us now, love.” The smirk is definitely asking to get wiped from his face. But anything I do to this body, I do to Reven.

“No.” I shake my head. “Reven made sure that *none* of you are inside me.”

He said so. No evil ones as the shadows had closed and sealed my wounds. I remember that much. He promised.

Shadow’s expression wipes free of any amusement as my words sink in. “Lies.” He spits the word.

I tip my head to the side. “Do you feel *any* connection with me?” The wrong thing to ask, though, because even I’ve felt whispers of something between me and the Shadows that have risen to the surface. Not like between a man and a woman. And not like between me and Reven. Different. Hard to define. “A sense of my soul,” I correct. “I know *he* does.”

It’s like the shadows holding my insides together talk to the shadows

that are *him*. Not the layers. Just Reven. That's how I picture it, at least. I even brush my other hand over my scar. But no sparks like before, no fire in my blood, almost like the sense of it has gone faint on me.

Hardly there.

My lungs expand as I realize...hardly there, but I *can* still feel him.

Instinct driving me because I don't know what I'm doing at all, I picture darkness and me and Reven together, like when he shadowed us to the mainland of Tyndra. I picture the shadows sealing both our wounds—my side and his wrists—swirling and cocooning us. Connecting us, me and the man buried inside himself. An answering swirl inside me almost has me gasping with relief.

He's here. With me.

Shadow scowls, eyes moving back and forth like he's searching for a physical sign of this connection anywhere, but he won't find it. It's buried inside me.

"You bitch," he snarls.

I step into him and wrap my hands around his wrists, where the sleeves are rolled back, skin to skin, making sure I touch those scars. Then I will the shadows inside me to reach through both of us. Darkness shifts and eddies around me, and Reven's face contorts. That Shadow disappears only for another to take his place but just as quickly leave. Face after face—too many to keep count—surfaces, only to disappear as another comes bubbling up. But I hold on. I can *feel* him. Feel the way he uses me as an anchor to pull himself back up to the surface.

Then, all of a sudden, there he is. Reven.

He pitches forward, hands on his knees, sucking wind.

"It's getting more difficult," I say. A statement, not a question.

He raises his head and pins me with a look that slams through me—all wrath and, heavens help me, desire. "*Why* did you do that?"

I frown. “Uh, I don’t know. Because you were stuck inside yourself? You’re welcome.”

“You risked yourself getting close. Touching *him*.” He jerks upright, and his hands go into my hair, his eyes a reflection of pain now. “Don’t ever risk yourself like that again. Not for me. Do you understand?”

And it hits me that he was afraid. For me. Despite his anger about my deception that we haven’t worked through.

“I’m fine,” I try to assure him.

His hands tighten against my scalp, jaw working. “You care.” The words come out on a wave of wonder. Then his gaze turns solemn, even wary. He drops his chin, his gaze going somewhere other than me. “I don’t want you to—”

“Don’t ruin this.” I swallow. “Caring is a gift.”

“A gift?” His lips twist with bitterness. “One I can’t accept.”

“You can.” I refuse to beg, but I know what he’s doing. Pushing me away. This is about to hurt. “You only have to be brave enough to reach out and take it.”

But he’s shaking his head. He’s pulling back from me, still touching and yet a thousand leagues away and slipping through my fingers.

“That’s how gifts work,” I point out. “One person gives, one—”

“Takes.”

“Receives,” I correct. “There’s a difference.”

“I won’t make you any promises I can’t keep,” he says, voice turning rough.

I put my hand over his heart. “Too bad. I’m asking for promises.”

The way his face fills with pain threatens to knock me to my knees. “Goddess save me. Meren—”

A blast of a horn has us both stiffening. It comes from somewhere outside the village and is followed by shouts and raised voices.

“What is that?” I ask.

But Reven lets me go and is already headed for the door. Every move he makes is purposeful. Driven. And furious.

“Reven? Talk to me.”

He turns his head, eyes gone deadly. The man who kidnapped me is back. “The Shadowwood has been breached.”

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Breach

Breached? My mind immediately turns that into *invasion*. I stare past him through the open door at the outlines of trees, like any second a thousand soldiers will burst from the forest, running at us.

“I need to go. Now.”

Reven’s voice is like a shove to get me moving. “What do you mean, breached?”

“Someone penetrated my veil of shadows.” His grimly calm fury is freaking me out more. “I missed it because we were—” He cuts himself off, face as stony as a gargoyle. “Because I lost my focus.”

So this is *my* fault? Frustration joins the fray of my emotions, but I dismiss it when a buzz swells from below us in the village—voices of men and women raised in alarm and anger—then cuts off abruptly.

“Stay here,” he says to me.

Then Reven takes off, darkness pouring off him. After a stunned beat, I run after him, my issue with heights buried under a stronger kind of fear. No way am I waiting here like a damsel in distress. That’s never been who I am. Not if I could be helping.

I get to him as he hits the bottom step, and he pulls up short so abruptly the shadows eddy around him, making several passing villagers scatter. “Meren. I mean it.”

I glare at his head because he’s not looking at me. “I’d say you’re cute when you get all commanding, but actually, you’re just insufferable.”

On a growled note of pure frustration, he reaches out and tugs me around to face him. “Please.”

That might be the first time I’ve heard that word pass his lips.

“You’re not the only one who needs to see what’s happening,” I point out, though more gently than I would have a second ago.

“Let me make sure it’s safe first.”

Safe. He’s protecting me, not holding me back? “Okay.”

He blinks. “Okay?”

I nod. So I stay, and he goes. Seconds later, I’m the only one standing here, all the Vanished gone, the village a ghost town.

I wait five minutes, ten. I’m starting to shift on my feet, debating following him. He should have come back for me by now unless something is really wrong.

A shadow passes between a nearby lantern and me, and I try not to breathe or move at all, peering closer. In the night beyond, I see nothing.

“I’ve been sent to fetch you again—”

“Holy hells.” I nearly jump out of my bones as Vos appears beside me. The man must have shadowraith in him to be able to do that. “Warn a girl next time.”

He doesn’t smile. I guess Reven and I are still on his pissed list. Not that I blame him. “We have a visitor.”

“Only one?” Not a mass of soldiers?

“Only one.” But Vos doesn’t seem happy about the small number. “Got past our sentries without us seeing and through the veil without Reven knowing.”

I don’t even need to catch the ominous note to his voice to realize that’s a bad thing. So this *was* my fault.

“Claims to know you.”

I rock back on my feet. That’s not possible. Also...which version of me?

He hitches his chin. “Come with me.”

The village is dead quiet, with not a sign of a single soul in sight. “Where is everyone?”

“Hiding.” I wince at the hardness to his tone. “At that signal, the horn

blowing, Bina takes all the children to a safe place deeper in the forest, away from the village, and the rest of the people hide up top.”

There’s a safer place in these woods?

I picture the faces of the people I’ve met. Picture their fear as they hide, not knowing what will happen next. The knowledge that their haven maybe isn’t as secure as they hoped. The women, the children, Vida, Horus, Tziah, and the librarian I only met briefly. I hate that after lives so rough that they would call out to shadows for help as a last resort, they still aren’t entirely safe.

These are good people caught between powers out of their control. Something I can relate to.

Vos takes me through the village to the other side and down the path that leads toward the Sacred Tree, but he unexpectedly turns left, taking me off the path, though not far and still within the shadowy veil. Just as the trees start to thin, he steps aside. The first thing I see is Reven. His back is to me, blocking whatever he’s cornered. Based on the way the muscles are bunching under his black shirt and how the woods here are darker, heavier, I don’t have to be told that he’s at the edge of his control.

Who or what is making him that way?

He doesn’t look at me as I move closer, though from the way he turns his head slightly, I know he’s aware I’m there. I glance at Vos, eyebrows raised. He waves me around Reven. I take two steps—

And look straight into the wonderfully familiar, deep brown eyes of my best friend.

“*Cain.*” Emotion breaks my voice over his name, and I don’t even think about it. I throw myself into his arms.

“I guess she knows him.”

Vos’s drawled aside hardly penetrates as Cain’s arms close around me tight. Suddenly, I’m a little girl again, lost in the desert—starving, alone,

and petrified—only to have him find me.

Except I'm not alone anymore. Not with Reven.

A Whiff of Home

“What are you doing here?” I ask as I pull back to search Cain’s face. I’m distracted momentarily by the way his gaze tracks over me, almost drinks me in. And I think I hear a tiny hum of warning from Reven behind me, but then I get a closer look at Cain and revise my question to, “What *happened* to you?”

I frown as I take in his disheveled state. He’s wearing the same formal, fitted outfit he had on the night I was taken, though his clothing is a mess, tattered and filthy, and covered now by an ill-fitting coat I assume he stole. The thickly ice-crusting boots on his feet, too. A long scratch down the side of his face, disappearing into what’s now a growing beard, is red and angry, but the blood is dry. And his hands are wrapped in white cloths, the visible skin glistening with what looks to be an ointment. Coming from the desert, I have no idea what that means.

A glance around shows Tziah there with scissors and more strips of the white cloths and a jar of something that looks like animal fat.

“What happened to your hands?”

“Frostbite,” he says.

I’ve heard of it—skin dying from overexposure to cold.

“According to these...people”—he doesn’t look away from me—“I should heal okay.”

I blow out a silent breath. One less thing that’s my fault.

Cain folds his arms across his chest, careful of his hands. “I followed you.”

He *what*? I mean, of course he did, otherwise he wouldn’t be here. But — “How?”

“I woke up in that damn courtyard to find you gone and a different you in your place.” His gaze sharpens. “One who wasn’t *my* Meren.”

The moonlight flickers, silver beams dimming like they're trying to run and hide from the shadows looming larger in the trees.

Cain flicks a glance over my shoulder. I'm hideously conscious of the fact that Reven is standing behind me, watching and listening to all of this.

"Wait," Horus says, gaze narrowing on me. "Meren the body double?"

I wince as I turn my head to explain to him. "Meren is me. Tabra is my twin sister and the real queen. Long story." One I owe to Cain more than anyone.

Horus's face turns to stone, betrayal etched in the lines, and I wish to the goddess I'd shared this sooner. But I couldn't.

"I fucking *knew* it," Vos snaps off to my side where I can see him. There goes our truce, I'm pretty sure. "You *knew*?" He has to be directing that to Reven.

"He just found out," I answer for him because the hole of silence behind me tells me Reven is clearly not in the mood.

It doesn't help Vos. "Well, isn't that a lump of coal."

Tziah, of course, says nothing, but she continues to watch with interest. At least she doesn't seem angry.

Reven finally decides to speak up. Though by the sharpness of his words, I'd say he's pissed. "Who are you?"

I swing around to give him a glare. "Does it matter? Clearly I've vouched for him."

A muscle ticks at the side of Reven's eye. "This is the Shadowwood, *princess*."

Oh, we're back to that now, huh?

Cain scowls, moving forward a step, but I stop him with a hand on his arm. Reven's gaze tracks the touch, but I refuse to take it back. "Cain is the oldest child of Zariph Cainis in Aryd. He'll be the next zariph of that zariphate. I have known him since I was a child, though he only ever knew

me as Meren and had no idea I was royal.”

Reven has no give in him.

I cross my arms, squaring off against him. “He’s the one you knocked out the night you came for me.”

The one about to offer me a cuff as a marriage proposal. Again. I leave that bit off. Reven’s clearly not in the frame of mind to deal with being pushed.

“Well, shit.” I glance over my shoulder to find Cain rubbing the back of his head. If eyes could turn into weapons, Reven would be skewered by now. “Remind me to punch you in the face first chance I get.”

“I change my mind. I like this one,” Vos offers, suddenly more cheerful. Then moves around Reven’s immovable form to lean against a tree, suddenly all casual and easy. “We should keep him around, just to see what happens. It’ll be fun.”

“Fine by me,” Cain says. “My place is with Meren.”

I groan inwardly. Cain clearly isn’t reading the room.

Or maybe he is.

We don’t have time for male chest-thumping, though. We still need to get going. Tabra’s hourglass is running out of sand. “I’ll explain everything, but for now...” I look at the others. “Can you give us a minute?”

“No.” Reven’s voice is intractable.

I get it. Given all the lies and what’s come to light and who I really am, I’ve lost any trust he had in me. He has to be thinking that Cain and I could run and abandon them all. However, Reven and I are bound together by shadow. We’re still figuring out how it works, but it’s something. Not that I want to leave him anyway. I stare at him, trying to make him understand—make him see I’m worth giving another shot.

“Cain is my friend. He would never do anything against my wishes,” I try to explain. To tell him without using explicit words that that’s *all* my

relationship with Cain is.

Reven stares at me a long beat. “Bring him to the meeting room when you’re done.” He stalks away, and the clearing turns a little brighter once he’s out of view.

Tziah, meanwhile, has to practically drag Vos away. Horus, at least, is no longer glaring, but his visible disappointment as he turns his back on me makes me wince all the same.

“Come with me,” I say when they’re gone. I lead Cain back to the nearby path, but instead of going toward the village, I take him the other way.

“Mer?”

“Shhh. Just let me show you this one thing. Then we can talk.”

His brows lower, but his mouth twitches. “All right.”

It’s not long before we enter a different clearing, and I stop and point. The second Cain sees the Sacred Tree, he takes a breath with his entire body. “Is that—”

“It is. You should see it in daylight.”

He doesn’t pull his gaze from it, and I smile at the awe softening his features. He shakes his head. “We always said we’d see them together.”

A snick of guilt tugs at me because I didn’t see it with Cain first—I saw it with Reven. But that was right, too. I won’t apologize for it.

“Well... Two down, one to go,” he says to himself.

“Two?” I scowl. “What do you mean, two? We haven’t seen the one in Aryd yet.”

His expression turns comically guilty as he grimaces. “I...”

“You saw it without me?” I plonk my hands on my hips, but my lips are lifting. Because who am I to accuse him of anything? I saw this one without him.

“Father took the zariphate there to offer sacrifices to bless me choosing

a heartmate—” Cain gets a closer look at my face and huffs a laugh. “I guess that promise to only see the trees with each other wasn’t exactly practical.”

“No,” I murmur, swinging my gaze back to the broad red leaves. “I guess not.”

Cain suddenly reaches out to yank me into his arms, wrapping around me. “You scared the ever-living hells out of me, Mer.”

I close my eyes and lean into him. Cain is home to me. And he cared enough to track me, to risk his own life, to walk away from his people.

He pulls back, taking me by the shoulders, gaze drinking in all of me again. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine,” I assure him, then close my eyes against the concern in his. “I’m sorry.”

“Meren.”

“I’m so sorry,” I repeat, still not able to look at him. “I should have told you everything ages ago. But—” But I was not allowed to, and the knowledge could be dangerous, not just for me and Tabra but for Cain.

“Hey.” He gives my shoulders a squeeze, and I open my eyes, searching his features. “You’re a princess. You don’t think I get it?”

I wince. “But you are my *best friend*, Cain. I owed you honesty. You would have kept my secret safe.”

His smile is slow but tempered. “I will always keep you safe, Meren.”

Relief punches from me on what comes out as almost a whimper, and I walk into his arms again, burying my face in his chest. He smells of sand and the desert, and I inhale deeply. “I thought you’d be so mad.”

“I was. But I got over it somewhere in the middle of Wildernyss when I was trying to find you. I had a lot of time to think, and eventually I realized that you were probably keeping me safe by keeping your secrets.” He takes me by the shoulders again so he can see my face. “I also realized that I

know the real you. You've been Meren with me all along, even when you had to be someone else with the rest of the world."

I have to press my lips together around a well of gratefulness for this man. "How could you be so sure?"

He tips his head, amusement sparking in his eyes. "Is your favorite holiday the Feast of Vultures?"

My eyebrows wing up. Where is he going with this? "Uh. Yes."

"And is your favorite food anything with cinnamon?"

Ah. I'm starting to see. "It is."

"Do you sleep in a ball with your knees tucked to your chest and your back to a wall or rock...or me?"

Guilty. I'm shaking my head now but smiling.

"And did I teach you to throw knives?"

I grimace. "Actually, we should have worked on that a little harder."

His eyes narrow playfully. "I see. Well, we can do that now."

Which makes me chuckle. "Okay. I get your point."

He nods, then seems to hesitate for a second. "In the interest of more honesty..."

He holds his hand flat out between us, palm facing down. After a moment, it starts to glow yellow. My lips part on a gasp as water bubbles up from the ground between our feet, growing until it becomes a small fountain that spills over itself and yet doesn't wet my clothes.

With wide eyes, I jerk my gaze from the cool, clean spring to Cain's face. So that's what he meant about purifying the well the night Pella and her helper caught me in the desert. "You, too?"

He nods. "We're *both* Hylorae." Like that's significant. I know to some it is—those who see Hylorae and Enfernae on opposite sides. Given the way twins in my line receive both kinds of powers, I've only ever thought of us as all Imperium. Different but not separate.

I open my mouth to say so, but Cain isn't finished.

With his other hand, he riffles through a pocket, and for a long, awkwardly uncomfortable moment I think he might bring out that golden cuff again. Instead, he places a small item on top of the still bubbling fountain, and it hovers there between us.

The unfinished rosebud I'd made in the desert. That feels like ages ago. He must've found it after it fell out of my pocket.

"Power over sand, huh?" he asks. But he's grinning. "Appropriate for you, I'd say."

I grin back.

But when I reach for the flower, he snatches it away. "Uh-uh. It's mine."

It was supposed to be for Tabra. I decide not to tell him that. She has plenty.

I'm glad I didn't when he says, "This will always remind me of you. No matter where we go in life, you will always be my Meren."

For a second, he's my childhood hero and friend again. But I also know there is more meaning to the words than I choose to acknowledge.

An image of Reven pops into my mind. Of what we shared.

I take a deep breath, knowing we still have to go back to Aryd. Reality is closing in. "You'll always be special to me, Cain. I wish we could stay here and enjoy the Sacred Tree and pretend that we're still kids."

He nods slowly. "But we can't do that."

Without having to say any more, together we head back to the others. Cain sighs dramatically. "Being all grown up really chafes sometimes."

He always could make me laugh.

Both of us sober as we reach the village, and Cain's expression is priceless as he takes in the buildings up in the trees. But he doesn't say anything, and we're at the meeting room almost too fast.

At my knock, Horus lets us in. Reven is standing at the fireplace, staring

into the flames, his back to the room. He doesn't even turn to look at me.

"Pals again?" Vos asks.

I shoot him a warning look, but Cain doesn't seem remotely fazed, throwing an arm over my shoulders—something he's never been in the habit of doing before—and squeezing me close to his side. "Yup."

After casting a glance in Reven's unmoving direction, Vos gets to his feet. "Time for answers. We know you came for our...princess."

"For Meren," Cain corrects. Deliberately, I think, making a point that he always knew the real me and they all just found out.

"How did you find me?" I ask to redirect the conversation. He'd mentioned Wildernyss.

I shouldn't be surprised he followed me now that I know he can open the portals on his own. His father is legendary when it comes to tracking, and the zariph taught Cain well. But that's in the desert. City is different. Mountains are different. Tyndra is different.

"I tracked that guy." He hitches his chin at Vos.

Vos's expression darkens. "I doubt that."

Cain cocks an eyebrow. "I saw you sneaking out of the palace after King Eidolon arrived. You traveled through the portal to the temple in Wildernyss, then through some really misty place and down a rickety ladder to Tyndra, and then to these woods." His lips flatten. "I lost your trail here when it got too dark to see in front of my face."

Tziah gets Vos's attention, points at Cain, and then gives a thumbs-up, her expression visibly impressed. Which makes Vos snarl all over again.

Reven still hasn't said anything.

Cain ignores them, focused on me. "I've been trying to get through these damnable woods ever since." He holds up his damaged hands, lips quirking in a half-hearted grin. "A Wanderer is not meant for this goddess-forsaken land."

All for me.

Maybe this is why Omma never wanted me to make friends. It puts more people I care about in danger and makes me vulnerable at the same time. I truly am cursed, and not just from the sand nymph.

He bends an unmoving look on me. “Nothing that won’t heal, Mer. Your turn now. Who are these people, and what are you doing with them?”

As quickly as I can, I explain everything. Again. Who Cain is to those who weren’t with us outside. And what’s been happening. I leave out Reven’s shadows—that’s his secret to tell. I also skip the kidnapping part, because I know Cain. He might try to take a knife to Reven’s throat for that alone. I also tell them all about the need to get back to Tabra and get her away from Eidolon.

Cain doesn’t say much the entire time. Neither do the others, not until the end, when he suddenly straightens, all business. “Then the soldiers aren’t yours?”

Bad Guys Close In

“What soldiers?” It’s the first thing Reven’s said since we walked in the room.

“Camped out all along the forest’s edge. I had to come into the woods from the north to avoid them,” Cain explains. “It added to what took me so long.”

We don’t even need to ask why. All the tents, the soldiers at the temple, the arrival of the general—none of this was accidental. Does that mean Vos had to skirt them, too? I don’t dare toss that in with the questions. Reven no doubt is thinking the same thing. However, the more immediate threat is the soldiers.

Are they coming for me? No. Eidolon already has the *Enfernae* princess who’ll manifest a soul power. No need to come for me. They must be coming for Reven. Or to clear out the Shadowwood. Or both.

“How close are they?” Reven’s voice has dropped to a snarl now. Soft. Vicious. “They’re not touching the veil yet. I’d know.”

“You sure about that?” Vos snipes, only to close his mouth with a snap as Reven’s sharp-eyed glare cuts to him.

Cain watches the exchange with interest, his speculative gaze sliding to me. “They’re camped outside the forest. These trees back up to the channel between Tyndra and Savanah?”

I shouldn’t be surprised that he knows the layouts of the other dominions.

“Yes,” Vos confirms.

“Well, the army is positioned along your eastern border, not quite to the channel. I don’t know how far south they go.”

“They came from the south,” Reven says darkly.

In his voice, I can hear what he’s not saying. We’re surrounded with no

way out.

No matter which way we go, we're trapped. The Devourers wait in the ocean on one side, Eidolon's soldiers on the other—many of whom now have a personal vendetta against me. After all, I killed a lot of them and sank their boats. But they were in Little Tyndra getting ready for something big long before we showed up to be captured.

"They've come for me," Reven says, echoing my thoughts. He gives me a significant glance, and I know where he's going with this. The king has figured out where his Shadows have been hiding. And he has Tabra.

Now we're *all* out of time.

"What are they waiting on?" Vos mutters, more to himself than the rest of us.

Then his gaze slides to Cain and he's frowning. "How *did* you get through the veil, anyway?"

Cain stares at the man, brows lowering as he thinks. "I don't know. One minute, I was wandering in circles. The next, it was like a smoky mist cleared, and everything turned lighter with moonlight. I stepped through. Then I walked maybe ten minutes before being picked up by your sentries."

Trying not to wince or look at Reven, I'm well aware that the timing lines up with what we were busy doing.

"Meren." Reven's voice is hard, but a sensation that is almost a gentle caress steals through my scar, and that's what makes me look at him. He swallows, his face full of stony regret. "I can't get you to your sister, not even the way I travel."

My eyes go wide. He can't? In other words, the Shadows won't let him. Has he been standing here trying to get me away this entire time while I thought he was pouting?

"We have two more days—"

The look in his eyes cuts off that hope. "One day. It took me and Vos a

whole day just to get you here.”

I was out that long? How did they even keep me alive? I close my eyes, breathing out slowly. Tabra. Her wedding to Eidolon is tomorrow. Even if we could somehow deal with what’s coming for us here, I’ve failed her. I didn’t keep her safe from the real danger.

Now the monster’s henchman is at our gates. It’s too late.

I open my eyes and nod my understanding. Omma’s voice sounds in my head with one of her many lessons. *When there seems to be no other way, think of one thing you can do.*

I set aside Tabra for now and focus on the immediate threat. “Are the soldiers close enough to the shadows that we could spy on them from safety?”

“No.” Reven’s face descends into a grim smile that makes the others in the room shift on their feet. “But they’re close enough for me to infiltrate.”

“What would that accomplish?”

“If I can see exactly where they are, where they’re trying to get in, I can try to bolster the veil there. Even better if I can hear their plans.”

No.

I grip the table, keeping the denial inside me. Of course he should do everything in his power to protect the people of the Shadowwood. My sudden worry for him shouldn’t be a consideration. Except, if he’s weakened—by me or the way he’s been using his power tonight—can he do it? Assuming the things inside him allow it.

Maybe the Shadows want this, though. They want him captured, want invasion so they can return to Eidolon.

“We’ll go with you,” Horus says, already pushing to his feet, his chair scraping across the floor. “We can wait in the trees, behind the veil, in case you need help.”

Vos, despite still being visibly pissed, nods. Tziah takes her place at

Vos's side. And Cain straightens as well.

My gaze slides to the man beside me. My friend, who even after discovering my years of lies still risked his life to rescue me. Who wants me to stay with the Wanderers at his side. Maybe that would have worked. Once. Before. Even sitting here, the pull of familiarity, of home and someone I've always trusted and liked, tugs at me. Hard to resist.

But the way I feel about the Shadowraith with a savior complex who is standing across the room tugs harder. Now is not the time to address the situation with him. With either of them. So I stay quiet.

"I need you both here," Reven finally says to Horus and Vos, the words heavy. "If I'm captured..." He doesn't have to finish that thought. We all know what it means.

"You can't go alone," Vos insists.

"I won't. Meren will come with me."

I startle, and at the same time, pretty much every other person in the room erupts in some version of "the hells you say." Cain maybe the loudest.

But I know Reven. Or at least I've come to realize that he never does anything without a reason. "Why me?" I ask through the jumble of protests.

I imagine, for a split second, his gaze softens. *He* softens. Only, in the next instant, that's gone, replaced by bleak truth. "Because I may need you to pull me out."

Oh.

Not for my glass spikes or the need to keep me near so he can protect me, but because of our scars and the shadows that bind us, anchor us to each other. He's worried he won't be able to hold back the Shadows.

I can see that he's hating himself for having to ask, even though his expression doesn't remotely shift. "I'll come."

"I don't think that's a good—"

"It's done." I cut both Vos and Cain off.

Maybe, just maybe, I catch a glint of surprise in Reven's brooding gaze.

Doesn't he realize I stopped fighting him days ago? We're only stronger together. Even with what we both are.

"We need more of a plan than this," Cain tries to insist.

"We already have one," Reven says, then looks over my head at Vos, who nods, I guess, which tells me they're prepared for something, at least, though I don't know what.

"Ready?" Reven says to me.

But I have things that need taking care of, too. I spin back to Cain, my hand on his arm. "If something happens tonight— Actually, no matter what happens tonight, I need you to get to my sister and try to convince Tabra to get away from Eidolon. She needs to hide. With your father, in a different dominion, whatever. Just keep her out of the king's hands."

All the rest of it won't matter a damn if Eidolon uses her for whatever he has planned. Goddess, I wish we knew for sure that it's her he wants. Knew anything for sure at this point. Why did none of the previous twins do more to figure out his endgame? All they did was hide and react.

Cain steps into me, eyes as hard as onyx. A warrior's eyes. "I didn't come all this way to lose you again."

"You are my best friend," I whisper to him. "I will always love you. I hope you know that."

I ignore both the clawing hole of silence behind me and the way Cain stiffens against me. "Don't do this," he says to me.

I pull back, gripping his arms to look him directly in the eyes. "I'm not the city waif you thought I was."

"I know—"

I cut him off with a shake of my head. "You taught me so many things, especially how to survive. How to fight. As a princess of Aryd, even if I'm not the queen, it is my *responsibility* to fight now. Fight for these people.

Fight to save my sister if it's not too late. Fight for Aryd and against Eidolon. Don't hold me back now. Not when your friendship is a large part of who I am. This is me. I *have* to go."

The look in Cain's eyes shifts and changes with his reactions—denial, pride, and eventually resignation.

"Promise me you'll fight to keep yourself safe, too," he says. "Don't be a hero, Meren."

It's a promise I couldn't make to Reven. I can't make it to Cain now, either, and he knows it. Which is why I say nothing, and, after a moment, he nods.

Then looks over my head, gaze turning stony and jaw tight. "Keep her safe."

I don't know what Reven's reaction is. He doesn't say anything. I squeeze Cain one more time and step away, turning to face the man who, not even hours ago, I gave myself to. Who was just inside me. Who introduced me to the world of pleasure with tenderness in his eyes and his touch...and then shut me out.

"Let's go," he says.

A Tear in the Veil

“Stop here.” Reven puts a hand out, taking me by the arm, his touch utterly impersonal.

His Shadows may not let him take me to Tabra, but they don’t seem to have a problem with zipping through the Shadowwood. The thought that maybe this is what they want tickles again at the back of my mind.

Regardless, we’re here already. We stand at the border suddenly, inside the tree line by a solid thirty feet, the veil of Reven’s shroud between us and what’s out there.

Through the haze and layers of trees, I can make out the glitter of fires. *Many* fires.

“Mother goddess,” I breathe. “Seems like overkill. There’s only a hundred of us. How many soldiers do they need to wipe out one village?”

“We’re three hundred strong, not counting the children,” Reven says.

That many? I hadn’t realized.

“The shadows are their own deterrent, and Quinten is no fool.” His lips form into a silent snarl. “No doubt he has orders to take me alive.” Without turning his gaze from the camp, Reven says, “Unless I tell you to, do not move past this point, or the veil can’t hide you. Understand?”

An order? Really?

I’d argue, but it strikes me in the next second that he is about to risk his life in the enemy’s camp. He doesn’t need other distractions or worries right now. Including me. “I won’t move unless you call me out.”

He finally faces me then and brings a hand around the back of my neck in an unexpected, possessive move that shoots molten, silken heat straight through me. I don’t want to react like that, though—not after the way he’s shut me off.

He tips my chin up with his thumb. “Definitely trouble,” he mutters. His

voice is a knife's edge, like he doesn't like that he touched me at all.

"You'd miss me if I left."

His fingers curl into my skin before he places a hard and fast kiss on my lips, then steps back and suddenly disappears into the night. Shadows don't curl up around him. His body doesn't disintegrate or melt into the dark like a mountain blanketed in mist. He's just...gone.

"I'd love to have that trick," I mutter.

At least I can still feel him in the darkness inside me—though fainter when he's not solid. My scar feels like it pulls tighter with each passing second, the drag on the skin around it stretching to the point of discomfort.

I search the camp for any sign of him out there, wishing that I could see more than the vague shapes of the tents and the flickering flames of the campfires. How am I helping by hiding back here?

I listen, waiting for a shout of warning. Waiting for the frenzied sounds of a struggle. But maybe the shadows are muffling the outside world, because silence surrounds me. Almost like the forest is aware that danger lurks nearby and has stilled to avoid notice.

Reven's suddenly beside me again, forming out of darkness. "They're not here."

"Not here?" I snap my gaze from him back to the camp, not comprehending because what he's saying makes no sense. "What do you mean?"

Hands on his hips, he drops his head forward in thought. "The camp is *empty*. Not a single man in sight and tents all a wreck. It's like they left in a hurry."

I'm shaking my head. "But where could they possibly—"

The blast of a horn echoes through the woods. Only this time, I know what it means, and it sends the fear of the goddesses straight through me. Another breach. Then another horn sounds. And another. Until they are

echoing in the trees and in my head.

Reven doesn't wait. He grabs my hand, and we're engulfed in shadow only to land right in front of our friends as they rush out of the meeting room.

"Cain isn't the only one who got through," Reven snaps. "Get to your posts. Eidolon's army is inside the Shadowwood."

To the Trees

“I have to warn Bina what’s happening.” Reven aims a look at me that’s pure royal command, the king in him showing through.

The king in him. If Eidolon is killed, Reven will be the King of Tyndra. And if anything happens to Tabra before I can get to her, that makes me the Queen of Aryd. Hells. Eidolon might get what he wants after all.

“Don’t move from this spot until I get back.” Another order.

Before I can point out that staying in one spot in the middle of an invasion might not be the safest move, he’s gone.

“Where do you need us?” Cain asks Vos. The first to react.

“You’re a fighter.” Vos isn’t asking. Warriors recognize their like.

Cain nods anyway.

“Imperium?” Vos asks.

“I can pull water out of the ground.” Cain looks at his hands, making a fist around the bandages still wrapped around them. “I’ve never used my power in a fight, but I’ll come up with something.”

“Good,” Vos says. “Position yourself on the north side of the village. I’ll be on the east side—I control ice. Reven to the south—he’s shadow. Just so you don’t accidentally try to kill either of us.” He turns to Horus. “You—”

“I will stay with the villagers.” Horus beats him to it. Vos nods, and Horus runs off.

“Anyone to the west?” Cain asks.

“A last-ditch escape if it goes bad,” Vos says over his shoulder as he moves to the base of the nearest tree. He pulls on a rope, raising a large crate into the air. Supplies, maybe? Weapons? “There’s a secret path to the west and then north. From there, try to get to that ladder to Wildernyss.”

It strikes me in that moment that Reven and his people, who obviously are the ones who must have put those ladders there, have done more in their

time here than I, or my grandmother, or my sister, or my ancestors, have done in centuries. And if I get out of this alive, I'm damn well making some changes.

Vos is done issuing instructions. He finishes whatever he's doing with the crate and takes off into the night, shouting, "Stay in the trees."

The villagers take up the cry.

But they can't be safe up there, not with those easy-access stairways. Granted, it'll slow the soldiers down, but by how much?

Cain makes to run, too, but pulls up when I stay where I am beside Tziah. "Come on, Meren."

I shake my head. "I have to stay here."

"Because *he* said so?" Something like shock coated in a thick layer of what might be betrayal ripples over him and breaks my heart. Because until not that long ago, I would have followed Cain to the ends of the dominions. He wouldn't have even had to ask.

I shake my head. "I'll stay with the people here in case you can't hold them back."

Not much of a defense. While I have knives, I've only trained to deal with one or two attackers. Not an army. My powers... Those are unpredictable at best. Hit-and-miss. Just look at my failures trying to make a simple glass wall. But I have to try.

So I stay.

Tziah is tugging on my arm by now, pointing to the trees, and given Vos's shouted instructions, I know where she wants me to be.

"Go," I tell Cain. "And no dying on me."

This isn't his fight. I dragged him into this. But I know my friend, and honor is important with him. Even through a face still frozen with disappointment in me, his crooked, cocky smile heals a small part of my heart.

“Don’t forget what I taught you about fighting.” Then he turns and sprints away. I watch him go.

Tziah makes a hissing sound, like she opened her mouth and closed it right away. But Reven said to stay here, so I hesitate.

I kneel down and, using my power, pull sand up from the ground, its pale color stark against the darker soil and blanket of pine needles. I use it to draw an arrow in the dirt, pointing at the tree Tziah has been tugging me toward. I have no idea if Reven will see it. With feet heavy, at odds with the rushing blood and fear thrumming through my veins, I follow her up a set of winding stairs I haven’t used before. For once, height isn’t the scariest thing about this. In fact, I hardly notice.

As soon as we reach the first platform, she stops.

“Should we go higher?” I ask. At least two more platforms are above us.

Without looking at me, she shakes her head and points at the tree bark. I understood the first part, but... “Um. Is there something the tree is going to do?”

Does Reven have some sort of tree Hylorae in his ranks I didn’t know about?

Tziah shakes her head again and holds a palm up flat. I figure that means wait. So I wait a few steps back from where she stands at the rail, sticking closer to the wide, immovable trunk. She’s peering into the forest below us and around us, and so am I. More than that, I’m listening.

I know this silence. I’ve heard it before the muffled rumble of an arriving zariphate, or among courtiers when my grandmother was in a rage. It’s the silence of those trying to make themselves small and unnoticeable. It’s the sound of the Vanished trying to wish away or pray away what they know is coming next.

Tension twists my insides, building with each silent moment. Where are the soldiers? Invasion should be loud, right?

Given the number of tents we saw, we're looking at at least five or six hundred. Maybe more. A thousand? When they come, it won't be subtle or soft. It will be with a roar.

I do the only thing I can think of—get ready. I ignite my power and start pulling sand up from the ground all around us as fast as I can. What I have in mind, if I can even do it, requires a *lot* of sand. After a few minutes of tugging it out of the ground but not going fast enough, I switch tactics and draw it from the piles already heaped in the clearing where I spent an entire day practicing.

Part of me wonders what anyone witnessing streams of sand creeping along the forest floor is thinking. The glass spikes I made before are my best bet. They worked on those boats, so maybe I can make a moat of them around us now. A deadly hedge.

At Tziah's frowning glance at my hands, I drop to a crouch, using the bulk of the tree and the rails to hide the radiance shining out of my palms. Not difficult. The glow is dimmer now than even when I was in Aryd making my flowers. Hardly a pinprick.

I put a hand to my amulet.

A whistle pierces the eerie quiet of the night. A sound I've heard before. Recently. I grab Tziah's arm and drag her into a crouch behind the wood paneling of the rail. The arrows striking around us hit all at once.

She stares at me wide-eyed, and I stare back.

Somewhere along the line, I think maybe I've stopped feeling the fear. It's there. I know it is, or my heart wouldn't be tripping over itself. But even days ago I would have felt like I was swimming through it, like haze or a sand trap.

But right now my mind is crystal clear.

Maybe because I don't see a way out of this. I'll fight. For me, for these people. But I'm going to die here. We all are. I see the same certainty in

Tziah's frosted eyes.

That she doesn't even appear shaken tells me that she's faced death before. Maybe too often.

She flattens her palm toward the ground, then lowers it, and I nod. As long as we stay down, we should be safe enough from the arrows. But they know we're in the trees, and they're already near enough to shoot at us. I still don't know from where, exactly. How'd they get so close without us hearing? Or, for that matter, without running into—

Tziah points down at the ground, and in the guttering of the lantern light below I can make out frost creeping slowly across the forest floor. Vos.

Black shadow churns in the sky, blocking out the moons. From another direction, a boom blasts through the night so hard it rocks the trees enough to make leaves flutter from the branches.

That sound unleashes hell.

A howl of soldiers, hundreds strong, sends a lance of dread down my spine, and yet my mind remains clear. The shouts get louder, a wave of sound crashing toward us. With the pounding of boots on the ground, like ants crawling out of a crushed anthill, warriors burst into view below us from every direction. But not the white-armored ones from the temple I'm expecting. These are something else.

Something even more terrifying.

The Kiss of Hell-Fire

I'm not sure if I'm looking at men or monsters. Through the cloak of darkness and the trees, I catch glimpses of jagged teeth that look almost like a lion's or a crocodile's, designed to rend flesh from bone. Flashing yellow eyes. Fur-covered bodies but with tattooed skin around their faces and limbs. And the stench that rises from the ground makes me gag.

They hit the village at a dead sprint and hardly pause before bolting up the trees. The thump of feet pounding up the winding stairs is the only sound in my ears now. Movement below catches my attention. The soldiers I was expecting, white armor gleaming and winking at me through the woods like stars through clouds, march forward to line up in the trees. Archers nock their bows and let arrows fly over the heads of the throng of brutes coming at us from below.

I grab Tziah's arm. "We need to hide."

Again with the shaking of her head. She's watching the stairs fiercely, but I don't understand. Horror wants to drive me higher or into one of the rooms, but I can't leave her.

"Tziah." I'm yanking on her arm now.

She swats me away, then, still crouched, makes her way to the trunk, never once taking her gaze from the stairs. The sound of harsh breathing over the cadence of feet running up the stairs tells me how close they are, and terror steals any sound I might make.

Then a surprised shout comes from just around the bend, and one of the attackers on the ground sort of catapults into the air to slam against a nearby tree, then drop to a broken heap on the ground. Only by chance do I see the shadow slipping away.

Reven.

He's out there alone.

Another man gets plucked off a nearby tree with a yelp, crashing through the branches. But there are too many for him to keep up with, and his control is weaker—thanks to me or them, it doesn't matter.

They're nearly on top of me and Tziah now, the putrid scent of them rising all around us, soiling the air. Goddess, they're so close, running up this tree at us. Up all the trees. I pull my power forward, getting ready to defend us the only way I know how.

The first sighting of skin and fur rounds the bend right behind a ripping snarl, and I realize with a start that this is a man, not a beast. Human eyes, human torsos and hands. All the animal parts are a disguise to create fear.

It works.

In the same instant, Tziah leaps up and pulls what appears to be a lever built into the trunk of the tree itself. Hidden there.

That or I really need to pay better attention.

The second she yanks it down, a thunderous crash drowns out the barbarians. At the crack of a branch splitting, the man I can see jerks around and yells as a massive log, suspended by a series of ropes, swings directly at him so fast he can't move. It smashes into the tree, pulverizing him and maybe one or two others and crushing an entire section of the staircase, cutting off access for anyone else trying to reach us.

The tree really does rock this time, and I white-knuckle the bark of the trunk, terrified that either this ancient sentinel is going to topple, taking us with it, or the platform we're on will crumble from the violence of the strike.

I was right to be terrified of heights. It's clearly how I'm going to die.

A series of similar crashes tells me other trees are losing their stairs, too. Then I look down and gasp.

Reven.

He materializes out of shadow to grab a boy who can't be much older

than thirteen—he must’ve gotten knocked out of his tree and survived the fall. Reven tosses him up onto the thatched roof of our meeting building. I jolt forward, hand outstretched and a cry surging up my throat as our attackers descend on Reven like a pack of feral raigus, the desert dogs whose bite the Wanderers believe traps a soul in the realm of the living. Tziah grabs my hand, and I lose sight of him as she drags me higher.

“What are those things?” I yell.

But she can’t answer and we’re both too busy climbing. A glance over my shoulder has me jerking us both to a stop.

Because the lights I see scattered through the forest floor are new. And they *aren’t* lanterns. “Look.” I point.

Horror can be slow to dawn and then come on in a rush. Which is what happens as a hundred little flames ignite in the night.

“Fire.” I breathe the word. They’re going to burn us out, and now we have no way to get down without a drop of at least thirty feet.

“Nock!” multiple voices shout below.

No, no, no.

“Draw!” comes the next order. The flickers of flame raise in a unified line.

Goddesses hear me. Don’t let us die here.

“Loose!”

A hundred flaming arrows release and sail through the air, higher this time.

Tziah and I duck as the swarm hits overhead with popping thuds followed by the instant spark of flame as the canopy catches and ignites. Cries and shouts of alarm and panic from the Vanished join the distinctive crackle of an inferno catching.

“How do we get down?” I ask, searching frantically around us for some way I might have missed.

To my left, a swell of water appears, rising like the glass walls of Aryd, well above the canopy. It douses one of the trees before receding, leaving the forest dripping.

Cain.

Another wave doesn't come, though. He only managed to put out the fire on one side of the village, the side farthest away from where I am, and the burning bearing down on me from above is growing more intense.

Sand. Sand smothers fire.

I should have thought of this from my days in the desert. Hands aglow, a smidge brighter than a moment ago, I raise them to the smoke-smothered sky, directing the sand I'd gathered below to shoot up and then drop over us. Except it's not the eruption I was hoping for. All I get are a few grains in my eyes, and the flames directly above me hiss like they are laughing at my feeble attempt.

Hells.

I've made giant glass spears that took down boats. I've moved heavy metal cages. And yet, I can't even make it rain sand.

My failure drapes over me like a weighted train, dragging me down. Still struggling with my disappointment in myself, I allow Tziah to yank me upward—closer to the fire, I'd like to point out.

The screaming from the Vanished gets worse, growing in panic and hopelessness, suffocating terror filling the air until it rings in my ears and makes it hard to breathe. The smoke doesn't help.

The horrible sound swells and rises—a heartrending noise I'm sure I'll hear in my nightmares for years if I survive this.

Damn Eidolon. Damn him. Damn his army. Damn everything about this.

In that instant, I choose to die fighting.

We get to the second balcony, higher up, and Tziah skirts the girth of the

tree to the other side. From around a smaller limb, she unwinds a thick rope with a loop at the bottom. When she shows me how to step a foot into the loop and hold on, then points, understanding sinks in along with a wave of nausea.

This is, apparently, the way down. “Um... You first.”

She shakes her head and points at me.

But no way am I leaving her. Vos would kill me if something happened to her. I haven’t known him long, but I know that much. Besides, I’m not sure I could handle it if one more person died because of me.

The blaze is bearing down on us now, the flames seeming to lunge and skulk across the treetops and down the trunk in our direction.

“Together,” I say.

After a small hesitation, during which I’m guessing she’s calculating our combined weight, she nods. In seconds, I find my foot in the loop beside hers, my hands on the rope clinging for dear life. Before I can balk, she pushes us away from the platform and we’re dropping.

Forget leaping into my throat—my heart shrinks and shrivels as the trunk speeds by too fast. We’re dropping through thick smoke below that teems with those terrifying half-beast, half-man fighters the Tyndrans have brought down on our peaceful, quiet sanctuary.

I take it back. Falling to a quick, sharp death might be better.

Through tumult, I see others dropping from the trees to escape the fires. They are going to need help. Reven, Cain, Vos, Horus, Bina, and the children...they’re all out there. The only way out of this is to fight.

I free up a hand to slip one knife out of my bodice and hand it to Tziah, who I think takes it because she’s too surprised not to. Then I pull out the knife strapped to my leg.

“Aim for one and slit his throat,” I say.

Rather than wait for the rope system to lower me into the fray, where

they can see me coming, I pick one out as he sprints in our direction.

Ten feet up, I jump.

The impact with him knocks the breath from my body, but I manage to get in several sharp stabs. He's limp by the time I hit the ground.

Cain would be proud. Reven would probably be impressed, given what he's seen of my skills so far.

I struggle to my feet and come up looking for Tziah, but all I see are bodies and fighting and blood spray. The unmistakable metallic scent of death lines the stench of body odor and smoke as the fires rage above us, decimating this ancient forest and the homes of the Shadowwood.

"*A portal.*" Reven's voice sounds in my ear, but as I whip around to find him, he's nowhere to be seen.

"I can't. You know I can't." But I'm talking to air.

A barbarian runs right at me, and I'm ready with my knife, but a long arm of shadow slices right through him, and two halves of a man fall dead at my feet.

Holy hells. Reven can do that? I have no idea if I'm terrified or turned on. In the middle of this chaos is not the place to be either.

"*Now.*"

I get the message. Our only hope is for me to do the impossible.

The Unimaginable

A portal. But I need space to create a portal big enough to get all of our people through. I get the feeling Reven is ready for that. I trust that he'll keep the soldiers off me.

I try to pull my power forward, but the glow is flickering on waves of fear, like the spark won't light. My failure from before is beating at my mind.

Mother goddess...*I can't.*

I spot Cain across the village in a sea of battling fighters and death. Somewhere along the line, he's picked up a sword, wielding it with the courage of ten men. I see no signs of Vos.

"Reven!" A female cry rises above the rest, followed by a sound that flays my heart wide open. Children's screams.

They found them?

Tyndran soldiers are pushing the children into the heart of the village. Bina is nowhere to be seen, but Tziah is there, trying to put herself between the soldiers and the little ones. With a face contorted by rage, one of the soldiers spears her in the side. She doubles over with the force of the impact.

When she collapses, the children scatter. Every single villager near me abandons their own fight and runs for them. Some make it. Others... A young man who might be a brother to one of the younger ones is cut down from behind. A mother's blood spurts from her slit throat as she slowly crawls across the pine needle- and sand-covered ground. The barbarians fall on others in a frenzy of gore.

I run at them, scooping up a child not more than three years old on the way and dropping to the ground as a soldier fires an arrow over our heads. The longer this goes on, the Vanished not already killed have been driven to

the center of the buildings. Herded. We're locked in a struggle with no way out, pandemonium around me everywhere, and desperation thick and sweaty in the air.

Reven's right. A portal is the only way. It's that or capture and more likely death.

The child in my arms screams and wriggles away from me before I can keep him close, only to fall to his knees beside a woman's lifeless body. Or what's left of it.

"On me," Reven's voice booms and whispers at the same time. Like the shadows know who to deliver the message to and how.

Someone—I don't know who—is dragging me back as we pack into a tight circle. Then a soft hissing comes from behind me. I swing around to find Tziah, a blood-soaked hand holding her side, kneeling at the center of the chaos of bodies, her mouth wide open.

One by one, starting with those nearest her, the villagers put their hands to their ears, crouching low. I understand why a second later as the hissing becomes louder, building pressure inside my head, until all I can do is cover my ears and cower.

But the barbarians...they back away, expressions pure, grotesque twists of horror. As soon as they're away from us, shadows slam up between us and them.

I scramble back on a gasp, seeing barbarians and soldiers alike trying to get in, pressed against the shadows not a foot from me, their faces hideous in their bloodlust. Only Reven's wall of shadow is keeping them off us.

I reach out with one hand, feeling that barrier, testing it, to find it as soft as silk and as immovable as obsidian.

Like the man himself.

Tziah shuts her mouth, and stillness descends, leaving the hard sounds of labored breathing, moans of pain and loss, and the muffled yells of our

attackers on the other side of the shadow. The few enemies trapped with us are killed swiftly.

Across the petrified, huddled mass of Vanished, I see Vos on the ground, Tziah now at his side. He looks unconscious. *Please not dead.*

“I can’t hold them long,” Reven warns.

He’s there. Really there, standing right in the center. His gaze meets mine over the heads of the others. Sweat beads his forehead, his upraised hands shake, and his skin turns paler by the second. But it’s the emotion in his stare that guts me with one swipe. He gives a tiny shake of his head.

This is the end. When the veil goes down...

Reven has rescued and protected these people almost single-handedly. He stepped up despite battling what’s inside him. I can’t let him lose them.

Bringing my power forward, my hands are glowing brilliant yellow. My amulet wakes up, and its heat only stokes my own. Helping focus my powers? I’ll figure that out if we survive.

The sand is coming to me. Doing my best to focus, I wield and fire the sand into glass, spreading it wider and wider, taller and taller, trying to make it big enough to walk through, thick enough to stand upright.

Praying with every second that it doesn’t shatter or topple or disintegrate like all my other attempts, I watch the edges desperately for the cracks and warping that destroyed my previous efforts.

With no warning, a hand snatches me, yanking me away from the glass, except I slam up against a hard force—or maybe it slams down behind me—and just as suddenly I am freed. The tattooed, hairy severed arm of a barbarian falls to the ground twitching, the blood- and dirt-crusting nails clawing at the air, and I yelp. The sound cuts off in my throat as the glass I was creating cracks at the outsides.

No. Please no.

We’re out of time. Cain shoves his face in front of mine, and he’s saying

something, but I can't hear over the thunder of my heart.

I shake my head, staring and stunned.

Sound comes back in a *whoosh* when he's midsentence. "—need to get you out of here."

I shake my head again, but this time in refusal. "I'm not leaving these people."

"Let them have the Shadowraith."

"No." I scramble to my feet. "We need a portal. Keep them off me if they get through again."

After a ripple of hesitation—he's hating this so hard—he nods. I scuttle away from the veil and go back to work. This time, I'm both building and trying to fill the cracks. I take time I don't have to make it smooth. Because I don't know if it'll even work if it's not whole. Or what if cracks lead to problems passing through? Or it shatters as soon as it's used?

"*Meren.*" That perfect, pure voice that will always be mine is beside me. All around me. But I can't see Reven anywhere. "*I can't—*"

His power is slipping. Swallowing down panic, I try to work faster.

I'm building and fixing, my hands up in front of me, the glow so bright it's reflecting off the glass now, too painful to look directly at, like staring into the sun.

"The shadows are shrinking!" Cain yells from where he's positioned at my back.

A second later, the murmuring of fear all around me turns up a notch, reminding me of a herd of antelope surrounded by predators. Several times, I'm forced to scoot forward, bumped and pushed by Cain's hand at my back or the wall of shadow, jostling me into others as the circle of shadow gets smaller and smaller, pushing us closer together.

"Don't touch the glass," I yell. Over and over.

By some miracle, my portal is still standing and whole.

As the last of the sand turns red-hot, then cools to shiny and clear, I pitch forward onto my hands and knees, heaving with the effort.

It's done.

Crawling, I move to the thing I've created. A wall. Maybe seven feet tall, three feet wide, and a foot deep. It looks like a waterfall frozen in time, thicker at the top and weeping downward with the bubbles of patched cracks visible at the edges, but it's as smooth as I can make it.

"*Meren.*" Reven's voice is barely a reed of sound. He's reached his end.

"Goddess, no!" someone cries out.

Mayhem breaks around me as the shadows are failing and our enemies are breaking through one at a time. Fighting. Screaming.

I force my power forward, my hands alight, and place both of my palms flat against the glass. Nothing happens.

"Goddess Aryd, hear me." My plea is the most desperate thing I've ever asked of her.

Almost like an answer, the amulet against my skin heats painfully, scorching my skin, and the glow of my hands turns even more radiant. I picture the place I know best in all the world. The portal I've traveled through a thousand times. The one in the temple in Enora.

Through the turmoil around me, I hold that image in my head and will the glass to change. To become.

At first the glass turns hazy, almost opaque, but slowly it changes. A mirage in the reflection. I hold out through the screams, Cain keeping me from being trampled or killed, and will it to be. Suddenly, the image turns crystal clear. Holding my hands to the wall, I snap my head to look up at Cain. "Get them through!"

He doesn't want to leave me undefended. I can see the hesitation in his face. But then he's shouting and pushing people through the portal I've created.

As soon as the first few make it through, others see what's happening and follow, along with my relief. It's pouring through me faster and faster, like a flood barreling through the desert after a hundred years without rain. I can get them out.

"A little longer," I whisper and pray that Reven can hear me.

More and more of the Vanished rush through, jostling each other but helping, too. Finally, thank goddess, Horus is in, dragging Vos's body, followed by another man carrying Tziah. But her eyes are open, and she shoots me a shock-dulled look.

Horus turns once he's through. "Come on."

"Go," I tell Cain.

"Not without you."

Stubborn man.

"I have to hold it open." I don't tell him that I'm not sure, for that reason, if I'll be able to make it through myself. I don't have to touch the glass of other portals to keep them working, so maybe...

"No," he snaps. "Together or not—"

Three things happen at the exact same time. The remaining protection of darkness disappears entirely. The shouts of the barbarians and soldiers roar in my ears as they surge forward.

And a shadow shoves Cain through.

I frantically try to hold the portal open, needing it to stay long enough to get me and Reven through. But Cain's horrified face is the last thing I see before I lose it. The temple room on the other side disappears, and several fighters crash against my glass wall's now-solid form. It smashes under their force, shattering into a thousand pieces.

A soldier in the telltale white armor backhands me.

Our attackers fall on me, and I drop to the ground. All I see are snarling faces. Hands grab at me, and someone kicks me in the stomach so hard I

curl into the impact. I can't breathe. I can't—

Reven's face suddenly appears before mine. He's on the ground, too, and they're beating him, but he doesn't look away.

"Meren." I can tell he says my name but can't hear it.

We're going to die here together, but at least I got as many out as I could.

I reach a hand that feels like dead weight toward him. I only want to touch him one more time before they kill us.

Then his expression changes, and the fear that blasts through me at the sight is greater than any other leading up to this moment in my life, including everything I've just gone through. I've never seen rage so raw. So rabid.

That's the only warning I have. Shadow explodes from him, so impenetrable the blaze of fires in the trees all around us disappears and I'm cocooned in silence and nothingness for several heartbeats.

Long enough that I choke out a garbled cry of fright. One I can't even hear come from my own lips. Then the light returns, the impact jarring as the last part of my choked cry sounds.

I force myself to battle through exhaustion to lever up on one hand and look around me in utter shock.

They're...gone.

All of them. Every barbarian, every soldier, even the fire. Every enemy we faced.

All gone. Like they never existed.

The billowing smoke clogging the air and the bodies of our dead strewn around me tell me everything that happened was real. But now the village is empty of the living.

Only Reven and I are left.

I Can Still Save Her

“What just happened?” I look around the wasteland of the village, trying not to retch at the horror of bodies. Only our people are left—the living escaped through the portal, but those killed in the attack lay around us. Dull, lifeless eyes stare at me with accusation and sadness.

I didn't save them all. I didn't save them.

The words repeat in my head. If I'd tried harder the other day or before the attack came, maybe I could have gotten them out sooner. I could have saved them all. But I didn't.

“Don't.” Reven's voice is rough as he crawls across the ground to me and smooths his thumb down my cheek, wiping away tears I didn't even know are falling.

But I'm crumbling.

Reven's face is a study of frustration as I flop over my knees and just let it out. I would've laughed if I wasn't grieving and dealing with a monumental sandstorm of guilt beating at me from all sides. Overwhelming me. Choking me.

This is *my* fault. All the “what ifs” and “should haves” are a cacophony of shame inside me.

“Hells.” I vaguely hear Reven nearby.

Then I'm up in his arms and he's striding through the burned-out husk of a village filled with carnage. One that not that long ago was perfect. And I just cry harder, screwing my eyes shut so I don't have to see more.

These people were safe before I came. “You shouldn't have brought me here,” I choke into his neck, heaving breaths in between each word.

“If I hadn't, we'd all be dead.” His voice is sharp. “No one would have gotten out.”

But that doesn't jar me out of my wallowing, and my tears are turning to

sobs. It's entirely possible every emotion I've been swallowing back—years of them, but especially the last week—are coming out in a torrent now. Out of my control, out of my grasp.

“I can't fix this,” I say. Any of it.

He stops walking and stares back, gaze steady. Solid. An anchor for me as I try to force my body to function. “I know.”

But that only makes me cry harder. Apparently, I have a bottomless pit of tears inside me, because they just keep coming.

“Goddess save me,” Reven mutters.

Then, with an abrupt heave, I find myself flying through the air to splash right into the middle of the brook that runs through the clearing with the Sacred Tree.

I come up screeching because the water is frigid. Not as bad as the channel between Little Tyndra and the mainland, but still the bone-aching, instant-headache kind of freezing. Probably because the water originates from Tyndra outside this forest. This is melted ice.

“What the hells do you think you're doing?” I shriek as I scramble out, slipping on the rocks at the edges.

I hit the grass and tumble onto my back, breathing hard.

Reven's face appears above me. He's standing, arms crossed, feet set wide apart, unmoved. “I'm helping you get your shit together.”

“By throwing me in a creek?” I snap. Then scowl at him, shivers racking my body.

He arches an eyebrow. “It worked, didn't it?”

He's unrepentant and annoyingly right. I definitely preferred when he kissed me to calm me the last time. Not that I blame him for using this method instead, after everything that's happened—finding out I lied, Cain's arrival, the breaches, and losing so many of his people before I got the rest to safety.

“We need to get to Aryd,” he says.

I scramble to my feet, which feel like stumps because they’re numb already. “I can’t. I’ll freeze before—”

He shakes his head. “Give me an hour to get ready. I can’t get us far on that much, but I can get us to the portal in the tower here.”

Which means he realizes that I put everything I had into my own portal. No way could I make another one so soon. If we’re going to tackle the king, rest for me would help, too.

I frown, studying him. That’s it? What about the Shadows that wouldn’t let him take me earlier? But maybe they’ll allow getting to the tower? “The soldiers at the temple—”

“Are gone, too.”

I almost step back into the stream as a milder version of his rage flickers across his face. All of them? “I don’t understand. If you could do that—”

“We need to focus on getting to your sister.”

Right. Tabra. And our friends who are still alive. That’s what’s important. My questions about the hows and whys can wait.

He apparently takes my silence as agreement, because the shadow throne rises, and he sits. No jedite, though. The blue stones aren’t around him. *Why not?* I want to ask, but his eyes are already closed.

Instead, I run back to the village, keeping my gaze on my feet, trying to avoid reseeing the horror. We should at least give these people a decent burial or pyre, depending on where they’re from. But there’s not enough time.

All my clothes are soaked, so first I go to Vida’s shop, which luckily has a few things still intact. I change rapidly into the only thing I can find that I think will fit me, which is a peasant’s dress. A nice one made of linen rather than rough wool, but basic. I can’t find pants but do find thin stockings to go underneath, as well as shoes that are leather with straps over the tops of

my feet to hold them on. A size too big, loose, but workable.

I manage to find a cloak clearly made for a man that will drag on the ground and probably trip me, but it's the best I can do. There are two, and I bring one for Reven. Depending on how close he can get us to the temple, we'll probably need them.

Next stop is the smithy's, where I pick up several knives to replace the ones I lost in the fight and more on top of that. I have no idea what we'll be walking into. I pause, my hand hovering over the handle of another knife. My mind is obviously clearing up, because it strikes me that we'll need to split up once we get to the portal. We can both turn it on, since we're both Imperium. I can go to Oaesys for Tabra, and Reven can go to Enora for his people. He can tell Vos— No, Vos was hurt. Cain. Reven can tell Cain where I went, maybe send him after me. Cain will need to speak with his father, who I assume is still in the palace.

That's the best way to do this.

By the time I change and get back to the clearing, Reven is already standing, no throne in sight, waiting for me. His gaze travels over my change of clothes with no visible reaction.

Yet another reminder that I may have irrevocably ruined what was growing between us.

"We'd better go," he says.

I hand him the cloak I brought. He slips it on and holds out his hand. When I take it, he tugs me up against him, arm around my waist. The shadows come up around us. When they clear, we're *inside* the chamber with the portal.

That was... Was that different than before?

I watch him closely for any sign the Shadows are wresting control from him, but he's not breathing hard this time. Not wanting to cling, because everything between us is...a lot, I take a deliberate step away from him. His

fingers flex into my skin like he doesn't want to release me, but he does.

I study the portal room in the Temple of Tyndra. I've only gotten peeks of it through other portals when Omma showed me the other side. Even Tabra, Omma, and Grandmother haven't actually been here.

It's incredible.

Every inch is covered in glittering jewels. The walls, the floors, everything crusted in blue and white and black jewels set in patterns that depict Tyndra itself. From the maps I memorized, I recognize Mt. Ynferno, the Cliffs of Sacrifice, and even the ruins of the ancient watchtowers from when all our dominions were, according to legend, still joined together.

"Amazing." I whisper the word, my breath misting in the air.

No fireplace. No warmth. Realizing that, I peer closer. The jewels aren't the only crystalized things in the room. The entire place is covered in a fine sheen of ice.

"Indeed."

As my hands glow sunny yellow, the portal glass changes into a view I'm achingly familiar with.

Oaesys.

Home.

The opulence of that chamber is all about the bronze and gold, the brilliant colors of the paint, the obsidian walls themselves. Fires burn in golden braziers, bathing the room in a burnished red and orange radiance.

The two portal chambers couldn't be more different. Light and dark, cold and hot.

"You should go to Enora," I tell him. "That's where I sent your people."

"Hurry," Reven warns me. "While no one is around to see."

I pause, giving myself a single moment to look at the stark beauty of this man who has been so many things to me so fast—kidnapper, protector, lover. I'm trying to tell him with my eyes that I'll see him again. Even

though I'm not sure I will. For once, words won't come. I can't tell him
goodbye.

So I step through.

Evil Waits

The first thing to hit me is the heat. Even with the chill of the desert at night, it is almost oppressive after only a short time in the extreme opposite.

At least it's not snowing. With Eidolon here, a corner of my mind not already frantic with other concerns was worried he'd bring the winter with him. It comes from Tyndra, after all. Thank goddess. One less thing.

Suddenly, the portal behind me changes and Reven steps through beside me, the violet light in his hands douses, and the glass turns solid again. "Forget something?"

I swing to face him, eyes wide. "I said you should go—"

"We'll join them later."

"No." It's too risky. What if the king can feel him and stops us? Or what if the king finds him and takes him back? I can't lose him, too.

"I'm not letting you do this on your own. Don't ask me to."

"But—"

He cuts me off with a single sharp look, one that brooks no argument. Does it make me weak that I'm relieved? That a tiny bit of my fear of facing this alone eases, even as my worry for Reven swoops in?

I slip my hand in his, twining our fingers together. "Promise me you'll leave if you think he's going to find you or hurt you."

After a long, searching gaze, he nods slowly.

That's the best I can do, I guess. I don't have the time or energy to argue about it more. Now to get my sister out safely.

Please let us be in time.

She will marry Eidolon at sunrise, when all weddings are performed in Aryd, so that the first kiss of the sun might bless the new union. We're maybe an hour from sunrise now. I don't have long to get to her, get out of the palace, and hide us someplace safe. Maybe escape to Enora and beyond

into the desert with Cain, the Wanderers, and the remaining Vanished of the Shadowwood.

We can do this. We can stop the madness of a king who has shed his Shadows too many times and broken his soul.

“Can you shadow us to the palace?”

He shakes his head. “I’d better save it for when we’re there.”

Which means we’re walking. “Then follow me.”

For once, I’m the one who knows the way. I’ve been sneaking in and out of this palace since I was a babe in Omma’s arms.

Cautiously, we head out of the temple and into the empty streets of the city. The hour is still late enough—or early enough, depending on perspective—that the people aren’t stirring yet.

Reven at my back, I cut a familiar, swift path through Oaesy.

Omma taught me many unknown passages, unused alleyways, and multiple routes to take. If one is blocked, I simply backtrack and choose another—but I have my own secret way of getting into the place itself. One Omma never contemplated trying.

Sick of waiting for Tabra to come get me and invariably being late on the occasions I came by myself—mostly in recent years—I’d discovered another way. Also risky, but less so in my mind.

That’s the way Reven and I must take.

The palace is surrounded by two sets of walls. The first keeps out the rest of the city. It is too tall to scale, topped with jagged glass if you managed it, and patrolled from the ground on both sides.

Impenetrable.

“Can you hold your breath long?” I ask Reven in a whisper. I already know he can swim.

“Do I need to?”

I pause, glancing over my shoulder to raise my brows at him. He gives a

grave nod.

Good.

Finally in view of the first walls that skirt the palace, I lead us to an abandoned building and tread down stairs that, as far as anyone else is concerned, descend to a cistern located underneath the city itself. Water for anyone with a jug who knows it exists. Most don't, strangely. Instead of stopping at the edge of the water, I slide into the cave's tepid depths.

"What are you doing?" Reven balks.

"Trust me," I whisper.

The way his eyes narrow, I get the sudden, uneasy sense that he doesn't. Not anymore.

But then he drops into the water with me. "Lead the way, princess."

Did I imagine that moment? Is my mind so warped with worry and fear that it's playing tricks on me now? "It's going to get dark."

He lifts a brow. Right. Shadowraith.

"Hold on to my dress so you keep up. If you lose me, you die. Understand?" It took me multiple visits and using a rope to find my way back until I figured out the right path and memorized it.

He nods. No hesitation this time. Damn my doubts.

"When we get to the other side, don't make a sound," I warn. "Guards patrol nearby."

Another nod.

With a big breath, I duck under the water and swim hard, immediately struggling to see in the underground tunnels of water where no light can penetrate. Though this darkness isn't nearly as oppressive as when Reven disappeared an entire army. Gentle tugs to my dress tell me he's with me.

Feeling my way, lungs burning, I take my first right, followed by my second left. Just as my body starts to struggle with the need to breathe, I sense a change in the water, the temperature warming, which means we're

near a shallow point. Exactly where I want to be. We burst through the surface into a room that happens to be on the other side of the palace's outer wall.

It's pitch black in here.

During the day, the palace servants come to fill massive vessels with water and bring them into the kitchens to be heated for bathing and cooking.

Conscious of the guards who pass by regularly outside this place, I keep my desperate gasps as quiet as I can. Beside me, Reven does the same. I wait until we can both breathe normally, then I grope, unseeing, for his hand, and he follows.

I feel my way up the stairs leading out of the water to another set of stairs that take us to the ground level and a door that is never locked. The rusty hinges creak a protest as I barely scooch it open. Only the tiniest crack.

Rather than hurry my actions, I stay there and watch.

Patience. The creed of the people of Aryd. My people. Really, what virtue would a desert people need more than patience?

Having done this enough times before, I know I need to time our next move with the patrol pattern of the palace guards, which tends to change. Time we may not have, but better we wait than get caught. Within fifteen minutes, I have their timing set in my head and am ready to go the next time the sentry appears.

Sure enough, a minute later a figure passes through the small sliver of waning moonlight in the chamber where we stand. I wait another few beats, then tug Reven's hand. We squeeze out the door—much harder for the breadth of his shoulders, which means more of the rusty creaking. Closing it behind us, we run across cool, soft grass, from tree to tree until we get to the smaller inner wall. This one is only six feet high and more decorative

than functional.

In a leap, using the corners, I clamber up and over, my wet shoes squelching. I drop to the other side into an easy crouch. Reven drops beside me a second later and tips his head, eyebrows raised and so many questions in his eyes, along with a grudging respect that makes me want to grin.

I almost expect a comment about climbing trees and how he should've known he'd gotten the wrong girl at the beginning. But he says nothing.

At my signal, we wait in this spot, staying low and listening to make sure we haven't been seen, but there's no cry of alarm. Here, we're safer from prying eyes. Guards aren't allowed in this part of the garden. The inner sanctum of the royal family. But the upper servants like Achlys are, as are any authorities or dignitaries staying in the palace. Which is likely a larger number at the moment, between the coronation and now the wedding.

When we finally do go, I'm even more careful as I move through the space than I would normally be, using the bushes and trees as cover as we make our way to the palace walls. From there, we scale a jasmine-and-honeysuckle-covered trellis to a second-floor ledge, which we carefully follow around to a balcony.

"You've got to be shitting me," Reven mutters, barely audible behind me.

I wonder if he suddenly recognizes where he is. He once told me about how he saw our glass garden from a balcony, which was how he knew about my power. This would be that balcony.

I drop to the floor, standing outside the wide, curtained windows formed by columns and arches, relief striking hard as my feet land with quiet *thumps*. Because we're here. Before the wedding, and Tabra should be inside.

We made it. By some miracle of the goddesses.

We can get her out the way we came in. Maybe. I'm not actually sure

she can hold her breath that long, let alone swim at all, but I'll figure that out in a minute. First things first.

Quiet as Reven's shadows, I part the sheer, unmoving curtains and tiptoe through to the inside bedchamber only to pull up short.

A woman is sitting at the edge of my sister's otherwise empty bed. But she's not Tabra.

I forget to lower my voice as my spine goes as straight as an iron poker. "Achlys? Where is my sister?"

No More Sand in the Hourglass

Achlys raises her head with a jerk and a gasp, and I have to stop myself from stumbling back. The entire left side of her face is vermillion. The outline of a handprint is unmistakable.

Somebody struck her.

Violence against the new queen's personal handmaiden? No one here would dare. Not even an authority or vizier, unless Tabra gave her permission, which she would never do.

"You're alive," Achlys whispers on a harsh exhale.

"Who did this?" I demand, rushing for her.

Vaguely, I catch the way Reven's head turns sharply my way. Probably at my tone. I sound like my grandmother all of a sudden. Domineering.

In the same instant, Achlys surges to her feet. "She's gone, domina."

Her face crumples, and she raises her hands to cover her eyes. Through tears she manages to choke out, "A man, a Wanderer, came here pounding on the door. He said you sent him."

Cain? Did he get here ahead of us? He must've used the portal from Enora to Oaesys to come help Tabra like I'd asked.

Achlys is turning frenzied. "He told her things...about Eidolon...t-t-
tried to get her to run, to l-l-leave the palace."

"And?" *Please tell me she went to the viziers, to the head of her security—anyone for help.*

"I believed him. Tried to make her leave with him. She"—Achlys can hardly get the words out now—"accused me of...being a d-d-deceiver. Of trying to ruin every-th-th-thing. Then she struck me and left."

Denial reverberates down my spine so hard my muscles spasm. *Tabra* struck Achlys?

That can't be. Tabra would *never*. Hurting anything is against everything she is as a person. The guilt would destroy her. Hells, my sister tries not to step on ants in the garden so much she looks like a fastidious cat with sensitive paws any time she walks through the grassy areas.

"What did Cain do?"

"The Wanderer?"

I nod.

"He ran after her." Achlys is shaking her head so much she looks like a broken doll. "Since you disappeared, she has... She is changed, domina."

Changed. The word drops like a dead body. "What do you mean?"

"Not herself. Harder. Heartless, even. She looks at me like..." Achlys stares into the distance, then says in a broken whisper, "She's never looked at me that way."

"Where is she?"

Achlys's gaze remains unfocused.

I take her by the shoulder and give her a tiny shake. "Where did Tabra go?"

She swallows, and the horror in her eyes gives me an answer before the words are out of her mouth. "She went to Eidolon to begin the ceremony sooner."

"Mother goddess," I choke out and cut my gaze to Reven. He's watching all this in silence. "What do we do?"

Before he can answer, Achlys sucks in a sharp breath. "There's more."

I swing back to her. "What?"

"She wears that necklace he gave her. She refuses to take it off."

"Necklace?" Reven demands from behind me.

Right. I'd forgotten to tell him about that.

"A gift from Eidolon," I toss over my shoulder at him without looking away from Achlys. "Part of his marriage proposal."

“Is it blue glass?”

A chill pricks over my skin as I look closely at him. “How do you know that?”

“That’s no gift, princess,” Reven says. Drawls, actually, sounding oddly like Vos all of a sudden.

I can’t tell if he’s angry or simply doesn’t care. One makes sense. The other doesn’t. “What?”

“That’s *his*. I don’t know what it means to him, but in the memories I do have, it’s always there. Around his neck.” His assessing gaze shifts to Achlys. “She’s changed, you said?”

Achlys nods, eyes wide. I wait for what’s coming.

Reven’s shoulders twitch. “I’m guessing that amulet is spelled or poisoned.”

Damn it. I *knew* there was something off about Eidolon sending that gift. “To do what?”

“Best guess...he’s about control.”

Control. He needs to control my sister. It makes sense in a twisted way. He’s lost his immortality and he can’t wait anymore, so now he’s making other moves to keep control or try to force whatever outcome he’s been aiming for all this time.

I pace the room. Our original plan to sneak in and sneak back out with her isn’t going to work anymore. I take Achlys by her hands. “Go rouse the viziers. Tell them their queen commands their presence in her bedchamber immediately.”

Without question or hesitation, she nods and hurries out of the room. I pause only a beat, watching her go, a small worry that I can’t make this work nagging at me. But it’s already in motion, so I run to the panel in the wall that leads to my hidden room and am inside with the push of a hand.

“What the hells?” Reven’s voice follows me inside.

“A secret chamber,” I call back, even as I’m tearing through my things. “To hide whichever one of us isn’t princess at any given time.”

“Fuck me.” His mutter reaches me, and if I wasn’t in a hurry, I would’ve chuckled.

“Don’t watch,” I warn him. Suddenly shy, despite what we’ve shared. What we’ve seen...and touched.

He doesn’t bring that up, though. As soon as he disappears from the doorway, I discard my still-soaked peasant’s dress and quickly put on undergarments. Knowing what I’m about to wear over them, I take the amulet from around my neck and tuck it into my breastband.

Then, closing that panel in the wall behind me out of sheer habit, I run for Tabra’s dressing room and start going through my sister’s royal clothes. I have to look the part of a queen fast, which means I need the easiest dress possible to get into without help.

“Not that I don’t enjoy the view, but what are you doing?” Reven asks from where he leans in the doorway. “We should go after your sister.”

“No. By now, she’s already with Eidolon. The only way I’m going to stop her is to insist that she’s an imposter who has taken my place. Make the viziers stop this wedding.”

“They won’t believe you.”

I pause with my hands ready to pull my dress off. “They’ll have no choice. I have her face. And if she’s acting strangely...” I shrug. “I can be Tabra better than she can sometimes.”

When I try really, really hard. When I’m not falling for the Shadowraith who stole me.

Right. I can do this.

“You can’t do this,” Reven snaps, straightening from the doorway. “It’s never going to work.”

I fist my hands on my hips. “Do you have a better idea?”

“What happens if they decide *you’re* the imposter?” Reven points out. Because he doesn’t have a better idea.

Which reminds me... I’m not the only one who is the mirror image of a royal. They can’t lay eyes on Reven or he’s right, they won’t believe me. “You should hide in my secret room when they get here.”

“Answer my question. What happens—”

“I can make them stop everything, at least, while they decide. Buy us time. We’ll figure it out as we go.”

Turning my back to him, I whip a dress over my head. Peacock blue and fitted, the gown is of the finest, softest material in Aryd and drapes over one shoulder, leaving the other bare. It also happens to have a matching blue “crown” that is more like a tall, fan-shaped hat under which I can stuff all my hair. The elaborate silver embellishments, including twined snakes representing the people of the cities and the Wanderers, make it ceremonial.

Over that, I drape a silver-and-white drop-sleeved robe that will float like a train behind me. I still wear my signet ring.

I hurry past the scowling man who’s standing eerily still in the dressing room doorway and back into Tabra’s room to check my vague reflection in the onyx. Should I try to apply makeup? I discard the idea as fast as it forms because my hands are shaking so badly, I’d probably end up looking like a jester if I tried. This is as good as I get.

“Goddess, you’re amazing.” Reven’s voice sounds behind me.

“She’s my sister.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

I turn slowly to find him watching me with an odd expression. He prowls across the room to stand before me, searching my eyes and smiling a little. Like we have all the time in the world.

“You should hide,” I whisper, when what I want to do is beg him to kiss me.

Because when Reven kisses me, the world rights itself. Maybe if he does that, I'll have the courage to go forward with this. Maybe if he kisses me, I can get through what comes next.

He must see the plea in my eyes because his own crinkle at the edges with a slow, breath-stealing smile. Then he lowers his head and presses his lips to mine.

Except...except he tastes *not* like him.

"I'm sorry," he whispers against my lips.

"What?" Then I focus on his eyes—those amazing eyes.

Eyes that flicker in the strangest way. Like a crocodile in water, with a second set of eyelids. I frown, peering closer. His entire face shifts, and the ugliness of a Shadow distorts his features into something...hideous.

My blood freezes solid in my veins, consuming the heat of our kiss so fast I may as well be standing naked in the coldest part of Tyndra. This isn't Reven. Oh goddess...this man before me is Shadow. How long have they been in control?

I jerk against his hold, but his arms tighten painfully around me, almost crushing me.

"I didn't want to have to do this," he says in a voice no longer velvet in its harshness, the sound scraping over my nerves.

Only the emotion in his eyes is regret.

A lie, I try to tell myself. The regret is a lie.

Maybe it's real, though.

"Don't make me hurt you," he's saying in this voice that's both kind and menacing. "I need you out of the way for this next bit."

In that moment, I don't doubt this pale, imperfect, sinister imitation of the man I gave myself to would hurt me. Maybe I'm wrong about the regret. He rips strips off the hem of my skirt and ties my hands at the wrists, then my feet at the ankles.

“You’re good,” I snipe at him. “I actually thought you were him.” Except, looking back, there were clues. Moments when it didn’t feel right, when *he* wasn’t quite right.

He just smiles—the charming smile of a snake—and stuffs a gag in my mouth.

“Better take this away, too,” he murmurs. Almost clinically, he runs his hands up my bare leg to my thigh, where, rather than simply taking the knife, he unties the strap itself.

“Asshole,” I mutter around the gag.

“You’ll change your mind about that one day,” Shadow predicts. “You and your sister belong to us now.”

Like a dog in a cage? A pet to be trotted out when they need my power? Or hers? I don’t think so.

I glare at him around the gag despite the gut-level shudder threatening to give away my fear and wish I could touch his wrist or my side, where the scars connect us, to try to reach Reven. Pull him forward like I did before, but there’s nothing.

He’s gone.

Shadow presses his hand against the panel to my room, and I close my eyes, shaking my head at my own damn ridiculousness for giving away that secret. The goddesses created a fool on my birthday.

He picks me up and takes me just inside, where he sets me on my ass on the floor. Then he crouches in front of me. “This is for your own good, love. Now I’m going to find your sister, then make sure the king weds her.”

I glare, refusing to give him the satisfaction of begging and pleading. Or of screaming, which is what I really want to do. Nothing of Reven looks out at me from his eyes. My heart threatens to dissolve like glass turning back into sand. Thousands of grains that will be impossible to put back together.

“Now, don’t make a sound,” Shadow warns. Then he shuts the door in

my face, and darkness hits me with a landslide of regret. My body starts to rock as waves of it hit me.

I just lost everything. Reven, Tabra, Aryd... *Everything*.

61

Shattering

Get up. Fight.

The voice inside me tries to push through the grief and tears. But, like in the Shadowwood, it's grown too heavy. It's too hard. What can I do to stop this? I've tried, and tried, and tried, and failed at every turn.

I'm drained.

I'm as useless as Omma and Pella and Grandmother always thought. Worse, even, because I couldn't even do my one job right. My only purpose in life was to protect my sister.

Goddess, Tabra, I'm so sorry.

The amulet against my skin tingles and warms in a sharp burst, almost like it's disagreeing with me.

Don't let him win. Don't be like the previous queens and hide. That small voice is insistent, like a gnat in my ear.

Another zap of warmth comes from the amulet, hotter this time. I glance down like I might see my skin turning red under the sensation. *You're not a survivor. You're a fighter.*

With an unbearable surge of fiery heat, images hit my mind. Me sneaking into the desert that first time so young. Me asking questions of Omma, even when I knew she'd punish me. Me making glass flowers, though using my power was forbidden. Me standing up to a Shadowraith, despite believing he was going to kill me.

The images shift. Me killing the death worm. Me sinking the Tyndran soldiers' boats even as they came for us. Me standing up to Shadow in the cage. Hell, I created a working portal.

A shred of hope breaks through the emotions drowning me, and I suck in a soothing breath and steady in a rush. If I could do those things, I can get myself out of this goddess-forsaken room. As for what I do after that,

I'll figure that out when I get there.

I scoot as best I can on my backside, pushing with my bound feet like an inchworm, across the floor to my bed. I have one last knife hidden between the feather mattresses—another trick Cain taught me. Rolling to my knees, I manage to maneuver both my bound hands into the gap and come away with nothing.

“No,” I groan and frantically start feeling along the crack.

A taunting chuckle whispers to me through the shadows. I scowl into the darkness. That bastard took my extra knife. Fine. I'm still not giving up. What else is in here I can use to get myself free?

A *thud* sounds through the walls—the door in Tabra's room being thrown back.

“Domina?” I hear Achlys call.

Thank goddess. “In here!” I try to yell out around the gag.

But she doesn't hear, because she's calling out again. Then one more time. Followed by the murmuring of voices.

I try to scream even as I scoot my way awkwardly across the floor to the panel. If I kick it, maybe they'll hear me. Achlys knows about this chamber. She'll come get me. But before I get to the door, the telltale sound of them leaving spears despair straight through my heart.

No. No. No. No.

“Come back!” My muffled shout around the gag is loud in my ears, but I know it won't penetrate the thick walls.

What now?

The panel door *clicks*, then swings inward. The flickering glow of firelight from one of the braziers in Tabra's room falls across where I'm sprawled and bound on the floor. A man stands there, in silhouette, and for a split second my heart soars. Reven must have regained control. He came back for me.

“Meren? Thank the sand spirits.”

Cain. My eyes go wide as he hurries into the room and crouches down.

“That bastard,” he snarls.

He reaches around the back of my head, his fingers fiddling with the gag. Then the thing loosens in my mouth, and I spit it out.

I take a breath only to stiffen when Cain takes my face in his hands and kisses me.

His hands against my skin are rough from years of handling horses and living in the desert, and the scent of him is as familiar as a comforting song. I’ve loved Cain all my life, and while I never once thought we could be more, a little part of me wished that he’d look at me, just once, and see a woman. That he’d want to kiss me like this. Even so, his touch tumbles me into a sea of confusion. Because I know what wanting feels like in a kiss now, and this is different. Cain’s kiss is all warmth, all light, all caring—everything he is in my life.

Reven’s is home. And fire. And divine darkness.

Cain pulls back abruptly.

“What are you doing here?” I ask the first question that gets through the lashings of shock.

He starts to work on the bindings at my ankles. “I came through the portal where you left us in Enora.” A muscle ticks at the side of his jaw. “I promised you I’d get to your sister, and I had to warn my father.”

“How’d you know I was in here?”

“The handmaid who was with your sister before.” His jaw is practically hewn from granite now. “She didn’t want to reveal this secret room to the others, so she took them to Eidolon’s chamber to try to find the queen. Stopped me as I was leaving to tell me to come back and check.”

Thank the heavens for Achlys. When this is over, I’m having Tabra make that woman a vizier and marry her. Screw the succession. I’ll produce

an heir for her. Maybe.

“We have to stop Tabra.”

His hands pause on the bindings at my wrists, and he stays that way, unbearably still, for too long.

“Cain?”

He raises his head to look me in the eyes, his own expression unreadable. “Come with me. To the desert. To the zariphate.”

“What?”

“This isn’t where you belong. Not before and not now.” His words make no sense, like a buzzing of locusts. “You took to the desert like a water moccasin takes to an oasis at birth. You were made to be there, not here.”

“Why are you talking about this *now*?” I lift my hands. “Finish untying me.”

“Haven’t I always taken care of you? Protected you? The dominion is about to fall, but the zariphates will rise. Let me protect you.”

Any breath still in my lungs after so many emotional blows deserts me in a painful *whoosh*. I search the face of the man before me. My best friend. My teacher. My hero.

My escape.

The boy who took in a little girl desperate for a place to belong and gave her that at his side, even if not everyone in his world cared for the idea or did the same. He became a strong man, a leader for his people. He’s offering me that life I always wanted, as myself, without the weight of dominions on my shoulders. All I have to do is let go of what I likely cannot stop anyway, reach out, and take what he’s offering.

But I can’t.

I will never abandon my sister that way. I won’t leave her to deal with this evil all on her own. How could I leave Achlys? The people of Aryd? The Vanished? Reven? He’s still there in those Shadows. Trapped. I know

it.

I hold up my wrists. “Untie me.”

The rope around my wrist falls away, and Cain helps me to my feet. “My father is waiting for me on the other side of the portal in Enora.”

His father is already gone? He didn’t stay in the palace to offer his help to his queen? The Mighty Cainis of the Wanderers is a fucking coward.

“I can’t go with you.”

The words drop between us, not like rocks in a pond. More like chasms splitting the ground open in an earthquake and separating us across an unbridgeable distance.

“Why not?” Cain searches my face, my eyes, not quite believing.

I reach for him, but he jerks away, fury replacing the love.

“Wait. You’re going to stay for *him*?” He spits the words. He’s never spoken to me that way in my entire life. “He *kidnapped* you. Stole you.”

I gasp because I know I left that part of the telling out. “You knew?”

“Vos told me.” His expression darkens. “You owe that monster *nothing*.”

“You’re right. I owe him nothing. But I’m staying. I have to try. For him. For my sister. For Aryd.” I dip my head, gaze on his, trying to make him understand. “For you.”

His lips curl, baring his teeth. “You’re not doing this for me.”

“One day, you’ll know better. Despite what you believe, even the Wanderers won’t be safe if Eidolon takes power here.”

Color snags my attention over his shoulder. The barest hint of pale blue in the far horizon of the still-black sky. The first indication that a new day is dawning.

The wedding.

“I have to go. I’m sorry.” I push past him and sprint into the bedroom only to pause at the door to the hall and turn to look over my shoulder at

Cain, who is glowering after me.

“The people of the Shadowwood—”

His expression twists as he realizes what I’m asking of him. “I’ll hide them.”

I blow out a relieved breath. There’s that, at least. “Thank you.”

He just shakes his head. “I’ll wait for you.” His words are more warning than promise. “In Enora. I’ll wait one day.”

I nod, then shoot away down the hall.

In my headlong dash, I pass three servants, all of them wide-eyed at the sight of their queen in a torn dress moving at more than a sedate glide. But I ignore them as I race through the halls of the royal chambers to the wing of the palace where guests would be given rooms. Eidolon was no doubt put in the most opulent suite reserved for the guest of honor, but those rooms are empty when I get there.

There is only one other place I can think they might be—the throne room. The same place I was headed to for the pre-coronation reception the night Reven took me.

So I run down the sweeping stairs to the long hall, out into the courtyard, past the deep well spiraling down into the ground, and into the hypostyle hall that leads to the throne room itself. The sound of my bare feet slapping against black marble floors echoes off gigantic columns and the high roof made of pure black gold from Mariana.

The massive double doors to the throne room are closed. I grasp the handle and pull, but they don’t budge. Holy hells, these are heavy. Why did I not know this?

Because servants and acolytes open the doors for the princess, always. That’s why.

I manage to crack the thing open and get a glimpse of my sister. She is standing before the dais, holding someone’s hand. I can’t see *him*, though—

only his arm. Tabra is dressed in the almost sheer white gown she sleeps in, her long black hair flowing down her back in waves.

Her head is turned so I can see her profile, and she's staring up at who I have to assume is Eidolon like the sun and moons all rise and set in this man.

What has that ageless bastard done to her? The difference isn't just the almost blank, rapt adoration in her expression—it's *her*. Tabra's smaller, paler, her cheeks sunken in. In the short time I've been gone, she's started wasting away.

Mother goddess.

A new worry for my sister wraps around my heart and squeezes hard. A flash of blue catches my eye. Around her neck, I can see Eidolon's gift.

Was Reven, or Shadow, or whoever he was at the time, right? Is it poisoned? Is this why she looks like she does?

Desperation pushing at me, I put my weight into the door, trying to shove it wider, but it won't budge. I suck in a breath, ready to yell Tabra's name.

She has to see me. That's all.

But my yell cuts off abruptly with a grunt as a large hand clamps over my mouth. I'm yanked up against a familiar hard male chest by an arm at my waist.

"I thought I told you to stay out of it," a voice that's all sharpened edges growls in my ear.

Then the Shadows of the king drag me away.

Sand and Shadow

My first instinct is to scream as Shadow drags me, feet and arms flailing, through several chambers of the palace-temple that houses the throne room. Damn them all to the deepest hells. Shadow finally stops, and it takes me a moment to orient. We're in the lesser tomb of the palace-temple, where lower authorities' and royal servants' ashes are enshrined. Walls and walls of urns are tucked into symmetrical rows of alcoves.

My parents aren't here. Grandmother, either. Rulers and their families have their own private tombs.

He turns me loose, spinning me away from him with a thrust. As I turn to face him, darkness wraps around me, binding my arms to my side the same way Reven did when he kidnapped me. I stare at him—this heartbreakingly beautiful monster. Only, instead of fear, anger burns everything inside me, melts and heats and purifies me until I'm like glass.

The amulet, still tucked inside my breastband, flashes white-hot against my skin in a star flare of intensity, like it's absorbing my anger and reflecting it back to me. Reminding me...

He's in *my* house now.

I don't have to dredge the sand from the soil. It's all around me. Everywhere. My lifeblood. My hands are bound behind my back. Perfect. I splay my palms open and call the sands to me.

Nothing appears to happen at first. I don't stop, though, because the tingling of my power is slowly building, so I know it's working.

"Now," Shadow sneers, staring at me from under thick, lowered brows. "Since I can't trust you to stay put, you and I are going to wait here for that ceremony to be finished."

Most of my focus is on the power building inside me. The vibration of it, a buzz, has taken up residence in my spine. Like being in my dominion,

in my element, is feeding me. Maybe the same way being in darkness feeds Reven's power?

Please, goddess, let the sands be coming to my call.

I need a distraction or he might notice the glow, so I glare through him. Past the current face to the one inside. Desperation edges the flow of shadow between me and Reven, but that connection is quiet and still, a pale imitation of what I feel when he's fully in charge. I'm not sure if what I'm sensing is him or my own wishful thinking.

"Reven?" I ask.

Shadow's sneer curls deeper. How he can make that beautiful face twist into something ugly is amazing to me, but he does.

"The traitor is buried deep, little girl. He can't hear you, and he never will again."

There's no answering swirl within me. I believe him. "He's better than anything you could ever hope to be. No wonder he rose to the top when Eidolon shed his shadows."

The nebulous binding cuts into my skin like knives. Before I can cry out, the urns in their alcoves rattle as the tomb itself starts to shake.

I smirk. *Got you.*

Shadow whirls toward the window just as a wall of sand blasts through it, slamming into him. The momentum picks him up off his feet and hurls him across the room. His shadows drop away from me.

In the same instant, I brace, throwing my hands up in front of my face, because the wave of sand is coming for me, too. Except nothing happens. I open my eyes to find that I'm encased in some sort of...I guess it's a bubble.

Like the sand knows not to touch me.

Rivers of it continue to pile in through the window, but slower now. Before I have a chance to do more than straighten, an impenetrable column

of shadow bursts out from beneath the onslaught, filling the room like a giant fist raised to smash down on me.

On pure instinct, I jerk my hands up again, and the amulet sparks, bright orange glittering embers pouring from me. The sand around my bubble flash heats to glass. The shadow form slams down on top of my own personal glass fortress, but it holds.

With wide eyes, I watch as Shadow rises from the sands and stalks forward, darkness a cloak flowing from him, consuming him, feet barely touching the rolling dunes I've filled the chamber with, now mixed with the ashes of the dead and porcelain shards of broken urns.

He's all beast. A rabid, wounded animal out for my blood.

Then his gaze lands on the glow of the amulet under my clothes as if he can see exactly what I have hidden there. If anything, his gaze sharpens to something covetous. "That explains a lot." His gaze shifts up to mine. "You have no idea what that is, do you?"

Before I can answer, darkness curls around my protective glass bubble almost like a lover's caress, flowing around my refuge until I'm buried and sight is stolen from me. Then something massive slams into the top.

It strikes again and again until I can feel the pounding in my bones and my teeth. Until eventually I hear the sound I've been dreading with each strike—the faintest brittle hiss of cracking glass. I can't see to try to patch it.

On the next blow, he'll crush me. No doubt in my mind.

I have seconds to figure out what to do, and in those seconds, it hits me that I have only one choice. The realization is like a spear of sunlight obliterating the night.

I'm out of other options.

On a deep breath, I disintegrate the glass. The dark disperses with it—whether from surprise or because I pushed it back, I don't know. Don't care.

I take that half a second Shadow pauses, lift my hands, and blast him with flash-heated glass. The force of it slams him back up against the wall of small alcoves, and it molds around him, cooling on contact, fusing him there. The glass flashes in strobes of bright orange as I layer more and more, winding it around his wrists and ankles like vines, then covering the rest of him. Faster than he can get the shadows out.

The heat of my power, melting and reforming the sand so fast, scorches my palms as the amulet singes my chest.

I don't stop.

I keep layering glass over glass, tighter and tighter around his body—his arms, legs, torso—containing him, using all the piles of sand in the room.

“You bitch.”

I ignore him and keep going.

He flexes against my glass prison, and then suddenly his body relaxes, his voice overflowing with self-satisfaction. “You have to let us out some time.”

“Who says so?”

While his smug smile doesn't slip, a tick in his jaw tells me he sees my resolve. He shoots a significant glance at my side. At the *scar* in my side holding me together and connecting me to Reven.

A threat.

Can they control those shadows inside me? Can they draw them out? It's a risk I have to take. I keep going, only now I'm pressing the glass inward. I'm going to crush him.

I'm sorry. Can Reven hear me? Does he know I'm out of choices? *I'm sorry. Goddess, so sorry.*

The raw fury that passes over Shadow's features ripples through every inch of his body as the glass slowly begins to grind at him.

He opens his mouth, and an eerie growling shriek comes out, a sound so raw and furious it's ringing in my head, pain fracturing through my skull. Then shadow leaks from his eyes and mouth and nose and ears. Reminding me of the Hollow's tentacles, they writhe around his head.

One tendril trails down my body to that spot in my side and spears through the scar. I gasp as a terrible sucking sensation hollows out my insides. A glance down tells me I'm right. They're siphoning out the shadows that bind my wound. Blood blooms against the blue of my dress.

Keep going.

I don't know if the voice is Reven, or my amulet, or me. But I set my jaw and focus. I'm too late for Tabra, but at least I'll be able to take out two of the critical pieces in this deadly game Eidolon is playing. Both his Shadows and I will be off the board.

I press closer, moving my hands to his face. "I'm sorry," I whisper.

Glass spreads out from my fingers across his skin, winding into his hair. A few more moments of this and he'll be crushed. Suffocated. The shadow tentacles writhe as I block their connection to him, the wound in my side opening farther.

I don't let go.

One last time, I reach for him through that connection. Closing my eyes, I picture that swirl of darkness. It's too faint for me to step into, but I touch it with my mind as I cover his face with glass, locking the shadows inside. My hands, held to his skin by the molten mass, burn as shadows frantically twist through my fingers, but I don't open my eyes. I can't watch the moment he dies.

"I'll find you in the afterlife," I whisper, broken.

Suddenly, the shadows wrapped around my hands turn tender. Sweeter. Softer. A caress instead of a desperate attempt to escape the glass coffin I've trapped them in.

On a gasp, I open my eyes and meet his clear, aqua-blue gaze through the glass separating us.

“Reven?” I’m desperate for it to be him.

Redirecting my power, I pull the glass back from his face.

He takes a deep breath. Then another. “Thank the goddesses for you, Mereneith Evangeline XII,” he murmurs.

“Is it you?” What if this is a ruse to earn my trust? I’m torn apart. I want to believe him, but...

“Meren—”

“I need proof.”

He closes his eyes as if that hurts, only to open them again immediately. “You hate heights. You carry two knives unless I take them away. You make glass flowers for your sister that you work on in a secret garden at the palace...and you also made one for me. You talk when you get nervous or stressed, and it’s so damn adorable—”

The sob that bubbles up from deep inside me surprises even me. Because I wasn’t sure. But I know the Shadows don’t share information with one another. That’s why Reven’s memory is so patchy, and why the Shadow I interacted with after the healing ritual didn’t know Reven had protected me from the rest of them.

Reven alone was present for every single one of the moments he’s bringing up.

I shatter the glass holding him, and he surges away from the wall, coughing as he gulps in air. I almost step back, just in case I’m wrong, but he’s faster, pulling me close, burying his hands in my hair, and presses a kiss to my forehead.

Before I can stop him, he lifts up my dress, exposing my now partially open wound. He blows out a sharp breath. “They didn’t get it all. I was trying to stop them.”

A glance shows that the edges are raw, but already shadow is moving and swirling to fill in the gaps. Slowly, like the creep of dusk across the sky as day turns to night. But I'll be okay.

He lowers the dress.

My mind chooses this moment for his words from a second ago to sink in. "You saw *me* in the garden?" I thought he'd just seen the flowers.

He smiles, eyes crinkling around the corners even as the clear turquoise turns gentle. Truly Reven. "I watched you form a tiny flower, turning sand into glass, the glow illuminating your face. You looked so lonely, and all I could think was that it would be nice to sit by you in that glass garden. At the time, I thought you were the Princess Tabra, but it was..."

"Me."

"You," he whispers. His lips tip in a crooked, heartbreaking smile.

Then he cants his head, gaze caressing my face. "But before that, long before that, there was this voice I would hear in the dark."

I'm starting to tremble.

"A girl who would call out sometimes, wishing for a new life, and I'd hear her. I thought she was in Enora, but I could never find her. Never get to her fast enough or figure out quite where she was. I was looking for her that night. The night at the gate."

My eyes grow wide. "I called to you that night."

"Yes." He shoved a hand through his hair. "You sounded different when I saw you trying to leave the city, though, so I didn't realize I'd finally found her. Then I stole the princess, and she opened her mouth, and I couldn't believe my ears—"

"Me again," I whisper.

"You again. Which made no damn sense, because the voice I'd heard was in *Enora*. That voice has haunted me for years." He grimaces. "*Years*. How could I fall for a glass-making princess? So I fought it. Ignored it.

Decided I had to be wrong, all while I was falling more under your spell with every bewitching, frustrating word that came out of your mouth.” He bends a gently accusing look on me. “Then I found out who you really were. That I wasn’t wrong, that you were both girls, and I had no idea what to do with that.”

“I’m sorry.” My heart is cracking all over again. Because everything inside me is pure joy at his words but also unbelievable sorrow.

He lifts a hand, tracing the curves of my face. “In those same memories that told me who you were, I found out about the curse, and I realized being around you isn’t making me weaker—it’s making the Shadows inside me *stronger*. Once the things inside me got a whiff of you, keeping them under control has been—”

He breaks off and shakes his head. And I know—I can feel how scared he’s been.

“They’re trying to get to you,” he says in a gritty voice. “They always will. I have to protect you from that.”

He sucks in a shaky breath. “I knew for sure I couldn’t live without you when I saw you go down under that pile of soldiers. I knew if I released my full power, the Shadows would overtake me. But I couldn’t let you die.” He swallows, throat working, jaw tight.

I realize then what he’s saying. He sacrificed himself for me. Knowing the Shadows inside him would bury him when he used that much power. *That’s* how he took out the army.

The part of my flesh that’s made of him prickles. The connection is real, tangible. Him.

His lopsided smile is tinged with murky sadness. “I didn’t think a thing like me—something that started from a source of evil—could ever love.” He closes his eyes and draws in a long breath. When he opens them, they’re pure ocean. “That connection you feel is my heart, and every beat is for

you.” His expression turns sheepish. “I think I’ve loved you since the first time I saw you in that glass garden.”

Even as my soul glows at those words, at the look in his eyes, anguish seeps through me with the knowledge that, like every other essential, promising event in my life, this one is about to be ruined. I want to settle into this moment, memorize it, but we don’t have time.

I smile back, trying to steal just one more moment for us, but I know I fail. I know he sees the sadness when he frowns.

“We still have to kill the king,” I say.

Everything that is love for me leaches from his eyes, and Reven’s expression hardens, answering bitterness seeping in, a reflection of my own. “I know.”

Sunlight blooms inside the room, rays of it reflecting off the crystal particles in the dunes and glass all around us. The first kiss of sunrise. A clamor of ecstatic bells peals, announcing the union of my precious, beautiful sister to the man who has deceived her.

To Destroy a Thing

Together, Reven and I sprint back through the temple to the doors of the throne room.

“Whatever you do,” Reven warns, “don’t show him your powers.”

“But—”

He grips my arm hard, expression unbudging. “I mean it, Meren. Let me handle him. You get Tabra out.”

Can he even do that without the Shadows vying for control and visibly drained as he is? We’re out of time, though, so I nod.

Reven helps open the heavy door, and I burst inside. This room is as familiar to me as any. All the windows are covered in elaborate stained glass, and the doors open to long hallways on all sides. The heart of the palace-temple. The only occupants are an imposing figure of a man standing at the dais with my sister and a priestess.

He turns his head, and our eyes lock.

Beautiful eyes. Crystal clear, aquamarine blue in an aching, eerily familiar face. Older—wiser, even—with distinguished silver at his temples and more lines around his eyes and mouth.

Eidolon.

The man Reven was birthed from, shed from. Forged of.

He cocks his head, eyes turning pinpoint bright. “Ah. The twin sister. I was wondering when you would turn up.”

Wind whips through the room, coming from nowhere.

On this foul wind, grains of sand are picked up to twirl and twist in the air, like a glittering dance. Then, one by one, like pearls on a string, the sand comes together, joining me from across the room...to the king.

A voice whispers in the air. A woman. Throaty. Faint. The words of the sand nymph on the day of my birth.

Upon first glance, her power shall be bound with his forever, so that good may balance evil as the goddesses will.

The curse.

Eidolon's eyes—identical to Reven's—narrow ominously. “No.”

He slides an accusing look in Tabra's direction, and I know he's realizing what's happening here.

That's right, you bastard. You're tied to me. Not her.

The floating sand ripples with hidden golden fire, turning a brilliant red then white-hot in a terrifying, tiny display of my own powers. His power joins, and shadow swirls over it and around those gossamer grains like dense smoke until it obliterates the light.

I think I see a hint of my own death in that display. Suffocated. Annihilated.

“Enough.” Eidolon thumps a jeweled cane on the ground, the sound echoing and clanging through the room.

Immediately, shadow shreds the sand, the glowing grains falling to scatter across the black marble floor with a dying *shoosh* of protest.

The curse isn't broken, though. I can still feel it. Feel *him*.

Eidolon stares at me, expression turning to barely contained wrath as he takes in my face, glancing between Tabra and me. “That sand nymph has much to answer for.”

Eidolon's eyes flare as Reven steps around me.

“It's over,” Reven growls.

Hatred contorts Eidolon's features a heartbeat before darkness explodes through the room—coming from both men.

All I can do is duck and scuttle out of the way. “Tabra!” I yell, but my voice is swallowed in the craze of the fight.

My sister screams, but I can't get to her. I can't see her over the thrashing of shadows. Reven and the king are brandishing them like

weapons, hurling attack after vicious, rapid attack.

Part of me had hoped that without Reven and the Shadows inside him, Eidolon wouldn't have this power. But then, the other shadows Reven wields don't seem to come from within, or they'd never do his bidding. What, exactly, can a shadow *Enfernae* do?

Reven does the same fist thing Shadow did to try to break my glass bubble, though he forms it into a spiked, lethal mace. Only to have Eidolon knock it away with a mace of his own, the *boom* reverberating through the room, so loud my ears ring.

Even through that, Tabra's second scream reaches me. I start making my way across the space, sticking to the edges. But Reven's weapon flies into one of the ancient stained glass windows depicting the history of Aryd, and it shatters in a waterfall of color, crashing down into my path.

Sunlight streams in through the jagged, gaping window, and a massive broken piece dangles overhead, still attached to the metal framing. Threatening. It glints almost like it's laughing at my efforts to sneak through the room, blocking me from getting to my sister, because it could fall any second.

I'm fairly certain that move was on purpose. A glance shows Reven wrestling another face back inside himself. It disappears on a smirk aimed at me.

Teeth gritted, I backtrack the way I came.

In the center of the room, shadow blasts out of Reven in an explosion, throwing everything he has at Eidolon in such a furor of violence and speed, I hardly know what I'm seeing.

Just as the tumult hits the king, at a single gesture from Eidolon, it stops cold. At his direction, the mass of shadow grows and shoots to the top of the three-story ceilings. He splays his fingers, and the shadow separates into thin blades that slam to the ground like the drop of a guillotine, cleanly

slicing through the black pews made of the burning trees from the Land of Eternal Death.

I do what Cain taught me to do in a sandstorm...drop to my knees and find something solid—in this case, the wall—to huddle against and avoid being shredded.

Reven disappears to avoid being cleaved into pieces, then resolidifies. “Meren!”

His shout has me looking at him, then up because he’s staring at something over me.

I scramble out of the way as a final blade comes down, only to trip back again as an obelisk topples and falls with a whining protest, followed by a mighty *boom* as it hits the floor.

Directly across the way, I get a flash of Tabra’s face as she watches—ashen, thin, but her expression is oddly fascinated. I need to get to her. Drag her to safety if I have to.

Frantic, I search for Reven and find him in the center of the room, closer to Eidolon now.

Which is when I see it.

The shadow moving across the floor toward Reven, coming from the corner nearest me, where the fire in the brazier has been snuffed out. The thing is half man, half tail. Three tails, actually. A shadow reflection of the Revoker, the Devourer emblazoned on the crests of Eidolon’s family. The shade-monster slithers and glides, hardly a whisper on the floor, blending in with the black marble, toward where Reven is still fighting Eidolon’s weapons.

“No!” My warning is swallowed by a gale of winds.

That’s when the shadow on the floor strikes. All three tails lash out—one around Reven’s waist, one around his ankles, and the last around his neck.

Reven yells, back arching in a spasm of pain, face contorting and changing. Face after hideous face rises to the top, the Shadows inside him fighting for dominance as Eidolon's creation holds him prisoner.

I struggle to my feet and call the sand piled in the lesser tomb to me. I'm going to shove it down this bastard king's throat. Let's see what Eidolon can do with shadow when he can't breathe.

Except Reven's eyes twitch sideways, gaze hitting me out of the corners.

He shakes his head. I can hear his voice through our connection. *Don't show your power.*

Before I can drop my hands, that shadow holding him splits into three long streamers that each shoot toward one of the three braziers still lit.

The shadows scoop up the fire, almost seeming to devour the blaze, but instead of dousing the light, the shadows carry it. The embers and flames spread along the edges like rivers of fire, illuminating the entire room.

"Impossible," Eidolon snaps. "Shadow and fire can never mix." And I think maybe a flicker of trepidation enters the king's eyes. Is this an ability he didn't know he had?

Those undulating ropes of dark and flame shoot up to the roof to converge and come screaming down on top of Eidolon with a sound unlike anything I've ever heard. Not even the barbarians in the Shadowwood compare.

It roars with all the fury of the monstrosities of our world, and I'm instantly back on that pathetic excuse for a bridge between dominions with the Hollow coming after us.

Just as the conflagration crashes down over him, the king brings his hands together, fingers splayed, almost like he's holding an invisible ball, and darkness consumes the room.

It's pitch black but not silent or still.

That roar is muffled now but still raging, coming from the direction where both men had been standing, and a new wind howls, tearing my headdress from my head. With impatient hands, I hold my hair back from my face as it flies in every direction.

Move, Meren.

Carefully feeling my way, I make my way toward the worst of the sound, closer and closer until a faint glow appears before me, giving me barely enough light to see.

In the center of the throne room, not two feet from me, is what appears to be a sphere, for lack of a better word. Flame hovers over the top of it in a coronet of fire.

Pushing against the wind that's trying to force me away, torturous step by torturous step I climb over seats that have been overturned and around the tip of the toppled obelisk, until I'm finally there. I tentatively put a hand to the sphere. It reminds me of sand dunes. No grain to it, it's slick and soft, but it has the same density, and I can push through it—into it—in the same way.

I take a deep breath and shove my way inside, using my arms to sort of tunnel through until suddenly I burst into the hollowed-out center, where it's lit by the fire circling overhead and dead calm.

The eerie kind that happens right before a bad storm in the desert.

I gasp air into my lungs. Or maybe I'm gasping at the sight of Reven on his knees before Eidolon, held immobile by ropes of shadow winding and twining around him like vines made of thorns.

Tabra stands beside the king, her face—*my* face—twisted into something so filled with hate that I don't recognize either of us in the features. Horror is a fist to the gut when she raises a glowing hand—hers a deep violet versus the warm gold of mine—over the man on his knees.

Over my Shadowraith.

All the fires of the hells. When did her powers manifest?

I don't even think about it. I shove my hands out in front of me, and a whipcord of sand shoots into the sphere from outside it where it's piled up. It wraps around her waist and drags her away on a screech.

Eidolon snaps his head in my direction, the shadows falling from around Reven in his surprise. His gaze narrows on me, and I know I've given my power away.

"My, my. That's more than the last three generations of sand Hylorae could do. Perhaps you will be of use to me after all."

Unwatched on the ground, out of a smoky pocket of shadow where he hides things, Reven pulls a dagger from thin air and smoke. One of *my* daggers. It winks at me, catching a flicker of flame.

Eidolon, still considering me with a speculative gleam in his eye, doesn't see it coming when Reven drives the knife into the king's heart.

Kill Every Piece

Even from across the carved-out space, the crunch and suck of death is sickening as he plunges the dagger deep and true.

Eidolon swivels his gaze from me to Reven—slowly, like his head is being cranked over—then lowers it to the hilt of the dagger embedded in his chest. He meets Reven’s stare, lifts a single mocking eyebrow...then the blade disintegrates into nothing. The only indication that he’d even been touched is a small rip in the shiny, navy material of his shirt.

Impossible.

“My own Shadows can’t kill me,” the king sneers. “They are made of me. *You* are made of me.”

Reven’s expression ripples through an array of emotions—shock, denial, and fury—before settling on cold resignation. Stony. Reminding me of the ominous man who stole me away not so long ago.

Before Eidolon can do anything else, a rope of shadow lassos around the obelisk behind me and Reven yanks himself across the room, sliding on his knees to where I am. Without thinking, I drop to my own knees as he reaches me. His arms wrap around me so tight his grip bites into the flesh at my waist.

Suddenly, we’re consumed by darkness. Again.

A new kind, though. One filled with peace.

No more wind. No throne room. No Eidolon.

And in this place, I can see Reven before me, his face a study of contradictions. Tenderness and grim determination.

“Where are we?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “This is the place I made of only me—where I hide things—and I can’t let him find it. Not even the Shadows inside me know.”

“Then why—”

He presses his lips to mine, quieting my question, and I lean into him. Absorbing him. On a grunt that sounds almost like pain, he pulls back and looks at me with a horrible kind of unfixable sadness. It dulls the clarity of his eyes and carves grooves around his mouth.

My own heart shrivels under that look and sets to aching so deeply I can't breathe. I open my mouth to deny whatever he's about to say.

But Reven touches a finger softly to my lips. "I've known in my heart, all along, that there is only one way to win. I even tried it before, but maybe this time...with you here..."

I shake my head, already seeing where he's headed.

"I am Eidolon's future," he insists. "Me and what I carry inside me."

I shake my head harder. "No."

He slides his hand into my hair, cupping the back of my head the way I've come to love, to crave. He drops his forehead to mine. "The king is a husk, destined to die anyway, but *I* still exist. You have to kill me. If the Shadows take control again, or if he uses that curse to control you..."

I'm shaking now, so hard my bones would rattle if he didn't have such a hard grip on me. "No." The word is a shard of whisper in my throat.

I didn't save him in the lesser tomb just to lose him now. I can't do what he's telling me to. I *won't*.

When I thought there was no hope of Reven getting back out and the Shadow was in charge, I was ready to follow him to the afterlife. But I just got him back, and hope is a sick emotion that changes things entirely.

I refuse.

"We can fix this," I insist through lips so stiff I can hardly force them to move.

He shakes his head gently. "There's no fixing this."

"I won't kill you." A flat refusal. "I will get us out of here. Find another way."

“He has no heart to wound...because *I* have it.”

Because Reven is the heart—the beating, feeling, decent piece left of a shadow-wielding *Enfernae* king so twisted he’s become a foul thing.

“Don’t—”

Reven kisses me, the touch desperate and terrible and wonderful. A goodbye. One I can’t make myself return.

Instead, I pull away on a sob and raise my hands, letting go of him even as he holds on to me. I’m going to get us out of here, so I try to drag sand to wherever we are. Mountains of it rest nearby. “Let me do this. Hold him off while I work.”

Reven smiles, but it’s desolate. “You will be with me, Meren. Always.”

He’s still saying goodbye.

No. I won’t allow it.

Suddenly, sand is with us, streaming in from under our feet. Piles of it. Because he let it in. He turns me around and pulls me in close against him, my back to his front and his arms iron bands around my waist.

He sets his chin to my shoulder and lips to my ear. “I will miss the sound of your voice in the night.”

A sob escapes me, but I swallow it back down as I try to concentrate.

I’ve made a portal only once, and I was furious and terrified. Emotion is the key to my power. I think I know that now. So I draw on desperation this time. I have to get us out of here. We’ll figure out how to kill the king later. If I can get Tabra and Reven, we can run.

“Be ready to grab my sister,” I tell him. Warn him. This has to work.

He’s not listening. “And I’ll miss the way you make me laugh even when I’m angry with you.”

Goddess, he’s still saying goodbye. “Don’t *do* that,” I choke out.

The glass for the portal is coming together. It doesn’t need to be so big this time. I’m almost there.

“You were never second best to me.” Reven’s voice is different this time. Harder. Hopeless.

“Not yet,” I plead. I’m there. Another few seconds.

“I can’t let him find this place.”

“I’m almost finished. Just one more—”

“It’s already done,” he whispers.

The shadows drop away so suddenly the beams of sunlight coming in that one broken window in the throne room almost overtake me. Eidolon stands poised, only feet away, his expression turning so menacing at the sight of the glass wall I’ve almost completed, bile rises up, burning my throat.

“Don’t—”

Eidolon raises his hand. In the same instant, Reven releases me and picks up a shard of bloodred broken glass from the window.

“I’ll wait for you in the next life,” he says to me.

I drop my hands, the glass finished, just as Reven plunges the makeshift dagger into his own heart, his eyes never leaving mine. Everything around me, in me, crashes to a halt until he collapses to the floor with an ominous *thud*.

With the terrible sound of a dying animal, all the shadows in the room plunge into the wound in Reven’s chest. Pain blooms in my side as my body desperately holds on to the ones inside me. I curl over on myself, containing them by sheer will until all the others are swallowed into his body like water down a drain until they’re gone.

“No!” I hardly realize the voice screaming is mine as I drop to my knees beside him, his blood pooling on the floor, wet and sticky under my hands and knees.

Silence strikes me so sharply it hurts, and I lift eyes blurry with tears to search for my sister only to land on Eidolon, who is standing before me.

He's *furios*, the emotion a physical thing that rips at his face as he stares at Reven.

No more Shadows to take his place, to continue his legacy. I will *never* let him have mine...a new secret to guard. Not only that—he's cursed and bound to the wrong princess. To me.

He lifts his blazing gaze to me, eyes narrowing, and visibly controls his expression. Like stuffing the emotion into a box and locking it. I've seen Reven do that so many times. Then he holds his hand out—not to me but to the side—and Tabra joins him. Rather than take his hand, though, she moves closer, standing over me as I wallow in the pool of Reven's blood, still warm from his body.

“Did you actually think you were going to win?” Tabra's smile, which has only ever been sweet, twists into something wicked, her amber eyes turning a murky brown.

This is *not* Tabra. Not *my* Tabra.

“What has he done to you?” I whisper.

My sister scoffs. “You were always only ever a pale imitation of me, sister. *My shadow.*”

What little is left of my fractured heart crushes under the terrible weight of her words, the undeniable truth of them in her hard eyes. Technically, she has my eyes, glinting with amber, but they are filled with...nothing. No emotion for me beyond vague contempt.

Desperation claws through me. Desperation...and determination.

I lift my chin. I am a goddess-damned princess of Aryd, a Hylorae wielder of sand and glass. And this asshole is not going to win. Not today.

My amulet pulses against my skin as if it agrees. *Save her*, it seems to whisper to me.

I lunge for my sister and snap the king's amulet right off her neck. Nausea immediately rolls through me, and I drop it with a gasp. But I'm not

done.

Answering my call immediately, a pile of unused sand rises up like an ocean wave and blasts across the room. Bypassing the king, it shoves me, Tabra, and Reven's body across the space. I hit the portal first and slap my glowing palm to the glass, sparks shooting off me in a thousand glowing embers. I think of the only place I can send them. The portal room in the Temple of Enora appears, crystal clear and gloriously real.

Cain is on the other side, waiting like he promised, his face a frozen mask. "Meren—"

My sand scoops Reven and Tabra through.

"No!" I vaguely register Eidolon's shout.

I can't go through myself, just like I couldn't go through in the Shadowwood. I know this. My power is what keeps it open. So I starburst both my hands and obliterate the glass before the king can follow or send shadows after them.

I close my eyes, breathing hard. It's done. Between Reven's sacrifice and my action, Eidolon has lost. And he's lost huge.

Let's see what you do now, you bastard.

"Oh, little one." His voice is so close I jerk back with a hiss, my eyes snapping open to find him standing over me like Tabra had only a moment ago, his amulet dangling from his grasp. His lips curl in a smile so filled with wrath, I flinch. "You are going to regret that."

Darkness swallows us whole and takes me away.

Epilogue

And She Lived...

REVEN

Sunlight filters through the slit made by the door flaps of my tent, which blow open and closed lazily in the desert breeze. No light can penetrate the animal-hide sides the tent is made of, draped over poles that balance against one another overhead.

I stare at the play of light and dark on the ceiling made as the sunbeams coming through those flaps hits the glass flower resting on my chest. The one Meren gave me.

Exhaustion pins my body to the mat the Wanderers use as a bed. I have no damn clue how I'm still alive, but I am. Barely.

I lie here in the middle of the goddess-forsaken desert knowing she's with *him*. That her life is in my vile maker's hands. While all I can do is wait to heal. Heal and fight the evil inside me. Try to ignore the whispers in my head that beg to be released. The Shadows have been trying, incessantly and painfully, to get out. To take advantage of my weakened state and drag me back under. It's taking everything I have to battle them back. I don't even have enough left to make the shadows in my tent twitch.

At a flicker of movement, I raise my head to find Cain peeling back one of flaps and stepping inside. Deliberately, I slip my glass flower into a pocket.

I can't say Meren's friend is thrilled by my presence in the zariphate, but he and his people have given me and mine a place to hide. I should be grateful.

Most of the time I just want to unleash darkness on him.

He looks me over with a dispassionate sort of clinical assessment. "You look—" He shakes his head. "Actually, you look like shit. But better than yesterday."

I drop back against my mat to stare at the top of the tent. “I guess that’s something.”

This man has made it clear—I’m here on sufferance. Because Meren’s last request of Cain was to give my people sanctuary. Apparently, that includes me.

They’re all here. All my Vanished of the Shadowood. Those who survived the attack, at least.

I groan as I lever up to sitting, then struggle to my feet.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Cain says, though he doesn’t step forward to help. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Time for healing is over. I’m going to get her back.”

His lips compress into such a flat line, his mouth looks sealed shut. “Not in that state, you aren’t.”

“No. But I can get answers and start making plans.”

His brows lower over his eyes. “Answers from who? You’ve already talked to your leaders.”

Vos recovered from his own injuries faster than I have. Tziah has, too, thank goddess, and Horus was unharmed. Hakan hadn’t returned to the Shadowood yet when the soldiers attacked, so we’re not sure where he is. Bina, though...I try not to think about her or the others we lost. My pain is weakness the Shadows try to use against me.

Vos has been here to speak with me often, though things between us remain strained. Not because of my previous, short-lived doubts about him. I don’t believe that he’d ever betray us—I was over that in the Shadowood before Cain even mentioned the soldiers. He’s mad that I doubted him in the first place.

But they aren’t who I need to see. “Where is she?”

Shock ripples over Cain’s features. “That’s not a good idea.”

He lowers his gaze to my bare chest, and I catch the barest flinch. I

know why, too. The Shadows are so close to the surface, their faces writhe under my skin, screaming from my insides, clawing to get out.

We're actually not sure what Tabra does with souls yet. For all I know, she'll free every Shadow inside me. Even if her power isn't dangerous, Cain's probably still right.

I don't give a shit.

"Where is she?" I demand again.

Running a hand through his hair, he lets out a hard breath. "At the bottom of a dried well."

I raise my eyebrows, and he shrugs. "She keeps trying to escape. After the last time, we stuck her down there where she can't get out."

"Take me to her."

After a pause, Cain shrugs again. "Your funeral pyre."

I'm pretty sure he wouldn't mind that outcome. He wants Meren. I could see that when he arrived in the Shadowwood, but his actions now, with me and my people, scream it.

It takes forever to hobble after Cain over rolling dunes that give way under my boots, the severe sun of Aryd beating down on my head. I'm glad I put on a shirt first. The way his people—mine, too—back away from me, the chaos hiding under my skin would only make their wariness worse.

Eventually, we come to a well situated a good distance from the encampment, its sandstone bricks arranged in a telltale circle of wall, with wooden beams suspended over the hole, though no rope dangles down.

I stick my head over the opening and find Tabra sitting at the shade-filled bottom, staring up at me. She has Meren's beautiful face, but she's *not* my Meren. This woman doesn't make me want to wrap her up and carry her away somewhere safe and private. To put myself between her and every evil in the world.

Instead, I feel nothing.

Nothing beyond horror at the way she looks. The bones of her cheeks are more visible than when I saw her in the throne room, her arms like twigs, face drawn. “Why aren’t you feeding her?” I snap at Cain.

“We are,” he shoots back. “And she’s eating, but...”

But she’s still wasting away.

I step back from the well, arms crossed, and lean against the rocks—partly to keep from falling over because my legs are shaking, threatening to give way. I’ll question Tabra in a moment. “Do we have any intelligence on what he’s done with Meren?”

If Meren’s in the prisons in Aryd, we can get her out. If Eidolon has her hidden somewhere, that’s harder, especially if he’s taken her to Tyndra. I can’t go there. The Shadows inside me only get stronger there.

Something in Cain’s face tells me bad things are about to be shared.

“Meren took Tabra’s place at his side.”

Pain slices through my chest where the glass blade cut. I’m so weakened, I have no power left for anything other than keeping Eidolon’s Shadows trapped inside me, locked down hard. There’s nothing left over for healing, so the wound is closing on its own. Slower, more painful.

“At his side?” That can’t be right. “By force?”

Cain shakes his head. “My spies tell me she acts like she is there by choice. She seems...happy with him.”

Rejection is a thunderbolt through me. That’s impossible.

Cain’s expression hardens, blame directed squarely at me. “She’s *his* queen now.”

Like hells. Even if I have to rip her from Eidolon’s shadowy fingers, I’ll never let him keep her.

MEREN

I stand before the onyx reflection in my bedchamber—not Tabra’s old room but our grandmother’s, where I sleep now that I’m queen. The

reflection shows a new version of me. I'm no longer Meren. I haven't been her for weeks.

Now I am Tabra Eutheria I, Queen of Aryd, and Queen Consort of King Eidolon of Tyndra.

The bells of the palace and all the temples of Oaesys are pealing in celebration, ringing through the city with joyous noise. The wedding enacted with my sister in secret has been announced to the people. The uprisings I heard whispers of before all this are on hold, or so I've been told. The citizens are waiting to see what changes. Which is something, I guess. All of our guests have gathered to shower us with well-wishes—and likely to see what the two most powerful rulers in all of Nova will do next.

Achlys and my viziers were found locked in one of Eidolon's guest suites with no memory of how they got there. Beyond assuring me that he didn't harm them to achieve that effect, Eidolon refused to elaborate when I asked. Other than the priestess who performed the wedding ceremony—she's dead now—we had no other witnesses.

The king hasn't tried to consummate our union yet, which I'm secretly grateful for. No one else knows because our bedchamber suites are joined by a private common living space.

Every single second that passes, I can barely breathe because my entire life has been narrowed to a single goal—convince the king I've been brainwashed like Tabra was. A liar with a crown of death hanging over my head if I fail.

“What do you think, domina?” Achlys asks softly behind me.

I don't know why my sister's faithful handmaid, her lover and oldest friend besides me, has chosen to stay with me. I can see the grief of her loss every time she looks at my face, at Tabra's face. I haven't questioned her. We hardly talk at all.

On purpose. I'm trying to keep her out of Eidolon's notice as much as I

can, so she has to believe the same lies I'm feeding him. That I'm besotted. His to control.

I study the vague reflection before me. Instead of a traditional royal dress of Aryd, I wear a gown from Tyndra made of ice-blue material I've never seen before, shiny and silky soft. The bodice is strapless and fitted. At my waist, a skirt—layers and layers of it—flares out. Over the shiny material is the sheerest, most delicate pure white lace I have ever seen. The lace is fashioned into designs of crystals—snowflakes or sand, I'm not sure which. The lace forms long sleeves, though my shoulders remain bare. It also tips each flouncing layer of the skirt. Shot through with strands of silver, it shimmers and sparkles with every movement.

“How about a diadem today?” Achlys asks.

“I'd rather wear the lightning crown.”

With a nod, she picks it up from where it's already laid across a table with a selection of royal jewelry. The crown is my one nod to Aryd in this ensemble. A minor rebellion. Nothing dangerous. Nothing that will upset the king.

Twisted and glittering, the pieces that were used to form it were all created when lightning struck sand. A larger version of the amulet around my neck. Black, though, because all the pieces used to make it were found in the Obsidian Desert. It used to remind me of twisted, glittering tongues of flame frozen in time. Now I think of snarls of shadow.

Achlys lightly sets it on my head.

“There,” she whispers. “Just like a true queen.”

“I *am* the queen,” I tell her, voice harder than I intended. I don't take it back, though, and ignore the way she shrinks away. “And my king is waiting for me.”

Recognizing that for the signal it is, she ushers everyone out of the room. I don't take this moment alone to secretly stash any knives on my

person. Not this time. It didn't help last time, anyway.

Instead, I move to my bed, where I slip my amulet from between the mattresses. I can't wear it. For a longer beat than I intend, I stare into its mysterious, glinting depths. It's gone quiet since the day Eidolon placed his own amulet around my neck.

I stare and stare. But it's time to go. With a breath, I slip it back between the mattresses.

A brusque knock sounds at my door. Without waiting for my permission, it swings open, and Eidolon steps inside, and my heart breaks like it does every time I see him. Reven but not Reven. Brutally handsome in a suit of dark blue that picks up the shades of my dress. It makes the black of his hair glisten like raven's wings and the blue-green of his eyes shine like sun-kissed ocean.

He approaches with a smile.

I summon an answering one. He tips my chin with a gentle touch, turning my face to his, and looks pointedly at my crown. "What is this?"

My smile widens as I raise a hand to touch my fingertips to it. "Do you like it? A little something for my people."

"You made it?"

I shake my head. As far as he's concerned, my powers seem to be waning. Is that disappointment in his eyes? Good.

"Maybe soon you'll be able to repeat what you did to create the portal and we can find your sister."

He's searching for Tabra. Whatever his plan, he needs her.

"Let us pray," I murmur.

He appears satisfied with my response. He holds out a hand. "Are you ready, my queen?"

I capture his hand with mine and place a kiss to his palm, trying not to gag. "Lead the way, my king."

After I tuck my arm through his, we step outside my chamber and make our way to the long hall downstairs. There, the processional—made up of my highest authorities and viziers—is lined up, waiting.

A gasp runs through them at my appearance. I ignore it as my grandmother would have done, seeing such a response as her due.

Haughtily, I lift my chin, and Eidolon and I take our place at the back together. Achlys hands me a scepter and a gilded palm branch—as ornately decorated as my clothing, polished and gleaming in the lamplight. I release Eidolon’s arm to take them and hold them crossed before my breast, in the way of our ancestors.

With a nod, Achlys signals the head of the processional, and with trumpets blaring—obnoxious and grating but necessary—we start our slow march through those gathered and waiting to pay tribute to their new queen and her king consort. Outside, I can hear the crowds, though it doesn’t all sound like cheering. Eidolon and I will present ourselves on the wide balcony overlooking the city later.

The palace hasn’t been opened to the common people as Tabra wanted. Not even for the coronation, Achlys told me. My sister changed her mind while I was gone.

The trumpeting and cheering grow in volume as the processional enters the courtyard. Even with only the upper echelons inside the palace, there are people everywhere, streaming through the gardens in all their finery, and I can see even more lining the long hypostyle hall beyond.

The processional leads us to the throne room itself, the sounds of the trumpets echoing off the gigantic columns and high roof. One would never know a battle had been waged in this room. It’s all been set to rights.

Mostly.

Sheets of gold silk hang over where the stained glass was broken.

As the sycophants had gasped when they’d first seen me in the palace, a

gasp now runs through the crowds gathered as we pass by. Are they angry that I'm dressed not as the Queen of Aryd but as the Queen of Tyndra?

Every person bows low and doesn't dare raise their head until Eidolon seats me on the ornate onyx throne situated on the raised dais, taking his place at my side on a throne covered in gemstones that remind me of the portal room in Tyndra.

I gaze out over my people—their expressions full of expectation and some with trepidation—and allow myself a small smile. One I hope Eidolon will mistake for happiness and not the bone-deep satisfaction that thrums through me.

Because I have plans for the king.

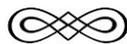
They came to me last night. As I lay in bed, watching the moonlight creep across my ceiling, marking time by the single star visible in the night sky, my amulet began to glow. Mine, not Eidolon's.

The glass is not big enough to use as a portal, but I can see with it. See into other portals...including the flower I made not so long ago.

And that's how I know.

Reven is alive. By some miracle of the goddesses, he survived.

And he's coming for me.



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Acknowledgments

Dear Reader,

Meren and Reven's story started with a single kernel of an idea. An obscure Grimm's fairy tale about a man who shed his shadow, and when the shadow turned real, he took over the man's life. I hope you fell in love with these characters and their story as much as I did (and continue to do). If you have a free second, please think about leaving a review. Also, I love to connect with my readers, so I hope you'll drop by on any of my social media!

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Abigail Owen

About the Author

Multi-award-winning author Abigail Owen writes adult paranormal romance and upper YA/NA fantasy romance. She loves plots that move hot and fast, feisty heroines with sass, heroes with heart, a dash of snark, and oodles of HEAs! Other titles include wife, mother, Star Wars geek, ex-competitive skydiver, spreadsheet lover, eMBA, organizational guru, Texan, Aggie, and chocoholic. Abigail currently lives in Austin, Texas, with her own swoon-worthy hero and their happily-ever-after family.

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